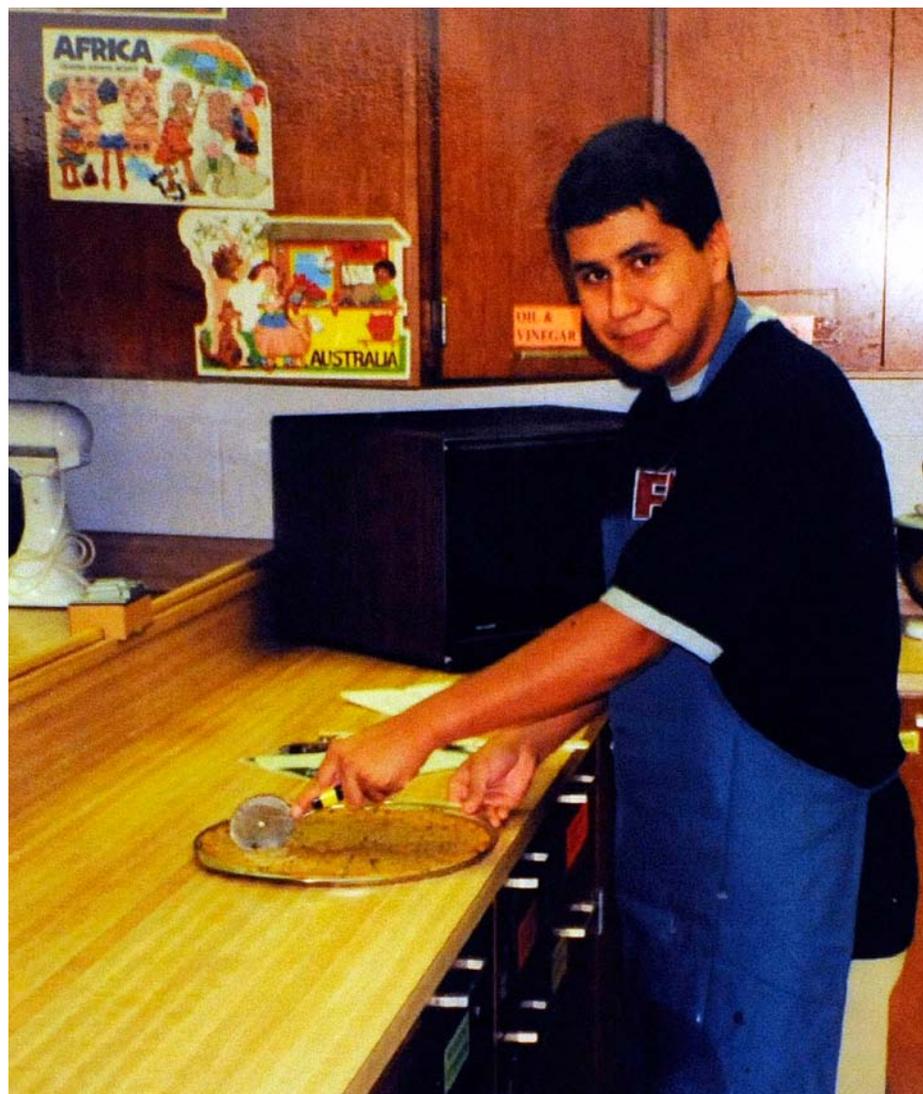


Childhood friends in Virginia and neighbors in Florida shed new light on the man who killed Trayvon Martin

George Zimmerman: Prelude to a shooting



George Michael Zimmerman making pizza in a home economics class at Osbourn High School in 2000. REUTERS/ZIMMERMAN FAMILY PHOTO/HANDOUT

BY CHRIS FRANCESCANI

SANFORD, FLA., APRIL 25

A pit bull named Big Boi began menacing George and Shellie Zimmerman in the fall of 2009.

The first time the dog ran free and cornered Shellie in their gated community in Sanford, Florida, George called the owner to complain. The second time, Big Boi frightened his mother-in-law's dog. Zimmerman called Seminole County Animal Services and bought pepper spray. The third time he saw the dog on the loose, he called again. An officer came to the house, county records show.

"Don't use pepper spray," he told the Zimmermans, according to a friend. "It'll take two or three seconds to take effect, but a quarter second for the dog to jump you," he said.

"Get a gun."

That November, the Zimmermans completed firearms training at a local lodge and received concealed-weapons gun permits. In early December, another source close to them told Reuters, the couple bought a pair of guns. George picked a Kel-Tec PF-9 9mm handgun, a popular, lightweight weapon.

By June 2011, Zimmerman's attention had shifted from a loose pit bull to a wave of robberies that rattled the community, called the Retreat at Twin Lakes. The homeowners association asked him to

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launch a neighborhood watch, and Zimmerman would begin to carry the Kel-Tec on his regular, dog-walking patrol—a violation of neighborhood watch guidelines but not a crime.

Few of his closest neighbors knew he carried a gun — until two months ago.

On Feb. 26, George Zimmerman shot and killed unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in what Zimmerman says was self-defense. The furor that ensued has consumed the country and prompted a re-examination of guns, race and self-defense laws enacted in nearly half the United States.

During the time Zimmerman was in hiding, his detractors defined him as a vigilante who had decided Martin was suspicious merely because he was black. After Zimmerman was finally arrested on a charge of second-degree murder more than six weeks after the shooting, prosecutors portrayed him as a violent and angry man who disregarded authority by pursuing the 17-year-old.

But a more nuanced portrait of Zimmerman has emerged from a Reuters investigation into Zimmerman's past and a series of incidents in the community in the months preceding the Martin shooting.

Based on extensive interviews with relatives, friends, neighbors, schoolmates and co-workers of Zimmerman in two states, law enforcement officials, and reviews of court documents and police reports, the story sheds new light on the man at the center of one of the most controversial homicide cases in America.

The 28-year-old insurance-fraud investigator comes from a deeply Catholic background and was taught in his early years to do right by those less fortunate. He was raised in a racially integrated household and himself has black roots through an Afro-Peruvian great-grandfather — the father of the maternal grandmother who helped raise him.

A criminal justice student who aspired to become a judge, Zimmerman also concerned himself with the safety of his neigh-

bors after a series of break-ins committed by young African-American men.

Though civil rights demonstrators have argued Zimmerman should not have prejudged Martin, one black neighbor of the Zimmermans said recent history should be taken into account.

“Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. I’m black, OK?”

the woman said, declining to be identified because she anticipated backlash due to her race. She leaned in to look a reporter directly in the eyes. “There were black boys robbing houses in this neighborhood,” she said. “That’s why George was suspicious of Trayvon Martin.”

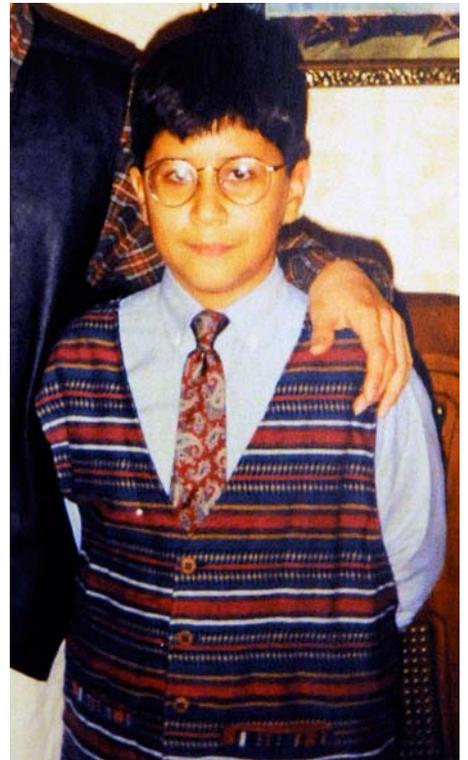
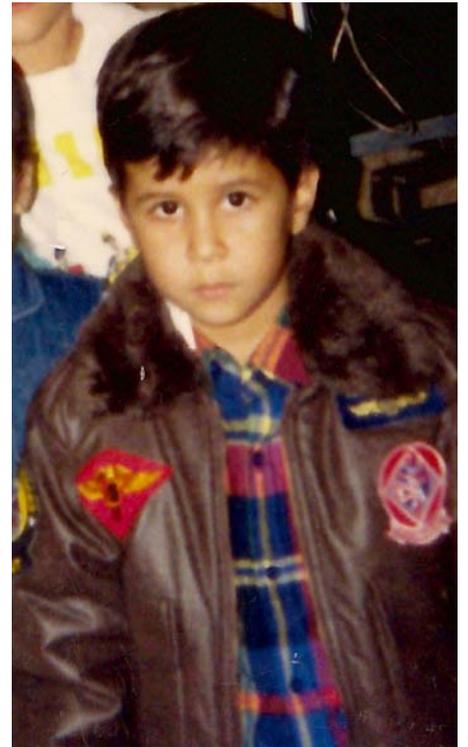
“MIXED” HOUSEHOLD

George Michael Zimmerman was born in 1983 to Robert and Gladys Zimmerman, the third of four children. Robert Zimmerman Sr. was a U.S. Army veteran who served in Vietnam in 1970, and was stationed at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, in 1975 with Gladys Mesa's brother George. Zimmerman Sr. also served two tours in Korea, and spent the final 10 years of his 22-year military career in the Pentagon, working for the Department of Defense, a family member said.

In his final years in Virginia before retiring to Florida, Robert Zimmerman served as a magistrate in Fairfax County's 19th Judicial District.

Robert and Gladys met in January 1975, when George Mesa brought along his army buddy to his sister's birthday party. She was visiting from Peru, on vacation from her job there as a physical education teacher. Robert was a Baptist, Gladys was Catholic. They soon married, in a Catholic ceremony in Alexandria, and moved to nearby Manassas.

Gladys came to lead a small but growing Catholic Hispanic enclave within the All Saints Catholic Church parish in the late 1970s, where she was involved in the church's outreach programs. Gladys would bring young George along with her on



Family photos show Zimmerman in 1986 (top) and 1989. REUTERS/ ZIMMERMAN FAMILY PHOTOS/HANDOUT

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“home visits” to poor families, said a family friend, Teresa Post.

“It was part of their upbringing to know that there are people in need, people more in need than themselves,” said Post, a Peruvian immigrant who lived with the Zimmermans for a time.

Post recalls evening prayers before dinner in the ethnically diverse Zimmerman household, which included siblings Robert Jr., Grace, and Dawn. “It wasn’t only white or only Hispanic or only black – it was mixed,” she said.

Zimmerman’s maternal grandmother, Cristina, who had lived with the Zimmermans since 1978, worked as a babysitter for years during Zimmerman’s childhood. For several years she cared for two African-American girls who ate their meals at the Zimmerman house and went back and forth to school each day with the Zimmerman children.

“They were part of the household for years, until they were old enough to be on their own,” Post said.

Zimmerman served as an altar boy at All Saints from age 7 to 17, church members said.

“He wasn’t the type where, you know, ‘I’m being forced to do this,’ and a dragging-his-feet Catholic,” said Sandra Vega, who went to high school with George and his siblings. “He was an altar boy for years, and then worked in the rectory too. He has a really good heart.”

George grew up bilingual, and by age 10 he was often called to the Haydon Elementary School principal’s office to act as a translator between administrators and immigrant parents. At 14 he became obsessed with becoming a Marine, a relative said, joining the after-school ROTC program at Grace E. Metz Middle School and polishing his boots by night. At 15, he worked three part-time jobs – in a Mexican restaurant, for the rectory, and washing cars – on nights and weekends, to save up for a car.

After graduating from Osbourn High School in 2001, Zimmerman moved to



Zimmerman consults with lawyer Mark O'Mara during his first court appearance on a charge of second-degree murder for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. **REUTERS/GARY W. GREEN/POOL**

Lake Mary, Florida, a town neighboring Sanford. His parents purchased a retirement home there in 2002, in part to bring Cristina, who suffers from arthritis, to a warmer climate.

YOUNG INSURANCE AGENT

On his own at 18, George got a job at an insurance agency and began to take classes at night to earn a license to sell insurance. He grew friendly with a real estate agent named Lee Ann Benjamin, who shared office space in the building, and later her husband, John Donnelly, a Sanford attorney.

“George impressed me right off the bat as just a real go-getter,” Donnelly said. “He was working days and taking all these classes at night, passing all the insurance classes, not just for home insurance, but auto insurance and everything. He wanted to open his own office – and he did.”

In 2004, Zimmerman partnered with

an African-American friend and opened up an Allstate insurance satellite office, Donnelly said.

Then came 2005, and a series of troubles. Zimmerman’s business failed, he was arrested, and he broke off an engagement with a woman who filed a restraining order against him.

That July, Zimmerman was charged with resisting arrest, violence, and battery of an officer after shoving an undercover alcohol-control agent who was arresting an under-age friend of Zimmerman’s at a bar. He avoided conviction by agreeing to participate in a pre-trial diversion program that included anger-management classes.

In August, Zimmerman’s fiancée at the time, Veronica Zuazo, filed a civil motion for a restraining order alleging domestic violence. Zimmerman reciprocated with his own order on the same grounds, and both orders were granted. The relationship ended.

In 2007 he married Shellie Dean, a licensed cosmetologist, and in 2009 the couple rented a townhouse in the Retreat at Twin Lakes. Zimmerman had bounced from job to job for a couple of years, working at a car dealership and a mortgage company. At times, according to testimony from Shellie at a bond hearing for Zimmerman last week, the couple filed for unemployment benefits.

Zimmerman enrolled in Seminole State College in 2009, and in December 2011 he was permitted to participate in a school graduation ceremony, despite being a course credit shy of his associate's degree in criminal justice. Zimmerman was completing that course credit when the shooting occurred.

On March 22, nearly a month after the shooting and with the controversy by then swirling nationwide, the school issued a press release saying it was taking the "unusual, but necessary" step of withdrawing Zimmerman's enrollment, citing "the safety of our students on campus as well as for Mr. Zimmerman."

A NEIGHBORHOOD IN FEAR

By the summer of 2011, Twin Lakes was experiencing a rash of burglaries and break-ins. Previously a family-friendly, first-time homeowner community, it was devastated by the recession that hit the Florida housing market, and transient renters began to occupy some of the 263 town houses in the complex. Vandalism and occasional drug activity were reported, and home values plunged. One resident who bought his home in 2006 for \$250,000 said it was worth \$80,000 today.

At least eight burglaries were reported within Twin Lakes in the 14 months prior to the Trayvon Martin shooting, according to the Sanford Police Department. Yet in a series of interviews, Twin Lakes residents said dozens of reports of attempted break-ins and would-be burglars casing homes had created an atmosphere of growing fear in the neighborhood.

“Let’s talk about the elephant in the room. I’m black, OK?” the woman said, declining to be identified because she anticipated backlash due to her race. She leaned in to look a reporter directly in the eyes. “There were black boys robbing houses in this neighborhood,” she said. “That’s why George was suspicious of Trayvon Martin.”

In several of the incidents, witnesses identified the suspects to police as young black men. Twin Lakes is about 50 percent white, with an African-American and Hispanic population of about 20 percent each, roughly similar to the surrounding city of Sanford, according to U.S. Census data.

One morning in July 2011, a black teenager walked up to Zimmerman’s front porch and stole a bicycle, neighbors told Reuters. A police report was taken, though the bicycle was not recovered.

But it was the August incursion into the home of Olivia Bertalan that really troubled the neighborhood, particularly Zimmerman. Shellie was home most days, taking online courses towards certification as a registered nurse.

On Aug. 3, Bertalan was at home with her infant son while her husband, Michael, was at work. She watched from a downstairs window, she said, as two black men repeatedly rang her doorbell and then entered through a sliding door at the back of the house. She ran upstairs, locked herself inside the boy’s bedroom, and called a police dispatcher, whispering frantically.

“I said, ‘What am I supposed to do? I hear them coming up the stairs!’” she told Reuters. Bertalan tried to soo her crying child into silence and armed herself with a pair of rusty scissors.

Police arrived just as the burglars – who had been trying to disconnect the couple’s televi-

sion – fled out a back door. Shellie Zimmerman saw a black male teen running through her backyard and reported it to police.

After police left Bertalan, George Zimmerman arrived at the front door in a shirt and tie, she said. He gave her his contact numbers on an index card and invited her to visit his wife if she ever felt unsafe. He returned later and gave her a stronger lock to bolster the sliding door that had been forced open.

“He was so mellow and calm, very helpful and very, very sweet,” she said last week. “We didn’t really know George at first, but after the break-in we talked to him on a daily basis. People were freaked out. It wasn’t just George calling police ... we were calling police at least once a week.”

In September, a group of neighbors including Zimmerman approached the homeowners association with their concerns, she said. Zimmerman was asked to head up a new neighborhood watch. He agreed.

Police had advised Bertalan to get a dog. She and her husband decided to move out instead, and left two days before the shooting. Zimmerman took the advice.

“He’d already had a mutt that he walked around the neighborhood every night – man, he loved that dog – but after that home invasion he also got a Rottweiler,” said Jorge Rodriguez, a friend and neighbor of the Zimmermans.

Around the same time, Zimmerman also gave Rodriguez and his wife, Audria, his contact information, so they could reach him day or night. Rodriguez showed the index card to Reuters. In neat cursive was a list of George and Shellie’s home number and cell phones, as well as their emails.

Less than two weeks later, another Twin Lakes home was burglarized, police reports show. Two weeks after that, a home under construction was vandalized.

The Retreat at Twin Lakes e-newsletter for February 2012 noted: “The Sanford PD has announced an increased patrol within our neighborhood ... during peak crime hours.

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“If you’ve been a victim of a crime in the community, after calling police, please contact our captain, George Zimmerman.”

ENTER EMMANUEL BURGESS

On Feb. 2, 2012, Zimmerman placed a call to Sanford police after spotting a young black man he recognized peering into the windows of a neighbor’s empty home, according to several friends and neighbors.

“I don’t know what he’s doing. I don’t want to approach him, personally,” Zimmerman said in the call, which was recorded. The dispatcher advised him that a patrol car was on the way. By the time police arrived, according to the dispatch report, the suspect had fled.

On Feb. 6, the home of another Twin Lakes resident, Tatiana Demeacis, was burglarized. Two roofers working directly across the street said they saw two African-American men lingering in the yard at the time of the break-in. A new laptop and some gold jewelry were stolen. One of the roofers called police the next day after spotting one of the suspects among a group of male teenagers, three black and one white, on bicycles.

Police found Demeacis’s laptop in the backpack of 18-year-old Emmanuel Burgess, police reports show, and charged him with dealing in stolen property. Burgess was the same man Zimmerman had spotted on Feb. 2.

Burgess had committed a series of burglaries on the other side of town in 2008 and 2009, pleaded guilty to several, and spent all of 2010 incarcerated in a juvenile facility, his attorney said. He is now in jail on parole violations.

Three days after Burgess was arrested, Zimmerman’s grandmother was hospitalized for an infection, and the following week his father was also admitted for a heart condition. Zimmerman spent a number of those nights on a hospital room couch.



Ten days after his father was hospitalized, Zimmerman noticed another young man in the neighborhood, acting in a way he found familiar, so he made another call to police.

“We’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there’s a real suspicious guy,” Zimmerman said, as Trayvon Martin returned home from the store.

The last time Zimmerman had called police, to report Burgess, he followed protocol and waited for police to arrive. They were too late, and Burgess got away.

This time, Zimmerman was not so patient, and he disregarded police advice against pursuing Martin.

“These assholes,” he muttered in an aside, “they always get away.”

After the phone call ended, several minutes passed when the movements of Zimmerman and Martin remain a mystery.

Moments later, Martin lay dead with a bullet in his chest.

Editing by David Adams, Daniel Trotta and Prudence Crowther

The Retreat at Twin Lakes, where Martin was killed and Zimmerman was neighborhood watch captain, had been plagued by break-ins and robberies. **REUTERS/LUCAS JACKSON**

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