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MEDICINE

**Diagnosis isn't about violence**

After slayings in Orange County are linked to Asperger's, those familiar with it move in with support and education.

By Rosie Mestel, Times Staff Writer

"MOM, I'm not like that," 21-year-old Tom Iland told his mother as they watched a TV news report about a young man with Asperger's syndrome who killed two neighbors in Orange County.

It was a poignant moment for 48-year-old Emily Iland. Her son, who also has Asperger's, was worried that others would think him capable of such violence.

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It wasn't just Tom. Since the shootings in Aliso Viejo, people with Asperger's syndrome and their families have been thinking, talking and e-mailing one another. They have been sharing their upset and fears — and brainstorming some practical steps to allay public fears and forestall such tragedies in the future.

On Oct. 30, 19-year-old William Freund dressed in a paintball mask and cape, entered a neighboring house and killed Vernon Smith and his daughter Christina, 22, with a shotgun. He shot at others, too, before returning to his house and shooting himself. In the days afterward, it was revealed that Freund frequently posted in an online forum for people with Asperger's, a condition that causes profound gaps in the ability to read social nuances but is not generally associated with violence.

Michael John Carley of New York City founded GRASP, a support group network for Asperger's syndrome and related conditions, in 2003. The shootings, he said, have galvanized his group's resolve to expand across the country. "I don't know enough about this young man to deduce if we would have been able to have an impact," he said. "Maybe there was some other diagnosis going on that we don't know about."

Carley, 41, was diagnosed with Asperger's in 2000, along with his son, now 9. "It's a very lonely place if you have no sense of shared experience with somebody with similar wiring to yours," he said.

People in the Asperger's community are not saying their disorder neatly explains the killings. In fact, some are upset that Freund's crime is being linked to Asperger's at all.

"What bothers me is the implication that there's something about Asperger's syndrome that causes people to do this kind of thing — kind of, 'Look out for the dangerous Asperger people,'" said Jerry Newport, 57, who founded a Los Angeles support group for people with autism and Asperger's in 1993. He now lives in Tucson and travels frequently to speak on the topic.

"The only connection you can make between Asperger's and what happened is that his Asperger's syndrome may have set him up for ridicule as a child," Newport said.

Days after the slayings, Newport and others in the Asperger's community brain-stormed ways to ramp up help, such as creating a crisis hotline staffed with people familiar with Asperger's and autism. They double-checked to make sure that their support groups had blanket policies of reporting threats to police.

One activist contacted the Orange County sheriff's office with an offer to put on an educational town hall meeting about Asperger's; another is in discussions with the New York Police Department about training for crisis intervention officers.

Though they don't excuse Freund's actions or know details of his case, many say they relate to some of the anguish he may have felt.

People with Asperger's, while often highly academically gifted, tend to lack basic social skills such as knowing how to read a face or hold a conversation, or when to tell little white lies. They are apt to talk relentlessly about their deeply held and sometimes quirky passions, be they city maps, industrial cooling towers or, for Tom Iland, anything pertaining to "Star Wars." The condition, which varies greatly in severity, affects an estimated one in 250 to 500 children, mostly boys.

The social awkwardness can add up to a childhood of ostracism and being the butt of playground jokes.

"I was alienated when I was in school. I was made fun of. And I did feel very alone," said Benjamin Levinson, 36, of Culver City. "I tried to make friends, but I never really could make any — I just didn't know how." He received a string of incorrect diagnoses before finally learning in his 20s that he had Asperger's. "Looking back on my life, I know that there was a time between when I was about 13 to the time I was maybe 22 or 23, I was just really angry.... Thank God I was able to get some help when I needed it," he said.

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### **The future looks brighter**

Life may be easier for the next generation of children with the disorder.

Today, because of far greater recognition of autism and related disorders, children with Asperger's syndrome are much more likely to receive a diagnosis early and get the help they need, such as support groups and social-skills education, said Laurie Stephens, an Asperger's and autism specialist with the Help Group. Among other things, that nonprofit organization runs Village Glen, a school in Sherman Oaks specifically for children with Asperger's and related disorders.

"These are people who really want to be able to get along with other people, but it just does not come naturally," Stephens said. "There are many hidden social rules, and they need to be taught them."

Iland was a Village Glen student a few years back — and he and his mother credit it with helping him make the transition to a regular high school, then to community college. He's now a junior at Cal State Northridge, studying for a degree in accounting. He still lives at home and has a mentor to help him with life skills.

"Violence and revenge isn't the answer," he said, talking on the phone from the CSUN campus last week. "I'm a big 'Star Wars' fan, and [in the films] those who seek revenge are the bad guys."

But special schools can serve only a few. To make the Santa Clarita area public schools easier for her son and others like him, in 2003 Emily Iland pushed to start a peer mentoring program devised by the University of Minnesota in which children with disabilities are paired with nondisabled students.

Now she is working on a new project aimed at educating those in law enforcement about Asperger's and autism. She recently convened a training session for more than 275 judges, sheriffs and attorneys in Santa Clarita and is working on a DVD aimed at teaching youth with Asperger's to interact safely with law enforcement and communicate their anxieties and frustrations instead of letting them escalate.

Perhaps none of these things could prevent a tragedy such as the one in Aliso Viejo, she said, "but we're being as proactive as we can."