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Avi Schaefer's Zest for Life Inspires Others, Even in His Death

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By Ben Preston, Noozhawk Staff Writer | **UPDATED**

As they grieve for a son, a brother and a friend, a rabbi's encouragement turns tears into smiles

[Noozhawk's note: A school memorial service for Avi Schaefer will be held from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday at Valhalla Training Center, 1722 State St. in Santa Barbara.]

A week has passed since the [tragic death of Avi Schaefer](#), and community support for his family has not faltered. In keeping with Jewish tradition, Schaefer's family sat [Shiva](#) — a seven-day period of mourning — at their home in the Santa Barbara foothills near San Antonio Creek, with memorial services held twice per day.



Twins Avi and Yoav Schaefer were nearly inseparable for 21 years. (Shira Borochoy)

photo)

Schaefer, a 21-year-old freshman at [Brown University](#), was struck and killed by an alleged drunken driver Feb. 12 in Providence, R.I.

On Thursday, the home of Rabbi Arthur Gross-Schaefer and his wife, Laurie, was packed with no fewer than 100 people, a poignant reminder of how many lives were touched by Schaefer's life. Standing near the back of the crowd, which spilled out of the library onto the veranda, I heard someone murmur that there had been nearly 1,000 people at his funeral on Feb. 15.

Rabbi Arthur — well known throughout the Santa Barbara community not only in his role as a rabbi at [Community Shul of Montecito and Santa Barbara](#), but also as a professor, lawyer, humanitarian and all-around great guy — reassured his guests and thanked them for coming. His son's life, his passion for doing good things, and his incredible energy, he said, is something from which everyone can draw inspiration. A few songs were sung, prayers read, and more than a few tears dabbed away, but it was difficult to leave without feeling uplifted.



I met Schaefer and his twin brother, Yoav, nearly three years ago, on a summer night when they were on leave from the [Israel Defense Forces](#). Along with a few other friends, we sat on the back patio of the [Mercury Lounge](#) in Goleta, listening intently as the two brothers recounted humorous tales of army life. Although they were going into the special forces, they had a disarmingly relaxed manner about the whole thing, giving the impression that they were happy just to have the chance to serve.

Having just finished his IDF stint last year, Schaefer hit the ground with his feet running, continuing his commitment to service. At Brown, he was studying Arabic and, according to [Brown president Ruth Simmons](#), was working with a professor and a Palestinian undergraduate student to establish a new class focusing on the importance of dialogue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The reality of the physical loss of a brother, son, friend and rising star in the world community was written on Yoav Schaefer's face at Thursday's service. Wearing a torn shirt commemorating his fallen brother, he had a slightly dazed expression as he greeted fellow mourners, and looked as though he hadn't slept much.

“It hasn’t hit me yet, but it will,” he said when I asked him how he was doing.

Anyone who knows the family can attest that these two young men did everything together. A quick look at their Facebook pages shows scores of photos of the two brothers with arms draped lovingly over one another’s shoulders as they smile at the photographer’s lens. The Gross-Schaefer’s home was decorated with almost a dozen such pictures.

In the end, all that can be done is to try to offer support to a family that was literally blindsided by a hapless stroke of fate and to heed Rabbi Arthur’s plea to take inspiration from his son’s life. Avi Schaefer dove head first into very important work; now it’s up to the rest of us to pick up where he left off.

Friends have established a Facebook page, [In Loving Memory of Avi Schaefer](#), to share their memories and condolences.

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