

Reflecting on the tragic shooting of Yoshi Hattori: How knocking on the wrong door for Halloween launched a political revolution, and what we can learn from it

By Julie Heng

27 years ago, Japanese exchange student Yoshi Hattori, dressed in a John Travolta a la Saturday Night Fever white tuxedo, was ready for his first Halloween party.

He would never make it.

16-year-old Yoshi and his host brother ended up knocking on the wrong door—10311 instead of 10131, six doors away—where Rodney Peairs would lift his .44-caliber magnum, yell “Freeze!” and shoot Yoshi to death.

I had never heard of Yoshi until last week, but his story is a horrifying yet fascinating examination of culture and gun safety, especially in retrospect. This summer, 27 years after Yoshi’s death, 26 mass shootings left 126 people dead in America. The shootings in El Paso and Dayton occurred just hours apart.

In the aftermath, my cousin, who is studying animation in Australia, wondered repeatedly whether America was safe.

“I mean, we all see the news,” she said. “It’s always about another shooting here or there. There are so many guns.”

“Well, it’s completely safe to go outside,” I found myself quickly reassuring her. “It’s not like we worry about it.”

“But we do,” a small voice in my head said - matter-of-factly and somewhat desperately. Everyone said things would change after the summer of mass shootings, but nothing happened. To a degree, I wasn’t surprised. Despite increased calls for protests and discussion of red flag laws and buyback programs, very little legislation occurred. Once the country moved on from the 20 six- and seven-year-

olds massacred at Sandy Hook, its level of tolerance became virtually impenetrable. And that was 2012.

What more could be done?

This is where Yoshi's story comes in.

Yoshi's parents, Masa and Mieko Hattori, were from a country that eliminated privately-owned guns and was horrified by America's fondness for them. The news of Yoshi's death lit up Japanese hearts and headlines. The Hattoris' petitions to end easy firearm access quickly collected nearly two million signatures in Japan and, with the help of Yoshi's Baton Rouge host family, the Haymakers, 150,000 signatures in the U.S. Mind you, Change.org did not exist in those days - the signatures were all mailed in.

The Hattoris' and Haymakers' campaign was instrumental in the passage of the Brady Bill, which reinforced gun safety by mandating background checks before allowing firearm purchases. In fact, the Hattoris spoke with President Clinton in the Oval Office the month the Brady Bill became law.

To this day, the Hattoris continue to campaign for stricter gun control in the U.S. Last year, they met with student survivors and activists from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland in solidarity with the #NeverAgain movement.

I find it intriguing that such a catalyzing force for U.S. policy came from a Japanese family. It validates that individual efforts can make a difference, and pushes us as Americans to champion our own pressing causes. A movement can synergize from enough pressing forces.

The Tinker siblings, Supreme Court plaintiffs in the landmark *Tinker v. Des Moines* case, said as much when I interviewed the four of them (separately) after the Parkland shooting last year. One quote from Paul Tinkerhess spoke the most to me:

“The very fact of being upset can motivate you to finally do something about the problem and change things. I would say if you are touching a hot iron you have a problem, but if the nerves are not firing from the nerves to the brain, you have an even bigger problem.” Feeling disillusioned is a good thing, Paul Tinkerhess said. That's how “we can see that the nerves are firing.”

The Criminal Trial of Rodney Peairs (box on the side of the page)

After being initially released by the police, Peairs was charged with manslaughter. In trial, Peairs' defense attorney said the shooting was made by a regular guy in self-defense. The attorney described Yoshi as a crazed, "out of control . . . hyperactive Japanese exchange student who thought his job was to scare people." They maintained that Yoshi was menacing when he walked up the driveway and excitedly said, "We're here for the party." The Baton Rouge jury unanimously found Peairs not guilty. Courtroom spectators even broke into applause after the ruling.

Violence can stem from many areas, but easy access to guns is what simplifies many steps from intent to outcome. We can't assume something will happen, because it won't. A social movement needs individual voices calling policymakers and attending demonstrations.

That's right, America: we're knocking on your door. And we're here for the party, too.