

YVONNE ABRAHAM

Putting anger aside



In the midst of unthinkable loss, Malcolm Astley has shown extraordinary grace.

Given the awful details of his daughter Lauren's murder, one could easily forgive the Wayland man for declining to speak publicly about losing her.

It would be perfectly reasonable, too, for the father to step up to the microphones and rage at his loss. Or to rail against Nathaniel Fujita, the ex-boyfriend accused of taking 18-year-old Lauren from the world.

Astley has done none of these things.

Instead, the man who had to identify his only child's body a few days ago has stood before reporters time and again since, answering their questions patiently, and with gut-wrenching eloquence.

He has shared the once-ordinary, now-heartbreaking, details of his daughter's life even as he makes her funeral arrangements.

He has repeatedly tried to see his heartbreak as part of something bigger — expressing his hope that Lauren's homicide will strengthen the community, urging parents to treasure their children while they can, raising awareness of violence in teen relationships.

And instead of surrendering to anger, he has shown breathtaking compassion.

"Lauren's mother and I share the anguish of Nate's parents, who put so much caring into Nate, and my daughter as well," he said after Fujita's arraignment Tuesday. "We want them to know that."

Middlesex District Attorney Gerard T. Leone Jr., whose office is prosecuting Fujita, rarely sees survivors show such openness so soon after their loss.

"In my experience, it's unusual for someone to be able to articulate and exhibit such constructive feelings this early on in the process," he said.

"I went to offer my condolences [Tuesday], and Mr. Astley was already talking about helping me engage in speaking to kids about teen dating violence."

How does Astley summon such awe-inspiring generosity?

"I don't know quite how it looks from the outside," he said by phone yesterday. "It's the way I do things."

The Wayland School Committee member and former Lexington High principal was raised in a family that prized conciliation over conflict, and he and his wife, Mary, raised Lauren the same way. ("She certainly thought a lot of what I said was hogwash," he joked.)

He is devoted to the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Their lessons are reinforced by the Unitarian church where Astley is active and by his work as a peace activist.

And so, in the midst of the cataclysm, he sees a path.

"It's believing the words of King and Gandhi, that anger will not match anger," Astley explained. "You have to engage with what may feel like torment to you, to get at the roots. Then many more conflicts will yield to common interests. That has got to be the goal if we're not going to destroy each other and ourselves."

He spent a career trying to understand teenagers, so he's determined "not to react simply with rage" at Fujita, Astley said.

"When someone takes it in their hands to take someone's life, it comes out of needs that were never recognized and never met," he said. "Yes, there has to be justice for the loss, but there also needs to be a careful look at what was missed and what could have been done better, and what we need to do to help others now."

It is difficult and exhausting to talk about his daughter's murder, Astley said.

But it gives him some comfort to do it, helps him navigate the hurt.

Still, the grief bobbed to the surface every few minutes during our conversation, Astley's voice catching as he tried to see in Lauren's death the start of something less awful.

"She's just so gone," he said, sobbing.

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