

Orlando (USA) massacre: Gunman Omar Mateen 'was a regular at Pulse [gay] nightclub'

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Customers had seen killer there before and several report getting messages from him on gay dating apps.

The gunman who killed 49 people in an attack on a gay nightclub in Orlando is said to have been a regular at the venue and had messaged several people on gay dating apps, according to reports.

An unnamed FBI official told the Associated Press on Tuesday that the bureau was investigating the claims.

At least four regular customers said they had seen killer Omar Mateen drinking at the nightclub on multiple occasions. "Sometimes he would go over in the corner and sit and drink by himself, and other times he would get so drunk he was loud and belligerent," Ty Smith told the Orlando Sentinel

"We didn't really talk to him a lot, but I remember him saying things about his dad at times," Smith said. "He told us he had a wife and child."

Jim Van Horn, 71, told the Associated Press Mateen was a "regular" at the Pulse nightclub where the murders took place. "He was trying to pick up people. Men," he said. "He was a homosexual and he was trying to pick up men. He would walk up to them and then he would maybe put his arm round them or something ... That's what people do at gay bars. That's what we do."

Asked what went through his mind when he saw his picture, Van Horn, who lost three friends in the shooting, said: "We just went, 'Oh. That makes sense. That's Omar.'"

He added: "I think it's possible that he was trying to deal with his inner demons, of trying to get rid of his anger of homosexuality. It's really confusing to me. Because you can't change who you are. But if you pretend that you're different, then you may shoot up a gay bar."

Asked by the *Guardian* about rumours his son was gay, Mateen's father Seddique Mateen said: "It's not true. Why, if he was gay, would he do this?"

But when asked why she thought he went regularly to a gay club, his ex-wife Sitara Yusufiy told CNN: "When we had gotten married he confessed to me about his past that was recent at that time, and that he very much enjoyed going to clubs and the nightlife ... I feel like it's a side of him or a part of him that he lived but probably didn't want everybody to know about." Asked if she thought he was gay, she said: "I don't know."

As accounts of the gunman's reported appearances at Pulse emerged on Monday evening, thousands of Orlando residents packed a downtown square in memorial of the dead. Bells at the First

Methodist church tolled 49 times for each of the victims, the last of whom to be identified, Akyra Monet Murray, also the youngest at 18, was named shortly before the vigil began.

As the crowd at the vigil raised up candles in front of the Dr Phillips Art Center, which had been lit in rainbow colors, faith leaders including an imam and Hispanic evangelicals joined LGBT activists and campaigners against gun violence in a collective cry of defiance that love would conquer hate.

“We remain a city in pain. We are mourning and we are angry,” said mayor Buddy Dyer, who told the crowd that Orlando had become itself the victim of a dreadful irony. “Our city, a joyful melting pot of cultures and ways of life, now has to bear the title of the site of the worst mass shooting in American history.”

Two prominent members of the Pulse community addressed the vigil. The club’s manager Neema Bahrami said to a huge cheer: “I want you to know we are not leaving. We are here to stay. We will be bigger and better than you can ever imagine. We will not be defeated. We are here to stay.”

Pulse’s co-founder Ron Legler said that he and Barbara Poma had opened the popular gay venue “as a place of pride. A place you could feel safe. We are going to rebuild that Pulse.”

Terry DeCarlo of the GLBT Community Center in Orlando told the vigil that he had received messages of condolence and solidarity from all around the world. The mayors of Berlin and London, and leaders from Australia, Spain and Brazil had all contacted him “saying Orlando, we see you, we stand with you, we love with you,” he said.

Among the huge numbers of people at the vigil, many of whom carried rainbow flags or the national emblem of Puerto Rico in reflection of the large number of Hispanic victims, was a man who described to the Guardian his extraordinary story of survival at Pulse. Orlando – he would not give his last name – described how for three terrible hours he lay motionless on the ground in a back bathroom of the club, his head rammed up against the toilet bowl, trying to maintain total silence.

In all that time, he said, as the shooter of the Pulse nightclub massacre calmly moved around him, he kept having just one thought.

“I’m not going to make it out of here. I kept thinking I wasn’t coming out of this, I just wasn’t.”

Orlando and two other terrified clubgoers at the popular gay venue avoided drawing the gunman’s attention by playing dead, as all around them they could hear the carnage. “Everyone was screaming and bellowing, except for us. Me and my friend kept quiet. We could hear the shooter talking to people in the next bathroom stall.”

The clubgoer said he heard Mateen ordering people in the adjacent bathroom stall not to use their phones to make text messages. “He said, ‘Please don’t text’. That was the words he used.”

He also heard the shooter make a call, apparently to the police, and making the statement that America should stop bombing Isis in Syria.

Orlando recalls hearing the gunman make reference to a bomb vest in other phone calls, as well as a strange moment in which he demanded to know if anyone in the bathroom was African American. “I have no problems with black people,” the shooter said.

Finally, explosions ripped through the wall of the bathroom as the police SWAT team made their controlled entry. The air filled with dust as a hole was punched in the wall, a wild burst of shooting ensued, and Orlando found himself being tugged up out of the stall by officers and hurled physically

out of the hole and into the open air.

“An office just grabbed me and flung me out through the hole,” he said.

As he recounted the story, Orlando was still wearing the medical tag from Florida Hospital, where he was treated.

Further accounts of the shooter’s apparent interaction with gay culture in advance of his rampage were given by users of a gay dating app Jack’d, who told news outlets that Mateen had contacted them through it. Kevin West, 37, a former Navy serviceman, said he been messaged by Mateen on the app.

Though out of touch with him for a few months, West said he had received a message from Mateen saying he was in town and asking to meet for a drink.

West told the LA Times he had immediately contacted the FBI after seeing Mateen’s picture on the news, handing over his login details to his Jack’d app.

Another man apparently messaged by Mateen on the dating app was 23-year-old Cord Ceden, who also told the Washington Post he had seen Mateen at the club before. “It was definitely him. He’d come in for years, and people knew him,” Ceden said. “He was open with his picture on the sites; he was easy to recognise.”

His former classmate Samuel King, who also worked at the same shopping mall as Mateen after high school, said Mateen had known that he and many of his friends were gay but never expressed any disapproval. “He had to know it, but I never got any sense of homophobia or aggression from him,” he told the Washington Post.

The information adds to a complex and often contradictory picture that is emerging of the gunman and his motivation for the outrage. His father, Seddique Mateen, hours after the shooting said that Mateen had once become incensed when he saw two men kissing in Miami in front of his wife and child.

However, in an interview with the *Guardian*, the father indicated he believed the importance of the incident had been overblown. “But that was a couple of months ago and he never talked about it afterwards,” he said. “I don’t think that incident would trigger this kind of violent reaction.”

Details have also emerged as to how Mateen was able to buy two powerful weapons with which he carried out the attack - .223 assault rifle made by Sig Sauer and a Glock 9mm handgun. He bought the firearms in three separate visits earlier this month to a gun range and store about 15 miles from his home in Fort Pierce.

The owner of the St Lucie Shooting Center, a retired New York city police officer called Ed Henson, told reporters that he had no responsibility for what had happened. Mateen had passed a full federal background check before he was allowed to buy the guns, Henson said, and besides “If he hadn’t purchased them from us I’m sure he would’ve gotten them from another shop in the area.”

Now that all 49 of the dead have been identified, and their families told the dreadful news, Orlando will start to begin the long process of grieving. Five of the 53 injured remain in grave condition in hospital, with 47 still in treatment.

Barack Obama will visit the city on Thursday for a ritual of mourning and reflection that has become all too familiar to him in his eight years in office - this being the 15th time he has had to address the

dark subject of mass shootings. After that, the funerals will begin.

Ed Pilkington in Orlando and Jessica Elgot

The Associated Press contributed to this report

P.S.

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