

# His Son, 17, Was Sextortion Victim, Then Died by Suicide. Now, S.C. Dad Protects Other Kids from Same Fate

Gavin Guffey, 17, had just graduated from high school and was getting ready for college with plans to become an art teacher

By **KC Baker** Published on March 29, 2023 10:00AM EDT



Brandon Guffey with portrait of late son, Gavin Guffey. PHOTO: ANDREW J. WHITAKER

Brandon Guffey was typing on his phone in his Rock Hill, S.C., home, in the early morning hours of July 27, 2022, when he heard a loud noise coming from the hallway bathroom.

"It sounded like a bowling ball falling and crashing through shelves," Brandon, 43, tells PEOPLE.

He yelled for his son, [Gavin Guffey](#), who was in the bathroom with the door locked. When the 17-year-old failed to answer, Brandon kicked in the door and found his oldest child lying on the floor, bleeding.

"I'm thinking he fell and hit his head," he says.

After shouting to his wife, Melissa, to call 911, he noticed a gun lying next to their son. "I could smell and taste the gunpowder," he says.

He sat on the bathroom floor with his son's lifeless body cradled in his arms. His son had taken his own life.

"I've never experienced anything like that, that amount of pain," he says. "Still, to this day, it's still very painful."



Brandon and Melissa Guffey. ANDREW J. WHITAKER

Just as searing is when he and his family found out Gavin was being blackmailed over compromising pictures he'd sent a woman he believed was a college student in North Carolina on the night he died.

Online scammers posing as the young woman sent the recent high school grad nude photos and asked him to send some in return.

***For more about Brandon Guffey's fight to prevent teens from sextortion, [subscribe now to PEOPLE](#) or pick up this week's issue, on newsstands Friday.***

When he pressed send, the scammers threatened to show them to the world unless he forwarded money on online payment apps.

"My son was a target," says Brandon, who is working with local and federal authorities to apprehend the scammers he believes are responsible for his son's death. (The FBI declined to comment on the case.)



The Guffey family. COURTESY

Determined to prevent other kids from falling prey to sextortion, Brandon has turned his grief and pain into action.

Brandon was the Republican nominee for the state House of Representatives at the time Gavin died, and last November, he won the general election.

In January, his first order of business as one of South Carolina's newest legislators was to introduce a proposal to the state House [to make sexual extortion a crime punishable by up to 30 years in prison](#).

The bill is expected to reach the House floor in early April.

***Want to keep up with the latest crime coverage? Sign up for [PEOPLE's free True Crime newsletter](#) for breaking crime news, ongoing trial coverage and details of intriguing unsolved cases.***

He hopes it gets passed in the House this year before legislators adjourn at the end of May.

"This needs to be passed today!" he says. "Bills move slowly yet we have a habit of moving some things through quickly. What is more important than saving kids?"

## **'This Is a Real Threat'**

The issue is so critical that in December, the [FBI issued a public safety alert](#) saying that law enforcement had received more than 7,000 reports related to the online sextortion of minors.

"This is a major crime," he says. "But people do not talk about it."

Victims "think that they're having this little online relationship only to find out that it's being recorded," he says.

Knowing the victims are feeling ashamed and embarrassed, "they use that information to extort them for money, or they're going to release it to everyone that person knows."

Now he is trying to let as many people as he can know about the dangers of sextortion.

"It's about raising awareness so parents understand that this is a real threat," he says.

Another way Brandon is spreading the word about the often hushed-up crime is with the heart-shaped symbol of love — Brandon tattooed the symbol on his left arm, put it on t-shirts and on specially-made lapel pins for each legislator who signs his bill.

He even had the conversation-starting image put on a tie he wears to the state House.

Recently, he says, "I hop in the elevator with 10 other University of South Carolina sophomore and juniors and they tell me, 'Hey, I really like your tie,'" he recalls.

"I was also wearing my son's tennis shoes, which were just old Vans that are all drawn-on. [The students] were like, 'You're the coolest one here.'

"I said, 'Well, let me tell you what all this means.' I ended up having them all follow me back to my office and give them a 30-minute lecture on the dangers of sexting and sextortion.

"Everything I do is trying to draw awareness. I would shout it from the mountaintop if I could."

He is also trying to do what he can to prevent teen suicide, telling kids how important and loved they are.

"The slogan 'Tomorrow Needs You' has become a rallying cry for us," he says.

He hopes other states take a firmer stance against sextortion and social media sites work harder to prevent the sextortion of minors.

"I want to ensure that these social media companies are held responsible," he says.

As Brandon fights to protect other families, his own — Melissa and their surviving sons Coen, 16, and Callahan, 4 — miss Gavin every single day.

"He always looked out for everyone," says Gavin's brother Coen, 16. "He was always super nice to everyone."

Coen is proud of his dad for working so hard to protect other teens.

"He believes it's his calling to help people and prevent it from happening to anyone else."

***If you or someone you know is considering suicide, please contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988, text "STRENGTH" to the Crisis Text Line at 741741 or go to [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).***

Updated by [KC Baker](#)