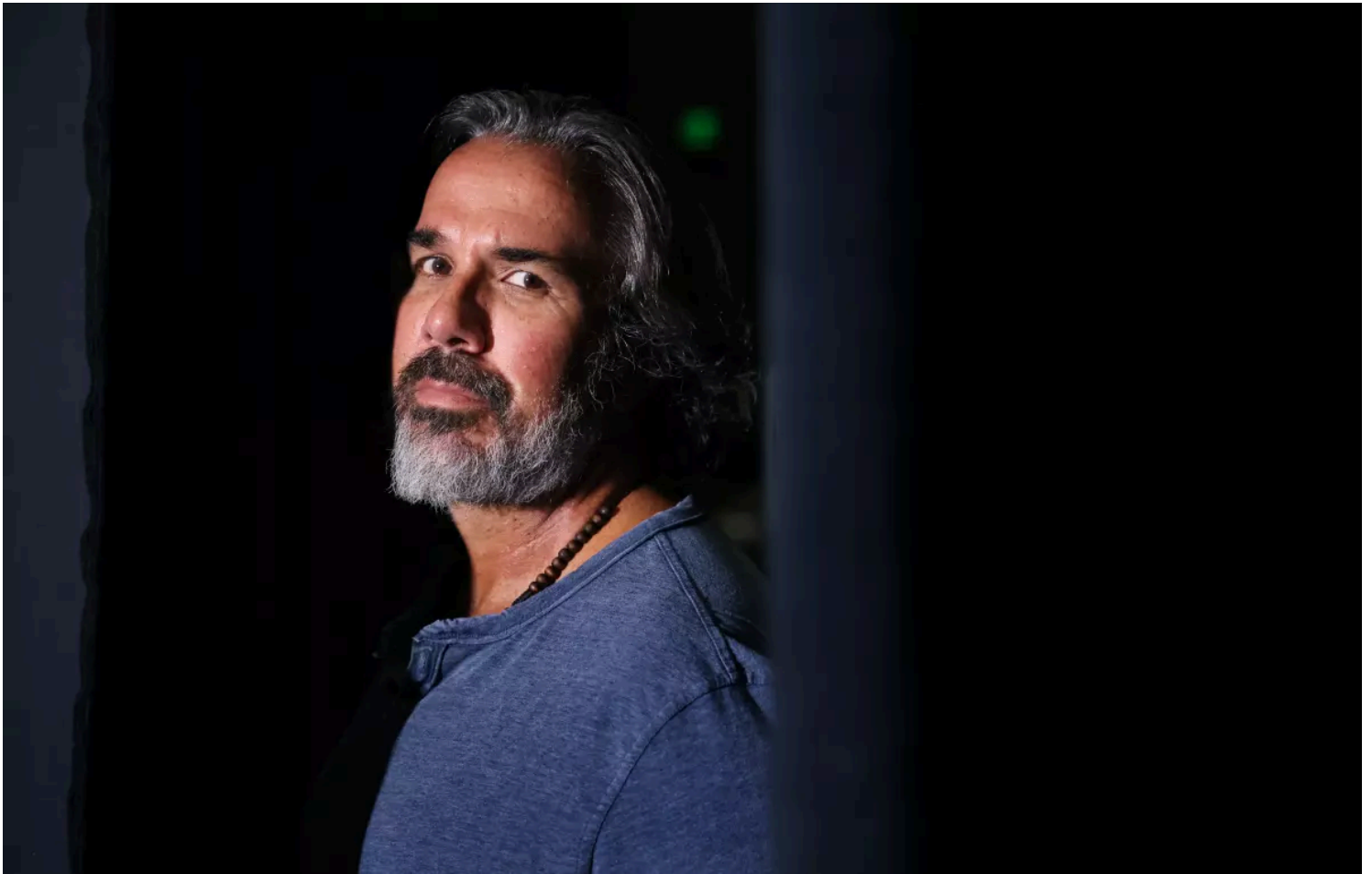




ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

His son died in the Parkland shooting. He's fighting for gun reform onstage and with a controversial AI clone



Manuel Oliver lost his son, Joaquin "Guac" Oliver, in the Parkland shooting. He's now bringing his gun-reform activism to the stage in a one-man show called "Guac." (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

**By Jessica Gelt**

Staff Writer | Follow

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- Manuel and Patricia Oliver turned to a creative form of activism after they lost their son, Joaquin "Guac" Oliver, in the 2018 Parkland school shooting.

- The cornerstone of their efforts is a one-man show called “Guac” that is staging its West Coast premiere at Culver City’s Kirk Douglas Theatre in October.
- The Olivers are fierce activists for gun reform and have created an AI avatar of their son to lobby for change.

Two days before a shooter armed with an AR-15-style rifle killed an 8-year-old and a 10-year-old, and injured 21 others in a mass shooting at the Church of the Annunciation in Minneapolis, Manuel and Patricia Oliver embarked on a six-day drive from Florida to Los Angeles to take meetings in advance of the West Coast premiere of Manuel’s one-man show, “Guac.”

The show, which was co-written by Manuel and James Clements and directed by Michael Cotey, is about Manuel’s son, Joaquin “Guac” Oliver, who was killed on Valentine’s Day 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., after being shot four times by a 19-year-old armed with an AR-15. Since then, there have been at least 400 more school shootings in America.

After the Minnesota tragedy — the 44th school shooting this year — Manuel did an interview with CNN while he was on the road, telling the anchors, “I believe that thoughts and prayers, this time, are out of the picture. These kids were actually praying ... and still they were shot. So I know exactly what those parents are going through. It’s a terrible situation and it hasn’t stopped. That’s the worst part.”

Manuel, a painter by trade, first conceived of “Guac” early in the COVID-19 pandemic, and has since performed it around the country, including at New York’s Public Theater and Woolly Mammoth in Washington, D.C. The upcoming show will be presented by Center Theatre Group at Culver City’s Kirk Douglas Theatre beginning Oct. 14.





"We want to continue to be parents, because that's a right that we have," Manuel Oliver says. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The Olivers believe that creative forms of activism can be most effective, and "Guac" has become a cornerstone of their work. The show is not meant to be political, nor is it meant to be sad, Manuel says. But it is designed to make audiences want to step up and do something about the gun violence epidemic in America, which claims more children's lives each year than any other cause.

During the 100 minutes that Manuel spends onstage, he paints a vivid picture of his son's life and reenacts how he died, using hammer strikes to symbolize each bullet that struck his son. The show, however, is not about Joaquin's death, but rather about the vibrant way he lived his life, Manuel says.

The idea arose when the Olivers grew tired of doling out tiny soundbites for mainstream news. They wanted a captive audience for long enough to lay out their case for change. From the moment their son died, the Olivers have refused to give up on their fight for sensible gun reform in America — no matter who is in power.

To that end, Manuel has a message for the president.

"If Donald Trump decides to sign an executive order banning assault weapons and passing a universal background check and safe storage for every single gun, he might get the Nobel Peace Prize," Oliver says. "Then you can say that you are the first and only president in the history of this country that was able to fight back and end gun violence."

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Does Manuel think that Trump will do that? Not really but, as he often says, he's out of options. Plus, he believes that Trump does whatever he wants with very little pushback from his party, the public or the courts.

"We want to continue to be parents because that's a right that we have," Manuel says, sitting beside his wife in a rehearsal room at the Culver City theater. "We carry Joaquin, and we will do anything to make sure that this injustice will not hit more families." They're also parents to older daughter, Andrea, and grandparents to 1-month-old Mia.



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Joaquin was an old soul, Patricia says with a warm smile — her eyes sad but glowing. He was kind and curious. As a little kid, he'd ask his parents to read everything to him, including the backs of cereal boxes and the sides of Happy Meals. He wanted to know and absorb as much as possible. He loved sports, and by the time he was a 6-foot-2 high school student, he was devoted to basketball. He enjoyed going to museums and listening to music. Guns N' Roses was one of his favorite bands.

He was also obsessed with politics and started a podcast in his garage with friends to talk about the issues of the day, including Joaquin's antipathy for the first Trump administration's treatment of migrants.

Joaquin was passionate about gun control, his parents say. In 2012, after 20 first-graders and six adults were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in

Newtown, Conn., an 11-year-old Joaquin wrote a letter to gun owners advocating for universal background checks as part of a school project.

Each time a child is killed by a gun in America, another parent joins the Olivers in the ever-growing network of grieving families wondering how they will go on in the wake of such profound horror and pain, Manuel says.

“It’s the worst network; you never wanna be part of that network,” he says.

But the Olivers continue to make those connections. Over the last three years the couple has been traveling the country in a bright orange school bus emblazoned with the slogans “Save Lives,” “Enough Is Enough” and “Stop Gun Violence.”

“We are the reminders,” Manuel says. “We understand what’s going on in those families perfectly. I know what happened that day in that house, how the father felt. Patricia knows exactly the pain, the suffering, the anxiety behind not knowing if your kid is alive or not. But that happens every single day in our country.”



Over the last three years the Olivers have been traveling the country in a school bus, which will be converted into an exhibition as part of a Manuel's one-man-show at Kirk Douglas Theatre. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

The seemingly unstoppable drumbeat of preventable child gun deaths drives the Olivers. In 2018, they founded [Change the Ref](#), an advocacy group that works to empower kids to enact change through education, conversation and urban art. The group's website champions "nonviolent creative confrontation to expose the disastrous effects of the mass shooting pandemic." Young people — those who have grown up with the trauma of active-shooter drills — are the ones most likely to pass meaningful reform when they come of age, the Olivers say.

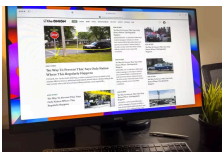
After the disillusionment of meeting with and lobbying politicians for gun reform, they got creative with their messaging.

"They will ask the same questions and they will show you that support, that interest," says Patricia, adding the legislators take notes, tell you that they are "sorry for your loss"

and ask what they can do. They often hand you a business card, urging you to call them at any time. “And that’s it,” she says.

The Olivers now offer “thoughts and prayers” toilet paper featuring the many platitudes employed by politicians after mass shootings. The idea is for people to mail the rolls to their representatives. Patricia also created a children’s book, titled “Joaquin’s First School Shooting,” which illustrates in childish drawings — and no uncertain terms — what exactly happened to her son and the other kids on that awful day. This too can be sent to a local office.

“When these things happen, it demands that we do more,” Manuel says. “If you don’t talk about the guns, then you’re not solving the problem. You’re just letting it go. Every time you send thoughts and prayers, you’re just saying it already passed. Let’s move on. So again, we don’t have that option. We refuse to have that option.”



Voices

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Most recently, the Olivers used AI to make their case. In early August, the couple unveiled an AI video clone of Joaquin, which engaged in an interview with former CNN host Jim Acosta on what would have been Joaquin’s 25th birthday. The backlash against the segment was fierce and immediate, with critics calling Acosta “ghoulish” and “manipulative.”

The Olivers are firm in their defense of their use of AI to re-create Joaquin. Everything the bot says was gleaned from Joaquin’s writing and social media posts, they say. And it is in keeping with their principles of activism, which are creative, tech-savvy, a touch punk rock and deeply nontraditional. Joaquin, according to his parents, was a socially conscious rebel in life.

“We just opened the AI door and everybody went crazy,” Manuel says, adding that people judged their choice harshly, saying that AI should not be used to re-create the dead.

“I disagree,” Manuel says. “Let me give you an emotional reason. I lost my son. I want to hear him again. So f—ing, I want to do that. None of your business.”

Manuel also does not believe that Joaquin’s AI avatar should be kept out of the public discourse about gun control. The bot, he says, is a good tool for communicating Joaquin’s message — and everything it’s saying was derived from Joaquin, not created by them.

“When someone is offended by that, by the use of technology, you’re missing the point,” says Manuel. “Because you should be offended by the reason that brought us to do this. What we’re doing here is not offensive. ... You should see what happened eight years ago when my kid was shot four times. Thank God you were not there because that will destroy you.”

'GUAC'

Where: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820
Washington Blvd., Culver City

When: Oct. 14 to Nov. 2. 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-
Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 1 p.m.
Sundays, and 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. on Nov. 2.

Tickets: Start at \$40

Contact: CenterTheatreGroup.org

Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes

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**Jessica Gelt**

Jessica Gelt is an arts and culture writer for the Los Angeles Times.