

The Straw Man

Over 18 months, Dylan Russell bought 15 firearms in Vermont, exposing the intense drugs-for-guns trade

BY JOE SEXTON

One day in September 2020, Dylan Russell walked into Bennington Armory, a gun shop in southern Vermont. The quirky store had opened four years earlier, in 2016, promoting antique guns and war memorabilia as its specialties.

Charlie Jewett, one of the owners, had gotten his first gun when he was 5 — a 410 shotgun given to him by his grandfather — and he later regularly competed in small-bore rifle shooting contests organized by the National Rifle Association. He'd chosen to come to Vermont from New York in 2016, in part because he considered New York's restrictive gun laws crazy.

"Vermont has the best gun laws in the country," Jewett told the *Bennington Banner* newspaper shortly after the shop opened. "Yes, they lean to the left, but they also want to be left alone. Freedom seems to be paramount. It's just a different feel here. I feel free."

Russell, 23, wasn't at the Armory for antique guns or war memorabilia. He was interested in semiautomatic handguns, and the Armory stocked those, as well. Russell, who had grown up in and around Bennington, met Vermont's minimal requirements for buying a gun: He was of age and had no felony convictions. He wound up buying a Smith & Wesson 9mm pistol.

A week later, Russell was back in the shop, this time purchasing a Kahr PM9 9mm handgun, a weapon its manufacturer markets as "a high-quality, extremely accurate, and easily concealable pistol." Less than three months after that, on December 10, Russell again came through the doors of the Armory, walking out with a Stoeger STR-9 9mm.

Russell's buying spree was hardly over. On December 12, 48 hours after his latest purchase at the Armory, Russell went to Black Dog Guns and Shooting Supplies store in Rutland, some 50 miles away, and bought a pair of Glock pistols.

In all, from September 2020 to March 2022, Russell bought at least 15 handguns, including 10 from Bennington Armory.

"Dylan Russell passed all his federal background checks," Jewett, the owner of the Armory, said in an interview.

However, Russell was more than just an



Dylan Russell

Bennington Armory

Black Dog Guns and Shooting Supplies

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was reported for The Trace, a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to covering gun violence. It is used here with permission. Want to know more? Visit thetrace.org.

enthusiastic purchaser of semiautomatic pistols. According to federal prosecutors, he was a shadowy soldier in a criminal enterprise meant to exploit two features of life in the state of Vermont: its gun laws and its deadly struggle with opioid addiction.

The authorities believe none of the guns Russell purchased were for him. He'd lied about that on the paperwork he signed when he bought them. He'd lied, as well,

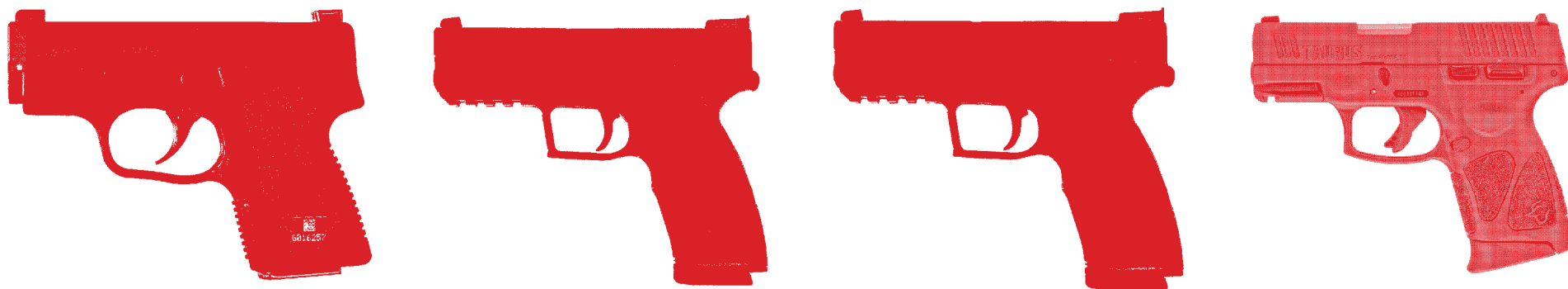
when he declared he did not abuse illicit drugs. He'd been using heroin ever since he graduated from high school.

In January 2024, Russell was charged in U.S. District Court in Burlington for his role as a "straw purchaser" in what prosecutors allege was a drugs-for-guns operation orchestrated by gang members based in cities including Springfield, Mass., and Hartford, Conn. Russell, who has pleaded guilty in the case and is set to be sentenced in November, bought guns on behalf of drug traffickers; he got drugs from them in return.

In an interview, Nikolas Kerest, the U.S. attorney for Vermont, laid out the straightforward calculus in cases such as Russell's: Vermont is a "source state" for

guns and a "target state" for those pushing heroin and, much more commonly these days, the extra-potent drug fentanyl. In Vermont's grittier communities — including Bennington and Rutland, Brattleboro and Barre — addicts are willing to pay higher prices than can be commanded in places such as New York City or Hartford or Springfield.

In recent years, interstates 91 and 89 have become convenient corridors for crime. Kerest's office said it had brought more than two dozen straw purchase gun cases since 2021. "It's a simple business proposition," said Kerest, whose office is prosecuting Russell, "that leads to a pretty robust and fertile market for guns going south and drugs coming north."



Our policies and lack of accountability leave us **vulnerable to major drug traffickers** who see Vermont as a “destination state.”

GOV. PHIL SCOTT

Left for Dead

The guns Russell bought made their way south quickly, according to filings in his case. Less than 72 hours after he purchased the Smith & Wesson at Bennington Armory, it was recovered during an arrest in Springfield. And one of the Glock pistols Russell had obtained at the Black Dog shop in Rutland turned up at a Federal Bureau of Investigation raid in Springfield. Yet another gun was found on a juvenile taken into custody out of state, one of six firearms the boy had in his possession.

Vermont has always embraced firearms and has had relatively permissive gun laws. Over the past decade, safety advocates have managed to get stricter laws enacted, including a red flag law that allows a judge to have guns taken from someone deemed an extreme risk to themselves or others. Another requires gun owners to keep their weapons safely stored.

Yet today no license is required to own a gun. Weapons including assault rifles can be carried openly.

Federal, state and local officials say it is impossible to estimate just how many illegally purchased guns are flowing out of Vermont; the guns they have recovered represent a fraction of the total.

“Arresting one individual who uses drugs for having purchased and sold 20 guns on his own doesn’t provide any insight into how many of his peers who use drugs might be operating the same hustle,” said Marc Maurino, an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives based in Burlington.

Shawn Loan, a state police captain who oversees the Vermont Intelligence Center, added, “All I can say is, it is more and more, and all the time.”



Vermont State Police Det. Sgt. Tyson Kinney clearing snow at the site where Isaiah Rodriguez was fatally shot

In 2022, President Joe Biden signed a bipartisan gun bill that made these straw purchases a federal offense punishable by more than a decade behind bars. Since then, cases have been made in Indiana, Washington, Illinois and Massachusetts, among others, states with often starkly different gun laws.

“Criminals rely on illegal gun traffickers and straw purchasers to obtain the weapons they use to harm our communities,” U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said earlier this year.

In Vermont, officials said the trafficking in drugs and weapons has led to a spike in homicides. In 2019, there were four drug-related homicides in the state; in 2023, that increased to 11 — more than a third of the state’s total of 27.

The recent killings included a gruesome one on February 2, 2022, when Isaiah

Rodriguez, a 17-year-old from Springfield, was shot more than a dozen times and left dead in the snow in Danby. State prosecutors have alleged that one of the three men who killed Rodriguez as part of a dispute over drugs was somebody Dylan Russell bought guns for.

‘I Use Heroin. I Never Stopped.’

The crash scene on Route 7 in Bennington County was an ugly one.

Just before 8 a.m. on March 22, 2021, a pickup truck going 54 miles per hour plowed head-on into an SUV driven by a father taking his 12-year-old daughter to school. The roof and two of the doors of the SUV had to be cut away to free the

father, who suffered fractured ribs and a broken nose. The girl, thanks to front and side airbags, walked away with minor injuries.

The driver of the truck was Dylan Russell. He was found outside his vehicle, his eyes bloodshot, both his arms bearing needle marks. Russell’s mother would tell police she’d kicked him out of the house days earlier, and she wasn’t sure where he had been staying.

A sheriff’s deputy at the scene asked Russell if he took drugs.

“I use heroin,” Russell said. He then suggested those he loved would be disappointed he hadn’t kicked the habit. “I never stopped,” he blurted out.

“My dad is going to kill me,” he told the deputy.

In 2014, then-governor Peter Shumlin declared opioid addiction Vermont’s greatest menace. That year, 64 people died of opioid overdoses.

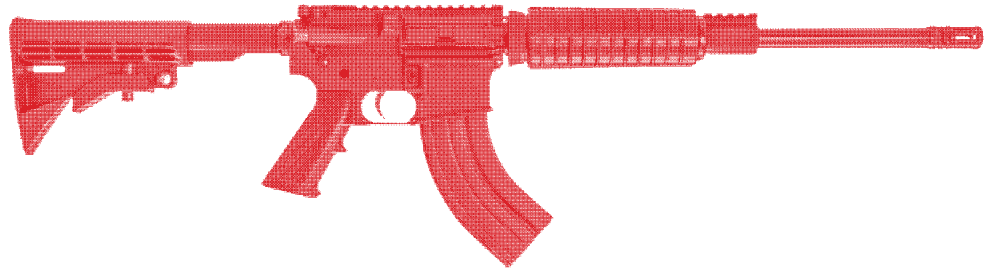
“In every corner of our state, heroin and opiate drug addiction threatens us,” Shumlin declared.

That threat has only worsened, and dramatically so. Last year, 236 Vermonters died of opioids. As a percentage of its population, Vermont has more people taking medication to treat their opioid addiction than any other state in the country. The addicted have swamped the state’s courthouses and emergency rooms, lost their children to state custody, and gone homeless by the hundreds.

But Vermont’s profound and prolonged opioid crisis has proved an opportunity for out-of-state drug traffickers who have set up operations in the Green Mountains. Bennington, a town of 15,000 with both fancy schools and grinding poverty, has become a top destination. And it has kept Corey Briggs, one of the Bennington Police Department’s two detectives, busy.

From 2020 to 2023, Briggs said, the department made nearly 700 drug seizures; on 18 occasions, authorities confiscated 500 or more bags of heroin or fentanyl. During those four years, Briggs and other investigators in Bennington

MIKE ALBANS/THE BENNINGTON BANNER



The Straw Man « P.27

said, there were armed assaults, burglaries and kidnappings, at least 20 shootings, and two homicides.

Bennington's proximity to Massachusetts and New York has, he said, "taken a toll on us."

Briggs said Dylan Russell had been a player in Bennington's bruising and bustling drug trade for years, a user and also a willing middleman for the out-of-state traffickers.

Jennifer Sweet, Russell's mother, said her son had grown up in Bennington and nearby Pownal, the youngest of six children. She said her son's struggles with heroin began after he graduated from Mt. Anthony Union High School.

Karen Shingler, Russell's lawyer in the gun case, said that once Russell began using, it defined his existence.

In 2018, Russell, then 21, was found unconscious in the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant in Bennington. He'd overdosed on heroin, and a .38-caliber handgun was in the car.

From then until the collision in 2021, Russell purchased at least five weapons. Even the frightening crash that could have killed a father and daughter did not halt his run of gun buying, though he had felony charges pending. In the ensuing months, Russell bought another 10 guns at two shops: Resolute Tool Works in Woodford and Bennington Armory. Each time, he declared on the required paperwork that he was not abusing drugs.

Shingler, Russell's lawyer, said it was impossible to believe the gun shops didn't have suspicions about Russell and his repeated purchases costing thousands of dollars.

"This kid presented as a junkie," Shingler said. "They didn't care."

In an interview, Jewett, one of the two partners who run Bennington Armory, denied that was true. The guns were sold legally to Russell, he said. There was nothing more to it. Asked if Russell's purchase of 10 semiautomatic guns in a matter of months hadn't struck him as unusual, Jewett ended the interview. "I see what you're driving at," Jewett said. "You sound like you are working for a law firm. I have nothing else to say."

State and federal authorities say scrutiny regarding purchases varies from store

to store. Some shop owners have suspected those seeking guns were lying about their drug use and alerted law enforcement. Other shops, they say, accept whatever purchasers declare on the required paperwork and feel it's not their role to judge a buyer's true intentions.

The remoteness of many of the state's gun shops, combined with the relatively meager ranks of local and federal law enforcement agencies operating in Vermont, make it hard to vigorously enforce some of the existing laws and meaningfully oversee the operations of gun shops.

"God's blind spot," one federal official said of Vermont.

'An Untouchable Issue'

His fellow legislators had had a few by the time state Sen. Philip Baruth walked into the restaurant in Montpelier one day in 2013.

"What do you think you're doing?" one of them shouted at the Chittenden County Democrat/Progressive.

In one of his early initiatives after becoming a Vermont senator, Baruth had proposed what he thought was a common-sense and urgently needed law: a ban on the sale of assault weapons. Weeks earlier, 26 people, including 20 schoolchildren 7 years old and younger, had been killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut by a former student wielding a high-powered rifle.

Nonetheless, Baruth said, the backlash to his proposal was universal. Gun lobbyists and everyday citizens reacted with outrage. Legislators he'd begun to think of as potential allies abandoned him. To him, it was more than surprising. It felt personal.

"You're an asshole," another of the elected officials at the restaurant's bar called out that day.

Baruth quickly withdrew his bill.

Gun restrictions, he'd just found out, were going to be an uphill effort. Baruth received calls from 26 reporters when he proposed the assault weapons ban. He'd never talked to that many in his life.

"An untouchable issue," he said. "Like a third rail."

Yet Baruth and others, including a schoolteacher and mother from Brattleboro named Ann Braden, did not give up. Braden, with no prior political organizing



Sen. Phil Baruth

FILE: JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR



It's a simple business proposition that leads to a pretty robust and fertile market for guns going south and drugs coming north.

U.S. ATTORNEY NIKOLAS KEREST

experience, rounded up 12,000 signatures on a petition calling for gun reform. And Baruth introduced more legislation in the ensuing years.

In 2015, for the first time in anyone's memory, a gun bill moved forward. It was basically a state version of the federal ban on felons buying guns. The legislation also pledged that Vermont authorities would contribute information to a federal database of violent criminals who should be prevented from buying guns.

It was a modest set of changes, Baruth said, and yet the governor at the time, Shumlin, signed the bills behind closed doors. There was no Statehouse news conference nor victory lap taken. It was progress no one seemed excited to celebrate.

Three years later, in 2018, the landscape shifted dramatically in Vermont. Another school shooting, this one in Parkland, Fla., claimed 17 lives, once more shocking the country. Then, just one



day later, an 18-year-old former student at Fair Haven Union High School was arrested and charged with planning to carry out a mass killing at his old school. The authorities said they had found a journal in the former student's car that laid out a disturbing plan for the attack.

"I'm aiming to kill as many as I can," the journal read.

The two events led to the most dramatic gun legislation in the history of Vermont. A red flag law was enacted, empowering authorities to remove guns from people at "extreme risk" of violence and those arrested on suspicion of domestic violence. Bump stocks and sales of high-capacity magazines were banned, and the age to purchase a firearm was raised from 16 to 21 — with an exception made for those who completed a hunter-safety course.

This time, Shumlin's successor, Republican Gov. Phil Scott, signed the bills on the Statehouse steps.

"The reality of how close we came to a tragedy like Florida forced me to do some soul-searching," Scott said at the time. "I've hunted and fished my entire life. I've got a safe full of guns, including the one I got when I was 13 ... I never felt the need to change our gun laws here in Vermont. I believed, since we were such a small, tight-knit state, that we were different and somewhat insulated from the violence the rest of the world was seeing. But I was wrong. And that's not always easy to admit."

As Scott signed the bill, gun rights advocates shouted that he was a traitor.

Baruth and other gun control advocates said Scott has only signed the variety of additional gun bills that have come to pass since 2018 because legislators would have overridden a veto. More

recent changes have included establishing a 72-hour waiting period to buy a gun and requiring gun owners keep their weapons safely stored. In 2023, the legislature made the kind of straw purchase that Dylan Russell engaged in a felony under Vermont law, just as it is in federal statutes.

Scott declined to be interviewed. His spokesperson, Rebecca Kelley, noted Scott's role in the 2018 legislation and that he "has subsequently agreed to enact multiple additional gun laws."

She suggested one of the real problems fueling the drugs-for-guns threat was a group of criminal justice reforms that Scott now regrets supporting. Those involve raising the age for offenders to be prosecuted as adults and more lenient terms for bail. Both reforms, Scott has claimed, had left more and more people on the streets — repeat offenders out on release, 18- and 19-year-olds still being treated as juveniles — who could be potential accomplices for bad actors from out of state.

"We focused so much on our well-intentioned goals that we didn't think through all the possible consequences," Scott said in a recent address.

"Our policies and lack of accountability," Scott asserted, "leave us vulnerable to major drug traffickers who see Vermont as a 'destination state.'"

Chris Bradley, the president of the Vermont Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs and a gun rights advocate, said he did not think Vermont was any more of a target for drug traffickers seeking weapons than any other state. He claimed the legislation that had passed in Vermont in recent years was "well intentioned, but virtually useless."

THE STRAW MAN » P.30

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The Straw Man

« P.29

Bradley noted that the state's law barring those convicted of a violent crime from possessing a firearm was merely a misdemeanor, while the federal version of the law made it a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison. If such laws are vital to public safety, Bradley argued, then put teeth in them.

A decade after Baruth got his introduction to the passionate state politics around gun control, he said Vermont is still no better than "middle of the pack" when measured against the rest of the country.

"You can open-carry an AK-47," Baruth said.

People can bring guns to bars. No one needs to get a license or permit. In Vermont, Baruth said, some fear the government will track your guns, knock down your doors, put you in reeducation camps.

"I have had people make that argument to me very seriously," Baruth said. "Permitting is the No. 1 boogeyman of the gun rights folks."

Baruth, today the Senate president pro tempore, recently said he would like the legislature to ban the sale of assault rifles. And after an altercation in a Burlington bar led to a fatal shooting in August, he's further supporting having the legislature revisit a potential ban on guns in the city's bars next year.

'Okay, Bro'

On February 19, 2022, John Pena Baez dropped Dylan Russell off near Bennington Armory. Russell entered the store, and minutes later, he shared via Facebook Messenger a picture he'd taken of an Anderson AM-15, an assault-style pistol.

"Hell yeah," Baez wrote back.

Russell sent a thumbs-up emoji and paid for the gun.

"Coming in a minute," Baez wrote.

"Park where you let me out," Russell instructed.

Baez was born in Puerto Rico and spent his early years, according to his lawyers, in a violent public housing project there. His mother struggled with addiction, and when Baez was 9, she brought him to Holyoke, Mass., to live with relatives of her boyfriend.



LUKE AVTRY

This kid presented as a junkie. They didn't care.

KAREN SHINGLER

As a teen, Baez wound up in the drugs-and-guns scene in Holyoke, a former mill town of 38,000 that is a troubled corner of the greater Springfield metropolitan area. Gangs are a problem, and nearly 50 percent of children under age 18 live below the poverty line. By 16, Baez was fully immersed in Holyoke's drug subculture.

On September 18, 2021, the Massachusetts State Police conducted a traffic stop on I-91. The man behind the wheel of the car told police he was an Uber driver, returning to Massachusetts from a trip to Bennington.

Baez was in the passenger seat. When police ordered him out, a fanny pack over his shoulder, they recovered two loaded Taurus 9mm handguns, cocaine, heroin and cash.

Baez was arrested, but it did little to halt his burgeoning operations in Bennington. He'd be released and later set himself up in various Bennington locations — trap houses, they are called — and deployed locals to distribute heroin, fentanyl, crack cocaine and more. He'd assemble his own violent crew of others from Holyoke and

Springfield, and they would give themselves a variety of gang names.

Along the way, Baez would forge a relationship with Russell to keep him supplied with guns.

Three days after Russell bought the Anderson pistol, he was texting Baez from inside Bennington Armory. He had bad news; the store did not have the Glock pistols Baez was seeking.

"Fuck," Baez wrote back.

He told Russell to get an assault-style handgun.

"Get 3 clips and like 5, 6 boxes of ammo," Baez added.

In return, Baez told Russell he would hook him up with drugs, enough for him to both use and sell. There was no need to worry about ever being dopesick — going through withdrawal — as long as the arrangement went on, Baez reassured Russell.

"Ima give u this so u can flip more than half and keep buying shit so never sick," Baez wrote.

"Okay, bro," Russell told him.

A week later, Russell wanted to repeat the drugs-for-guns arrangement.

"Can I get you something from [the] shop so I can get back on my feet," Russell wrote to Baez.

Within hours, Russell was buying a Springfield Armory handgun.

The authorities have so far recovered five of the 15 weapons they say Russell bought on behalf of drug traffickers from Massachusetts. One of those was taken from Baez when he was arrested in Bennington on April 6, 2022, on federal drug and gun charges. Exactly how many guns Russell bought for Baez is unclear, but there were at least five.

Baez was not just obtaining guns. He was using them. In January 2022, he was involved in a wild shoot-out at a trap house in Pownal, not far from Bennington. A dispute with a rival gang from Springfield provoked an exchange of gunfire, and the authorities allege that Baez fired his own assault rifle. No one was known to have been injured, but days later, one of the men involved in the episode would be dead. And Baez would be named as one of his killers.

Young Shooters

A little before 11 p.m. on February 2, 2022, four men emerged from their vehicle off to the side of Danby Mountain Road in Danby. The men, including 18-year-old John Pena Baez, had arrived at a spot in the woods used as an informal firing range, and they were there to shoot a new set of guns. At least, that's what they had told 17-year-old Isaiah Rodriguez.

Now, in the late-night cold, the men told Rodriguez to start running. Rodriguez laughed. Why would he run, he asked. What's going on?

Rodriguez was a Springfield teen who had become an associate of Baez in trafficking drugs to Vermont. He had been with Baez during the shoot-out in Pownal. But tension had arisen between the two — perhaps over a stolen gun, perhaps over the suspicion that Rodriguez aimed to break off to run his own drug operation.

Earlier that day, Baez had sent people to bring Rodriguez from Springfield to Vermont.

On Danby Mountain Road, Rodriguez finally did as he was told: He ran, and he



The Straw Man « P.30

died in a hail of gunfire, struck 16 times. The sneakers he was wearing were taken off him, and he was left in the snow.

Tyson Kinney, the Vermont State Police detective working the case, said he was struck by both the brutality of the execution and the age of Baez and the others.

“Senseless,” he said.

Baez “was the ringleader and mastermind,” Kinney said. “He planned it and set it up.”

An arrest warrant for murder has been issued for Baez, but he has not yet been brought from federal prison to face formal charges. Witness statements contain varying accounts of Baez’s role in the shooting and his claims of responsibility afterward. One account said he did not fire his gun; another said he did.

Hours after the killing, at a house in Bennington, Baez said he regretted not shooting Rodriguez, one witness said. Another said Baez had been proud of what he’d done and had smoked a celebratory cigar or marijuana blunt.

One account said Baez actually had listed his reasons for helping kill Rodriguez. One of them, according to the witness, was that Baez “wanted to know what it felt like.” Yet another account said Baez claimed he’d been paid as much as \$20,000 by an undisclosed person for the killing and that he’d given a new name to his crew: Young Paid Shooters.

“We can’t believe the way they did this,” Maria Figueroa, Rodriguez’s mother, told the *Bennington Banner* after her son’s death. “We didn’t even know he was involved with people who could do something like this. Whatever the hell he was in, he lost his life because of it.”

‘My Heart Sank a Little Bit’

Adam Cannistraci, the owner of Resolute Tool Works gun store in Woodford, got the dreaded phone call on August 30, 2022. A federal agent wanted Cannistraci to check his records of recent sales.

“My heart sank a little bit,” Cannistraci said in an interview, “because I know what that means. It means that a firearm was recovered at a crime scene.”



John Pena Baez

**He was
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and that
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ADAM CANNISTRACI

The gun the agent was calling about had been recovered during Baez’s April 2022 arrest in Bennington on drug trafficking charges. Cannistraci told the agent that his records showed the gun was one of two Taurus 9mm handguns he had sold to Dylan Russell in March of that year.

Those two handguns, however, were not the only ones Russell had bought at Cannistraci’s store. He’d purchased another Taurus 9mm on February 2, 2022, the day Baez allegedly helped kill Isaiah Rodriguez.

Kinney, the detective, said it had been difficult trying to identify the guns used

to kill Rodriguez. Because the scene of the murder was a local firing range, spent shell casings were scattered everywhere. So far, a single gun had been identified — a ghost gun, without a serial number, that was found at a local house used by Baez’s associates.

Asked if the Taurus that Russell had bought from Cannistraci might have been used that night in Danby, Kinney said, “It’s very possible, and we just haven’t recovered it.”

Cannistraci said he became a federal firearm licensee about four years ago. He said he believes in the U.S. Constitution’s Second Amendment, as well as Article 16 of Vermont’s state constitution guaranteeing its citizens the right to bear arms to defend themselves and the state. Cannistraci said his shop is run as a side business, open just two days a week, but that he takes his responsibilities seriously.

He said he has developed his own script for inquiring with prospective buyers to better assess their true intentions. A buyer who has someone waiting in a car outside is suspicious. Women buying guns in the company of men also raise alarms.

Cannistraci said he was roughly the same age as Russell, and he had a solid memory of his interactions with him. The first time Russell came in, he wore camo, nothing unusual in rural Vermont. He stunk of cigarette smoke. Cannistraci made him for a local. “He seemed like a normal dude,” Cannistraci said.

He said that when Russell returned and bought the two 9mm guns, Russell told him that his mother might be using one of the weapons. Unusual perhaps, he said, but legal in Vermont: The purchaser of a gun can legally transfer ownership to a blood relative, as long as that person does not have a felony record.

Cannistraci said that when Russell came in a third time, now smelling of marijuana, he’d seen enough. He refused to sell to him.

“He was purchasing a lot of the same style of handgun,” Cannistraci said, “and that seemed odd to me.”

Despite Vermont’s history of less restrictive gun laws, Cannistraci said people in the state over the years had, with a wink and a nod, pushed the limits of what was technically legal when it came to the buying and trading of weapons.

He said he thought regulations had been tightened and made more explicit

since 2018 but noted that Vermont still does not require gun owners to be licensed, something people such as Sen. Baruth think could help thwart straw purchasers.

State and federal law enforcement officials would not comment on Vermont’s specific regulations or vulnerabilities, but court filings make clear their continuing worry.

“For the purposes of firearms trafficking investigations,” prosecutors wrote in their filings against Dylan Russell, agents with the ATF “consider Vermont a ‘source state’ in that there are very few regulations, laws, or licensure requirements for purchasing and possessing firearms.”

‘His Conduct Ensnared Many’

In September 2023, John Pena Baez was sentenced to 75 months in federal prison on drug and gun charges.

Months later, an arrest warrant for Baez on the Rodriguez murder charge was filed with the court system’s criminal division in Bennington. When he will be brought from federal custody to be formally charged in Vermont is unclear.

At his sentencing hearing, prosecutors laid out the scope of Baez’s alleged operations in Vermont: drugs, guns, attempts to lure or compel girls into prostitution.

“The nature and circumstances of Pena Baez’s offenses are exceptionally serious,” prosecutors wrote in a sentencing memo. “He engaged in widespread drug distribution for a long time. He and his associates distributed fentanyl and cocaine base, leading to addiction and overdose. Pena Baez earned significant profits from his criminal activity ... He regularly used drugs to obtain housing, rides, and influence. His conduct ensnared many.”

Hungry for heroin, and despite a criminal record that included pending felony charges, Dylan Russell was a useful tool in a “source state.”

Russell’s plea agreement has been filed under seal. Lawyers said sentencing is scheduled to take place in November.

Karen Shingler, his attorney, said Russell has been sober since he was charged earlier this year. He has a job on the night shift at a Walmart. She’s hoping for probation. ⑦