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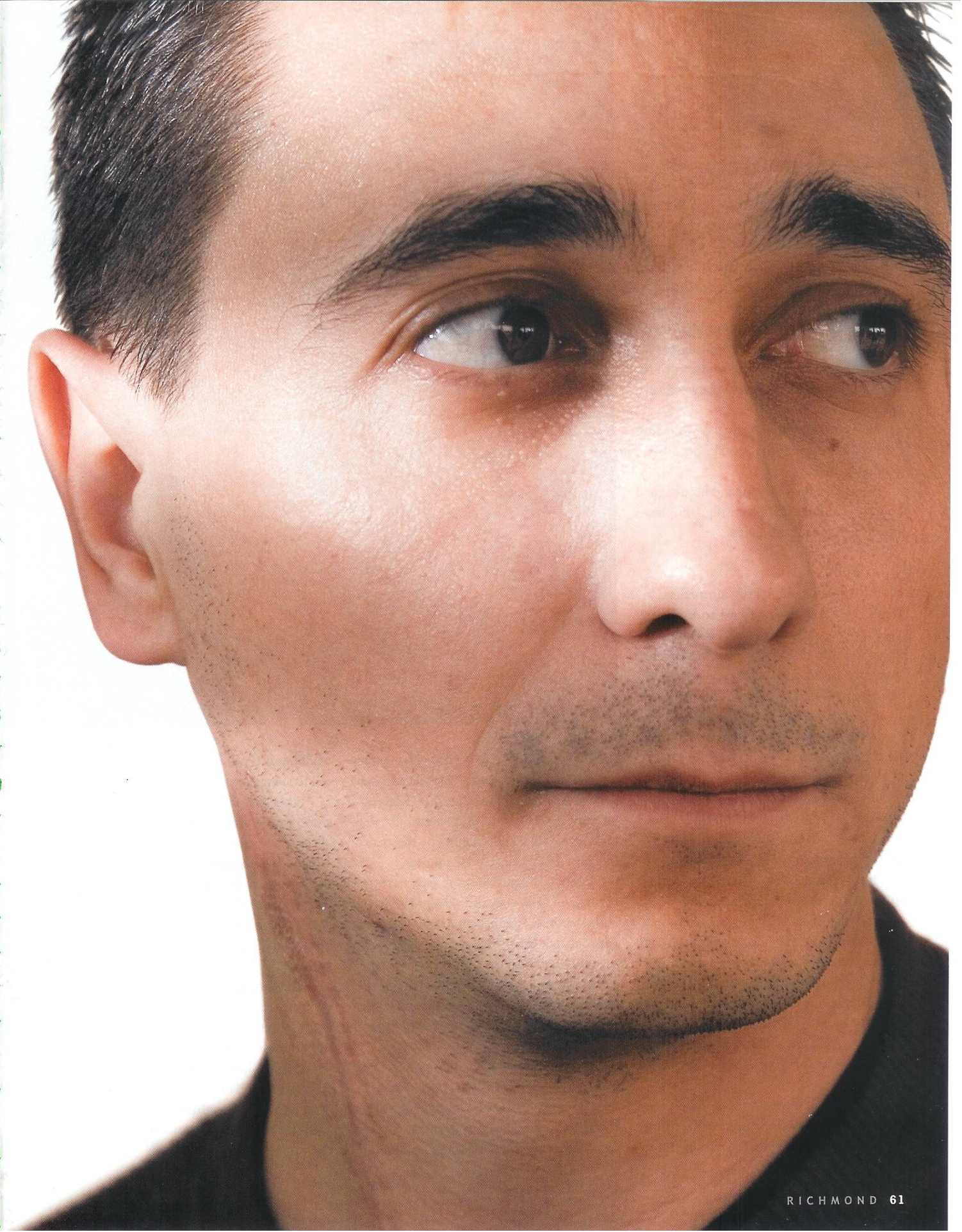
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The Shot Heard 'Round the World

A 9 mm bullet pierced ice-cream vendor Danny Teodorescu's right shoulder, then crashed through his clavicle and cut through his voice box.

His fiancée, Irina, heard it all by cell phone in Romania. "I'm sorry, baby, but they shot me," he muttered. "One second I was talking to him," Irina says. "Then our lives changed forever." ▶

By Harry Kollatz Jr./ Photos by Jay Paul



A classified ad caught Danny Teodorescu's eye in early 2006: Come sell ice cream in the United States through Mobile Ice Cream Corp., distributors of the Blue Bunny brand.

The notion appealed to the ambitious 31-year-old Romanian. In the United States, his earning potential would be greater than in Romania, even though it meant depending on sales commissions on top of a base salary. He was willing to take the 7-month job as a way to raise cash for his wedding to his high-school sweetheart, Irina Enache.

Irina envisioned Danny in a white suit riding through idyllic streets on a bike, pulling a cooler.

Instead, he drove a van, and his assigned routes were the public-housing complexes of Gilpin and Hillside courts.

Cold Feet

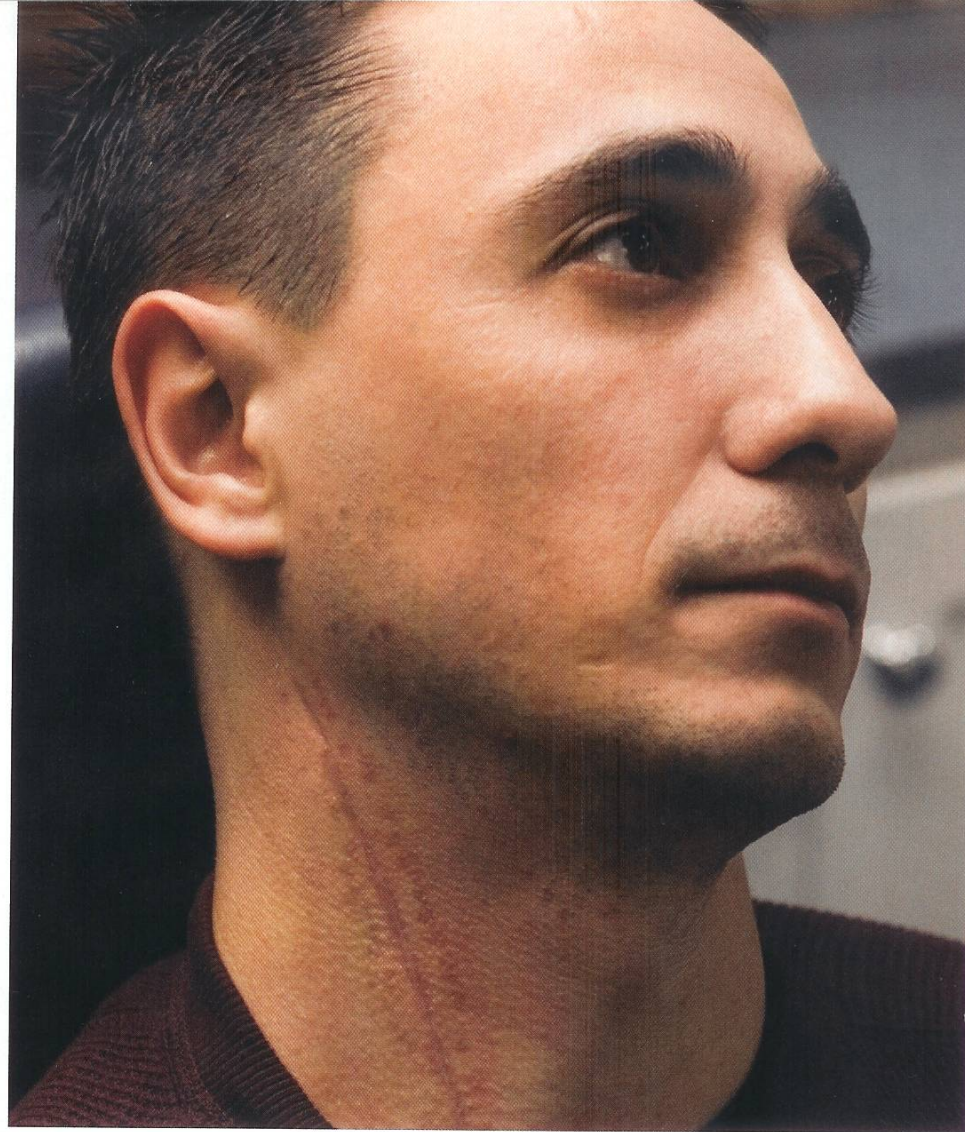
On his first day, after kids jumped on his truck, he sped away. "I had to make my courage to continue there," he says. "But, soon enough, it was OK." He was careful, recalling seeing men with guns shoved in their pants, strutting around, "like cowboys." Yet people would spend \$20 or \$30 a day on ice cream. "The same people, every day," he says, brows rising and frowning. "Good for me, though."

Jokesters showed up at his takeout window saying, "Give me all your money" before they ordered. This happened so often that it became part of the daily routine.

His first stint selling Blue Bunny earned him enough that he decided it was worth returning in 2007. He was assigned a route in South Side, and he and Irina began making serious arrangements for their wedding: the church, the reception restaurant, an Italian honeymoon. They sometimes spoke by phone five times a day. A date was set, Nov. 10. Danny would leave the United States for Romania on Oct. 15.

Only a Week Away

On Oct. 7, a warm Sunday afternoon, Danny drove his van into the parking lot by



the playground of E.S.F. Greene Elementary School off Catalina Drive. Parents and children were playing. Through his Bluetooth, he remarked to Irina that some kids were kicking a soccer ball. Judging by the crowd, he figured he'd be there 15 minutes.

A few youngsters came over and got ice cream. He was speaking with Irina about wedding details when two teenagers approached. One wore a white jacket, and the other had on a dark hoodie.

The guy in the hoodie came to the side and asked for a Chips Galore, an ice-cream sandwich that was buried in the bottom of the truck's cooler.

Danny opened the cooler's door and leaned in to get the Chips Galore. The truck then lurched, and Danny popped up to see the white-jacketed teen sitting in the truck's cab. Within reach were Danny's cell phone,

wallet and iPod, which he used to drown out the singsong music of his truck.

"What the heck are you doing?" Danny said, more annoyed than frightened. "Where do you think you are, at home?"

He pushed him, and without a word the boy got out. Danny locked the door and rolled up the window. He still held the Chips Galore, which he intended to give to his customer. Danny then heard, "Give me your money."

Danny thought it was a joke, like all the other times.

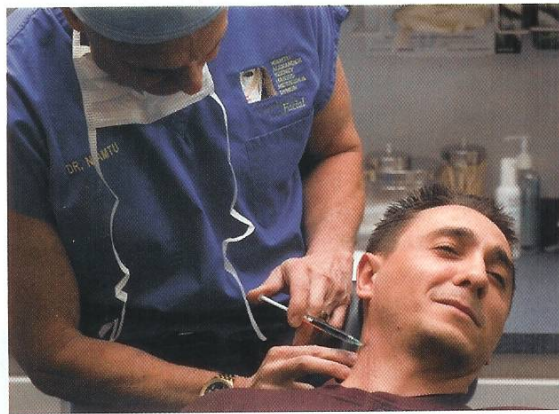
But then a bullet ripped through his right shoulder and his voice box. Exiting his body, it shattered the truck's cab window and landed on the playground outside.

Irina heard everything.

Danny muttered, "I'm sorry, baby, but they shot me."



Left: Danny's right vocal cord is paralyzed. His left vocal cord has compensated for the loss, and he is now able to speak. Above: Danny greets Irina at the airport on Feb. 4. He hadn't seen her in almost a year. She returned to Romania on Feb. 15, still uncertain of their wedding date but with a diamond ring. Right: Dr. Joe Niamtu, a cosmetic facial surgeon, numbs Danny's neck before treating his scar with a laser.



April Niamtu suggested. "Put it in a memory box."

Love, Romanian Style

Danny and Irina met in 10th grade. Danny dressed in rapper style, or the Eastern European version of it, and he hung out in nightclubs. He could afford them because of frequent trips to Germany, where he bought electronics and clothes and sold them in Romania. When he showed up to school the first day, he was late, which wasn't unusual.

When Irina saw Danny, she didn't like the looks of him, while he remarked to his buddies, "Who is that too-slender girl sitting up front?"

But events took their own course. She found herself with friends in a pool hall where Danny was holding court, and he offered to teach her to play. If she lost a game, he bet a kiss. It was just a joke. She, of course, didn't win and kept up her end of the bargain.

They sort of dated; Danny would buy her gifts, but Irina would pay him back. To save cash, she'd walk to school rather than take the transit, so she could reimburse him.

She wasn't like those girls in the clubs.

"I wasn't a saint guy," Danny says. If his late grandfather Ilie hadn't intervened and gotten him into carpentry work, and if Irina hadn't come into his life, he doesn't think he'd be around today. "I learned from them both the value of work, of saving money, of family."

"He wasn't easy," Irina admits. "He was stubborn."

After Ilie's death, Danny studied computer repair, and he found this skill almost as useful as carpentry. Irina introduced him to Christmas and church. He and Irina both had less-than-ideal upbringings. They wanted to build a different life, together.

He pulled a stint in the army; she began studying marketing but switched to psychology, which she is still studying. In November 2005, feigning car trouble and needing

For the Memory Box

Five months later, on Feb. 11, 2008, the day Danny turned 32, he entered the John Marshall Courts Building to testify against his alleged assailant, 19-year-old Dante Lewis.

On this, the morning of the nonjury trial, Danny's anxiety stole his appetite for breakfast. His left knee pumped nonstop with nervous energy. He didn't look comfortable in his brown, three-button single-breasted suit.

Commonwealth's Attorney Tracy Thorne-Begland and Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Bryan Rhode guided Danny's group into a dimly lit witness holding room alongside Courtroom 305.

Here were Irina; April Niamtu, wife of the plastic surgeon who befriended Danny; Adrian, Danny's younger brother from

Atlanta; and Pat Richards, Danny's favorite customer and one of the first to visit during this three-week hospital stay.

Thorne-Begland ran through some questions with Detective Herbert Byrd, whose transcribed conversation with Lewis put him at the scene with the gun in his hand. Byrd called Danny at 4 a.m. the night he apprehended Lewis. Danny couldn't sleep afterward and waited until 6:30 a.m. to call Pat Richards. His reluctance amused them: "I didn't want to call at an indecent hour," Danny said, with a shrug.

Thorne-Begland stepped into the anteroom. "Well, I have a little good news. Danny, you're going to get back your stuff from the truck, including your Bluetooth. It may be a little messy." This got a knowing laugh from the group.

"I think you should definitely keep it,"

a ride to class, Irina gave Danny an address that proved to be a church. There, with a priest, a cake and family, their engagement was formalized, Romanian-style.

"We wanted our wedding to be done our way. We wanted to pay for everything," Danny says.

"Get me an ambulance!"

Danny didn't have time to react when he saw the gun from inside the ice-cream truck; Lewis would describe it as a junk shot. Danny's arm flew up, and the Chips Galore was flung against the truck's front windows. Lewis fled.

Danny's ears filled with a great roaring sound. He could hear Irina screaming in his ear. Blood rushed into his mouth. Danny managed to unlock the truck's door and tumbled out. He croaked to those nearby to call 911. He staggered toward the playground, where two kids eased him to the grass, gave him a T-shirt to collect the blood, held his hand, talked to him. He remembers a police officer arriving and taking notes in a calm fashion. Danny tried to talk. "What are you doing? Get me an ambulance!" But gurgles, not words, came out.

In the ambulance, the attendants kept him focused, several times asking his name and country of origin, until Danny handed them his Bluetooth and told them to get it from Irina. Then he passed out.

VCU Medical Center's trauma, throat and orthopedic surgeons spent five hours with Danny. He was put on a ventilator, and a feeding tube was eventually inserted since he couldn't swallow properly.

The bullet had entered the sidewall of his throat and traveled through the upper part of his voice box, just above his vocal chords. Doctors would later discover that his right vocal cord had been paralyzed from nerve damage.

"Just 5 mm lower and the bullet would have gone right through his vocal cords, meaning he wouldn't have been able to breathe without a tracheotomy tube, and his voice would have been severely compromised," says Dr. Evan Reiter, who treated Danny.

For a while, as he healed, Danny couldn't speak, breathing and eating through tubes.

Pat Richards, his favorite customer, came to visit him in between speech and physical therapy. Another Blue Bunny vendor, Bogdan Margau, would translate Danny's gasps or notes to Irina on the phone. The television anchors came, along with the newspaper reporters. He was in the hospital for three weeks and a day.

A Rescue and Arrest

On a plane headed for a conference in St. Louis, cosmetic facial surgeon Joe Niamtu III was catching up on back issues of the Richmond Times-Dispatch when he read of Danny's plight.

"Here's a guy who came over here to make a better life for himself with this job not many people would want to do," Niamtu says. "He's accosted by people who aren't working, or trying get around it somehow. And this is embarrassing for the city, really."

Niamtu, whose grandfather immigrated to this country from Romania and whose father is fluent in the language, wanted to know if he could help. He asked his father to call the hospital and explain. At first Danny thought somebody was kidding him when he was told a caller wanted to speak to him in Romanian.

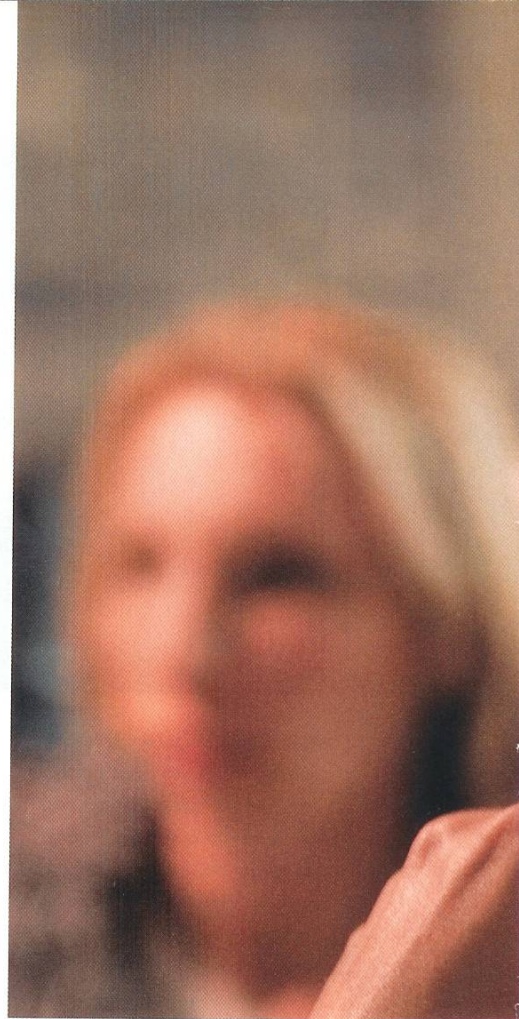
Joe and April Niamtu came to see Danny when he still had his feeding tube and sounded, says Joe, like Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*.

Danny, through tears, told the Niamtus how his job assignment was almost over, how he was supposed to board a plane to Romania and marry Irina. Then this.

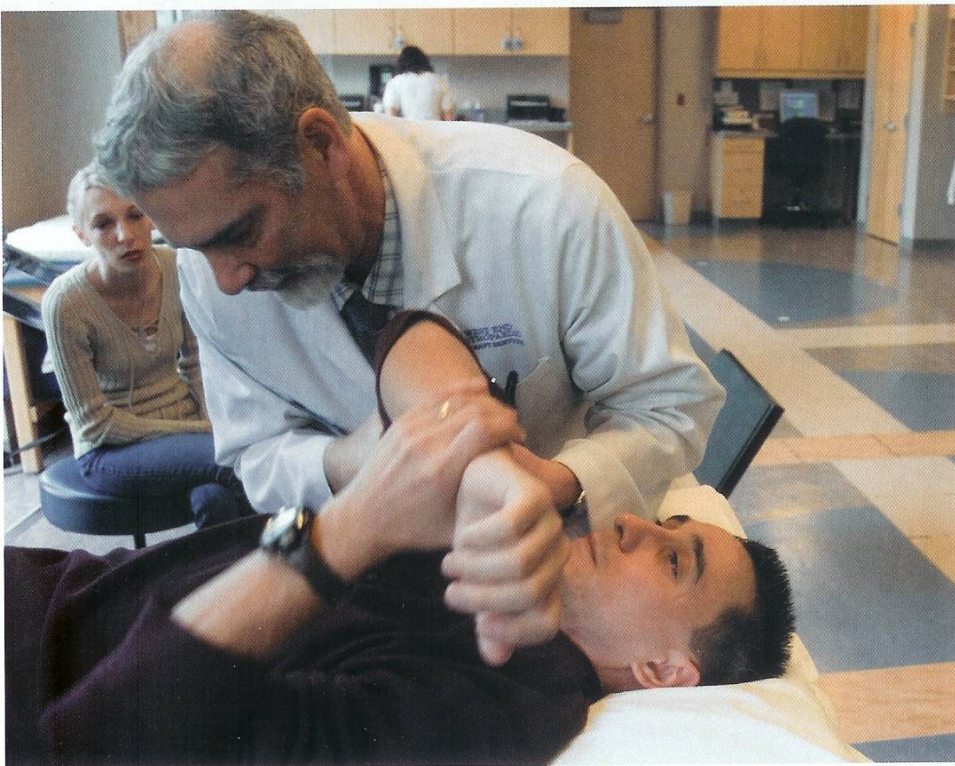
Joe offered any assistance he could give, in particular for any scarring left by his injuries. "You know, I thought he'd need a coat or a hat or something," he says, with a wry smile. "Two weeks later, I get a call. He's getting turned out of the hospital, and he's got nowhere to go."

Team Danny

The Niamtus opened their house to Danny.



Above: Danny, Irina and the Niamtus celebrated Danny's 32nd birthday on Feb. 11, which coincided with the trial date of Danny's assailant. Right: Physical therapist Andrew McCole of West End Orthopaedic Clinic at St. Francis Medical Center works with Danny to improve the range of motion in his shoulder, which was damaged by the gunshot.



They have two sons, Joey and Evan, both with cerebral palsy and who require feeding through tubes. “We had all the stuff and the space,” Joe says.

Through Joe Niamtu’s family, friends, patients and Danny’s former customers, support came in the form of clothes, donations and important medical and legal help.

Through orthopedic surgeon Dr. Paul Kiritsis, the Niamtus’ brother-in-law, Danny was sent to West End Orthopaedic therapist Andrew McCole. McCole is working with Danny to regain the strength and mobility of his shoulder and arm. Every pull of a weight, each turn of the arm, brought Danny one step closer to getting better, and to Irina.

“He’s undergone severe challenges,” McCole says, “huge emotional pressures, and he’s worked through all that, and committed himself to getting better. A motivated patient like that makes my job much easier.”

Danny’s work visa had expired, thus he needed a temporary extension to undergo his therapy. This is where Reed Smith attorneys Adela B. Parvaiz and Margaret Sanner came in. Next, Danny needed help fighting his denied worker’s-compensation claim.

An initial insurance-company ruling contended the gunshot was a random but tragic act, says Craig Davis of Emroch and Kilduff, who has agreed to represent Danny on this issue. Davis hopes that the case is resolved before Danny’s extended visa runs out on April 30. “He was on the clock when it happened,” Davis says. “He was targeted because he was in an ice-cream truck.”

The contributions and encouragement of Richmonders surprised Danny. Once, when he went with his customer and friend Pat Richards for dinner, he was asked for his autograph. “I just got shot,” he says, lifting his shoulders. “I’m not a rock star.”

Judgment Day

The trial of the Commonwealth of Virginia v. Dante Lewis in Courtroom 305, the Hon. Walter W. Stout III presiding, lasted about two hours. Lewis tried a strange defense — he attempted to explain that he was taking the fall for someone else.

Thorne-Begland called the tale “fantas-

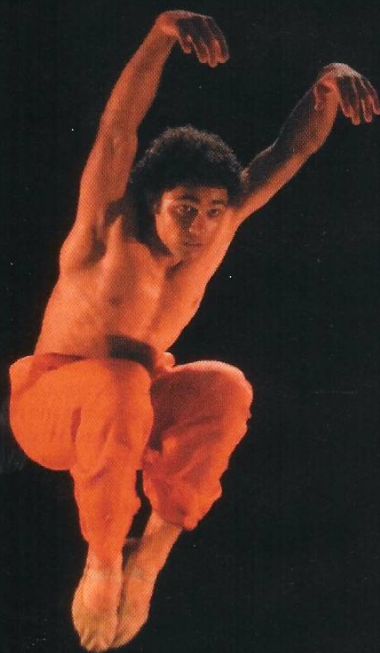
(THE SHOT continued on page 96)

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THE SHOT *continued from page 65*

tical,” and Stout found Lewis guilty of six charges. They included attempted murder, attempted robbery and use of a firearm by a felon.

Lewis showed no emotion when the counts were read. His sentencing is scheduled for May 1.

Where or When?

Back at the Niamtu house that evening after the trial, there was Chinese food, a birthday cake for Danny, and joke fortune cookies given to Irina and Danny. Danny’s read, “Marry the girl now,” and on the other side, “Wait until you get the rent bill.”

For Joe, the happiest ending for this story would be to get Irina back to the United States for a wedding at his house, with the James River as a backdrop, and Danny’s friends and supporters as guests.

“My sons can’t speak, so he’s like my oldest boy,” he says.

Danny’s routine has revolved around physical therapy, at West End Orthopaedic and at Joe’s home gym. He spends time with Joe and April’s sons, tinkers with computers, and talks with Irina via a Web cam.

Danny is in a Catch-22 with work and visa applications. “My status is impending, long and impending,” he explains. “You have no status until you have status,” he says, as his brow furrows. “On April 30, [Homeland Security] will send me a letter, which will say, ‘You have to leave the country,’ or something else.”

Due to his legal limbo, he can’t work.

Right before Irina’s return to Romania on Feb. 15, Danny presented her with a diamond ring, the one he had wanted to place on her finger last November.

As to when their marriage will officially take place, he says, “I don’t know where or when it will be.”

Though Danny longs to visit the mountains near his hometown in Romania with Irina — their favorite place — he would be willing to come back to the United States to work, despite his experience.

“This country is still the same for me,” Danny says, “the place where I can make a great future for my family.” ■