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Pilgrimage that ended in tragedy

Alan Scherr and daughter Naomi, 13, were in Mumbai with their spiritual group. Both died in attacks.

November 29, 2008 | Faye Fiore | Fiore is a Times staff writer.

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ARLINGTON, VA. — Alan Scherr devoted his life to meditation and the search for peaceful balance. His 13-year-old daughter, Naomi, was as bright and mischievous as her father was focused.

Together they met an improbable violent death Wednesday, shot in a terrorist rampage as they shared a late dinner in the plush dining room of the Oberoi hotel in Mumbai, India.

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Scherr, 58, and his daughter were nearing the end of a two-week pilgrimage to India with a group of 25 others from the Synchronicity Foundation, a spiritual community in Central Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains.

A thin and bespectacled former art professor at the University of Maryland, Scherr moved with his wife, Kia, to the community in the 1990s. They studied the teachings of Charles Cannon, who founded the group in 1983 and practices a form of meditation using audio recordings. Approximately 30 families in the group, including the Scherrs, have homes near the 450-acre Synchronicity sanctuary on the outskirts of the small town of Faber, near Charlottesville.

Naomi, a home-schooled 8th-grader, earned impressive marks and scored in the top tier on national academic tests, even while occasionally dying her hair blue, exuding an individuality that delighted her family and friends.

"She was passionate, if not a little mischievous, and will be fondly remembered by many of us for colorful hair styles and radiant energy," read a tribute posted on the group's website.

Mona Kaufman, a Synchronicity volunteer, said Naomi "always wanted to go to India. She was an incredibly gifted young lady with such a bright future."

Cannon, known to the group as Master Charles, traveled often, and his students yearned to go along, said Bobbie Garvey, a vice president of the group. "He finally said this year, OK," Garvey said.

Scherr was the founder's paid spokesman and a prolific writer and astrologer. He and his daughter were selected to go while Kia Scherr and her two sons visited family in Florida.

With Alan Scherr as their guide, the group saw ashrams and holy sites and was preparing to return home

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Monday. Naomi was to make her experience the subject of an essay for a scholarship application to Emma Willard School, a private school for girls in Troy, N.Y., she planned to attend.

Father and daughter were dining Wednesday night at the table of Andreina Varagona of Nashville, a 45-year-old meditation teacher and friend, when the shooting started.

"Within two minutes, they were on us," Varagona told the Associated Press from her bed in a hospital intensive care unit in Mumbai, where she was recovering from arm and leg wounds.

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Peggi Sturm of West Los Angeles, another member of the traveling party, hid in her hotel room with the door bolted and pillows shoved against the threshold until she and her roommate were rescued by commandos.

"It was beyond terrifying," Sturm wrote in an e-mail, "with all the automatic weapons and bombs going off."

Four in the group were injured but were expected to recover.

Kia Scherr learned the news in Florida.

"She goes in and out of periods speaking and non-speaking. She is a mother and a wife and . . .," Garvey said, her words trailing.

The Web page for condolences filled Friday, including one from a woman who taught transcendental meditation with Scherr 30 years ago. She remembered him as a "dear soul."

Scherr's prolific chronicling of his spiritual quest seemed to take on new resonance.

"People remain unhappy regardless of wealth, leisure time, any attainment of skill or knowledge, or any other conditional state," he wrote in a 2000 Web article. "The miracle of this life continues to unfold for me on a daily basis."

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