

DISRUPTIONS

Alex From Target: The Other Side of Fame

By Nick Bilton

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Two weeks ago, 16-year-old Alex Lee was your run-of-the-mill teenager.

He woke up at 7 for school. He loved playing soccer. He got into trouble for not taking out the trash. His small bedroom in Frisco, Tex., was a mess: clothes strewn all over the floor, unmade bed, posters of a Mustang GT hung on the walls. He had 144 Twitter followers.

Then on Sunday, Nov. 2, that all changed. After going to church, Alex's father dropped him off at 10 a.m. at the SuperTarget on Eldorado Parkway where he works. Alex clocked in for his shift, turned off his cellphone as the battery was low, and took his place behind the cash register.

He was a little tired from staying up late and watching a movie with his friends, but other than that, "it was just a normal day," Alex said, in his only news media interview since appearing on "Ellen" last week.

But as everyone on social media now knows, something bizarre was about to happen to him online. A teenage girl from Britain said she randomly came across a Tumblr photo of Alex that was surreptitiously taken a week earlier. She thought Alex was cute and posted the picture on her Twitter account, @auscalum, with the caption "YOooooooooooooo."

Within minutes, the image seemed to explode on the Internet. Soon a meme was born and the hashtag #alexfromtarget became a trending topic. (Yet the dark side of this marvel, including death threats against him and his family, would not become clear for several days to come.)

Alex, who was working the register all day, had no idea he had become an Internet sensation. His first glimpse came sometime that afternoon, when he started noticing that his checkout line was unusually long. Then his Target manager, Molly, who is a senior in high school, showed him the photo on her phone.

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Young girls soon appeared, animatedly giggling and snapping photos of him as he rang up their items. It got so out of hand that Molly transferred Alex to work in the stockroom for the rest of his shift. When Alex finally turned on his phone around 6 p.m., it almost leapt out of his hand, with dings, chirps and vibrations from friends trying to inform him of his new celebrity.

"I was getting tons of texts," Alex said. "They're all saying, 'This is crazy, you're famous!'"

At 6:09 p.m., Alex walked out of Target, hopped into the front seat of his mother's Mercedes and looked at his Twitter page, which had over 100,000 followers at that point. He tried to tell her what had happened, but he wasn't sure himself. Alex then asked his new disciples, "Am I famous now?" This message has since been retweeted more than 42,000 times and favorited by 86,000 users.

A screenshot of an image of Alex Lee posted on Twitter.



To say Alex is “a sweet kid,” as his parents describe him, is an understatement. He’s shy and exceedingly polite. He often chuckles to himself after speaking. While he answered most of my questions with short and sheepish replies, when I asked him about his girlfriend, Lindsey, he lit up, telling me that they met in chemistry class after sitting next to each other for a lab assignment.

“I really wanted some Chicken Express, and she was like, ‘Hey, we should get some Chicken Express tomorrow.’ And we actually ended up getting Chicken Express the next day,” he buoyantly told me when describing their first date. (Lindsey is handling this all very well, Alex said.)

Sharing fried chicken and mashed potatoes with Lindsey happened just a couple of weeks before he became a celebrity. Since then, Alex was flown to Los Angeles to appear on “Ellen.” (There were paparazzi waiting for him outside his hotel.)

He has been approached by news outlets around the world, and he has turned down interview requests from ABC’s “Good Morning America,” E! and dozens of talk shows. He’s been offered advertising deals and sponsorships. Television, movie and modeling agents want to meet with him.

Alex now has about 730,000 followers on Twitter — five times the population of Frisco. More than 2.3 million people follow him on Instagram. And according to Google Trends, the term “Alex from Target” has been searched on Google more than “Nash Grier” or “Justin Bieber” since this adventure began.

But while Alex’s rise from high school student to global celebrity may be the stuff that teenagers dream of today, there is also a negativity to instant web celebrity that rarely gets discussed.

For starters, Alex says he can barely go outside for fear of being accosted. “I’ve been in the house the entire time,” he said. “I’m kind of scared to go in public.”

When he walked into school last Friday, his first day back since becoming #alexfromtarget, students stopped him every few feet to snap selfies. In speech class, he sat with classmates and watched his appearance on “Ellen.” And after school, when Alex went to Whataburger with his father, he opened the door and was met with squeals of “Allllleeeexxxx!!” and was chased out by cellphone-toting screaming teenage girls.

While Alex is clearly enjoying some of the attention, he and his family have also had to deal with more serious consequences of web fame. A crafty marketing firm, Breakr, tried to take credit for Alex’s rise. (Everyone the company claims it worked with, including Alex’s family and @auscalum, has denied ever hearing of Breakr. In a report, BuzzFeed said that the company’s claims simply don’t add up.)

Thousands have taken to social media to call Alex names (including vulgarities) or fabricate stories about him being fired. Twitter is littered with posts that denigrate his looks (e.g., “Alex from Target is so damn ugly”) or spew envy at him (“Alex from Target is a nobody who doesn’t deserve fame”).

There have even been dozens of death threats on social media and in private messages (“Alex from target, I’ll find you and I will kill you”).

Alex is no stranger to some of this behavior. He told me he was bullied in elementary school and has learned to disregard “the hate” — though, he said, it’s increasingly difficult to ignore. But his parents, who are incredibly happy for Alex, say this hostility has been difficult to watch.

“The biggest concern for myself and my wife is some of the negativity we’re seeing online,” said his father, Eric Fooks, who is a small-business consultant. “Our concern is making sure he’s safe.”

Mr. Fooks said that in addition to death threats, people have leaked the family's personal information online, including Social Security numbers, bank accounts and phone records. The family, worried for the safety of Alex and his five siblings, has been in contact with the local police. Alex's parents have met with his school's principal and security officers, as well as Target managers, to put together security plans in case of an emergency.

The family has also been consulting with John Shahidi, a founder of Shots, a teenage-centric selfie-sharing app, to help Alex manage the online onslaught. Mr. Shahidi, who works with Mr. Bieber, said he contacted Alex's family after he noticed that Alex was following his company's Twitter account.

"The family is only concerned with doing something positive with this opportunity," said Mr. Shahidi, who met with Alex in Los Angeles last week after the "Ellen" show.

Alex echoed that, saying he wants to take everything he's learned from his days being bullied and help to guide youth who are experiencing spite online. He's also been helping his mother, Marci Fooks, a psychologist who recently started a nonprofit called Just Love International that tries to help children in South America who have lost their parents. One day, Alex said, he hopes to go to Asia to help children who have been caught up in the sex trafficking trade.

But for now, Alex is going to keep doing what he's always done: Get up for school at 7. Forget to take out the trash. And work at Target at nights and on weekends (though he'll be in the stockroom for a while, he's been told). But at least now he'll be able to tell his millions of followers all about his run-of-the-mill teenage life.

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