News

A School Shooting Every Week, One-By-One

Gun Violence in America: Part 1


PHOTO COURTESY OF LARRY JONES

Paris DeShawn Brown (right) embracing with his sister, spent three years in juvenile custody earlier. Friends said he had found a spiritual peace upon release.

By Alexa Imani Spencer, Howard University News Service

This is the first of a two-part series on the murders of teenagers throughout the U.S. While the nation's attention is focused on deaths in school shootings, the equivalent number of teenage murders place every week, mostly in African-American and Hispanic neighborhoods with little fanfare or public debate.

WASHINGTON – As 2017 came to an end in the nation's capital, the good news of the preceding 365 days included the city's declining crime rate. The mayor and other city officials proudly pointed to a 15 percent drop in homicides for the previous year and a 22 percent decline for all violent crime for the same period.

Sentiments quickly changed 30 days later. Within the first month of the new year, four teenagers had been murdered—Paris DeShawn Brown, 19; Davon Fisher, 17; Stephen Slaughter, 14; and Taiyania Aaliyah Thompson, 16.

America is mourning the deaths of 17 killed in a Florida high school shooting, one of the deadliest in history. Their deaths have prompted a national conversation about gun control and how to keep children safe in schools. Lost in the debate is the fact that a similar number of children and teenagers, most of them African American and Latino, are shot and killed every week. According to statista.com, 1,278 people between the ages of 13 and 19 were killed in 2015, on average more than 20 each week.

> "He would say that he believed God put him through certain situations to learn a lesson

Instead of victims of mass murders, they are single, solitary deaths. The examples are in cities across America. In Los Angeles, 15-year-old Miracle McGowan was killed January 12 in a drive-by shooting as she and three other people sat in a car in the Florence-Firestone neighborhood.

In Dallas, Natalie Hernandez, 14, killed February 12, was fatally shot and a 16-year-old boy was wounded as they and two other W.W. Samuell High School students were sitting in a car in a city park. In Atlanta, 17-year-old Ga'Quavious Williams was found dead in February outside of a home with a gunshot wound in the back.

Four murders of teenagers in one month is an oddity for D.C., and a reminder of gun violence taking the lives of the nation's children daily.

Paris DeShawn Brown

Paris DeShawn Brown, 19, was the first Washington resident to die of gun violence in 2018. His body was found lifeless January 10 at the 400 block of Skyland Place in Southeast Washington. He had been shot multiple times, police said. So far, no one has been arrested.

Brown lived in Ward 8, one of D.C.'s poorest communities. Unemployment consistently runs near 12 percent, according to The Office of Labor Market Research and information. Close friends knew Brown as "Paco." They said shortly before he was shot, he had been released after three years in custody as a juvenile.

Many, including childhood companion and classmate, Larry Jones, 16, remember him as someone who naturally stood out. Jones remembers what it was like when he was released from detention.

"Everything about him was more different than any other male that I had ever met," Jones said.

The two became friends around the age of four, he said. When Brown came home, Jones said, he immediately enrolled in Thurgood Marshall Academy, a law-themed charter school located in Anacostia where Jones and Brown were reunited as classmates.

Jones said he saw a change in Brown.

"He was very spiritual...that was the first thing I noticed," Brown said. "He would say that he believed God put him through certain situations to learn a lesson. Another thing I noticed is that he was really fed up with the way society ran."

While attending Thurgood Marshall Academy, Brown began to develop a newfound social and political consciousness, said Lena Barker, 32, a librarian at the the school for the past five years. Brown frequented the library as a place of refuge, she said.

"Paris, rather than being bogged down by that [academic] pressure, I think he learned how to embrace difficulty," Barker said. "But he also learned that there was a space that he could come to and let that stuff roll off of his back a little bit, and I think that was here, in the library, for him."

Brown had an interest in African-American Studies. So, Barker gave him books to read,

See SHOOTINGS on page 7