



Bullet changes unlikely victim's life; While homicide statistics grab much of the attention, more and more young people in Hennepin County are wounded by gun violence - something the family of 15-year-old Bobby Brown knows all too well.(NEWS).Kimberly Hayes Taylor. *Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN)* (August 17, 1997): p01B. (1605 words)

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Lying in a hospital bed, Ava Brown was still groggy from anesthesia on March 24, 1982, when she learned that she had just given birth to a son, Robert Brown III, her heart's desire. At that moment, the fog lifted enough for her to grab her husband's hand, hold it high and gush, "We did it!"

Fifteen years have passed. Fate and a single 9-millimeter bullet have led Ava Brown and her son back to a hospital.

She is proud of each battle he has won since a July 15 drive-by shooting in south Minneapolis left him paralyzed from the waist down. And just as when he was young, she is still gushing over him and his smallest gestures: sitting up, dressing himself, making his way into a wheelchair.

One day last week, she watched him push 60-pound weights on the vertical butterfly machine in physical therapy. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He huffed and puffed, making fish lips as he exhaled.

"My handsome son," Ava Brown said, beginning to laugh. "I'm so strung out on my son. I need help."

Like many mothers, Ava Brown thought that if she did everything right, her children would be safe.

She dedicated herself to her children, sending them to private schools, keeping tabs on their whereabouts, providing abundant love and attention.

Looking at Bobby Brown's life, one might think he should have been safe from gun violence in the Twin Cities.

He hasn't used drugs. He isn't a gang member. He was a leader at Washburn High School, made good grades and counseled his peers. He had been the "man of the house" since his parents divorced when he was 2 years old.

Earlier this year, he was selected to visit Ghana, West Africa, with a group from the Twin Cities as part of a community program.

But despite all that, he wasn't safe.

Neither were the other young victims of gun violence, part of what authorities and medical officials say is a rising number of young people shot each year in the Twin Cities.

Agencies easily track the juvenile homicide rate. But the number of young people injured by gunfire has increased so rapidly that no one has been successful in tracking it. No one knows exactly how many juveniles are injured by gunfire each year and survive.

The Minneapolis Police Department, the state Department of Health and the state Department of Public Safety can't answer this question because the numbers aren't broken down that specifically.

Dr. Douglas Burnette, a trauma physician in the Hennepin County Medical Center emergency room and gun violence researcher, said the number is so high that, at the hospital, not a shift goes by without a young person needing treatment for gunshot wounds.

Youth violence prevention workers say they need more information: Where are children when they are shot? Who is shooting them? What is the nature - and the consequence - of their wounds?

So a coalition of organizations and state agencies is developing a new emergency room tracking system that would give them answers. The system should be up and running next year.

'Devastating' incident

The shooting that injured Bobby Brown also injured his sister, LaVonne Brown, 18, who was shot twice in the legs. Bullets just missed his other sister, RaiChel, 16. A bullet lodged inches away from LaVonne's 10-month-old daughter.

"It was a living, breathing, fiery, devastating, tormented place for me to be in," Ava Brown said. "I had done everything right. I never even bought my son a toy gun."

But Bobby didn't always feel safe.

"It's life in Minneapolis, life in urban America, life in the 'hood," he said, "life as a black man."

He has seen his cousin become a quadriplegic after being shot five times late last year; he's harassed when he goes into stores; he has heard about youths having their bikes stolen right out from under them.

Visiting peaceful Ghana - where the crime rate is much lower - made him even more keenly aware of that. But the sense of looming danger back home was a part of his life he had come to accept.

"I'm a Christian," Bobby said. "Before, you could tell kids that being a Christian, you'll be safe. Now, it's a different story. I got the citizenship award in my school. I did counseling with other kids. I should have been the last person to get shot. But it happens."

1/3 Changing instantly

The bullet that hit Bobby in the back and damaged his spinal cord didn't just take away his ability to walk. It left a family and a community of people who know him shattered and confused - but faithful.

That day - a Tuesday - began as a typical day for Bobby. He had gone to his summer job, painting houses for Summit Academy OIC. Later, he watched TV and talked on the phone.

Working out at home to prepare for football practice at St. Louis Park's Benilde-St. Margaret High School - a fullback, he had won a scholarship there - he bench-pressed 135-pound weights and did 100 sit-ups with a 10-pound weight on his washboard stomach.

Then he showered, changed to go pick up his sister, LaVonne, from an aunt's house where she had been watching videos.

As they do each time they leave the house, he and RaiChel prayed, asking that nothing happen to them during their trip.

They drove the few blocks to the aunt's house, went inside for five minutes and returned to the car. As they were getting in, a 20-year-old cousin came home. Someone drove past and fired at the cousin. When they missed, they opened fire on the Browns, Bobby said. Police are still investigating the incident.

Bobby shook uncontrollably. Blood poured from LaVonne's legs. She and RaiChel were hysterical. The baby was crying. Bobby, despite his own pain, tried to calm them. "I kept telling them it was just a stun gun, that everything would be OK," he said.

A woman, who no one has seen since, grabbed his arm and began praying over him. Bobby felt comforted, but his body felt strange.

"My stomach was heavy," he said. "Everything fell on top of me, like a heavy weight. I tried to get up, but only half of my body was coming with me."

His back felt as if it were burning, so he lay there praying. He continued praying in the emergency room.

For the next few days, Bobby was in intensive care. He had a temperature of about 104 degrees, and he slipped in and out of consciousness. Doctors gave his mother the prognosis a few days later: Bobby was paralyzed from the waist down, and they didn't know whether he would walk again.

A powerful faith

Bobby realizes his road may be difficult, but he is convinced that he will walk again.

"I'm going to be OK," he said. "I have faith. It's a powerful thing to have faith."

He smiles. "I know that this bullet wasn't meant for me," he said. "I know that God is not going to leave me alone and I know that I am going to walk again and play football again. I'm going to be the first male in my family to go to college and graduate."

His mother won't say the word "paralyzed." She guards him against anyone saying anything negative to him about his disability. "I'm protecting his spirit," she said.

His aunt, Linda Atlas, of Minneapolis, said people ask her and other relatives when they'll accept Bobby's being paralyzed.

"We're not in denial," she said. "But we're expecting the inevitable, supernatural intervention of God. When man says it's over, God has another plan."

Bobby believes God will use him to speak out against gun violence. "I keep having this dream," he said. "I'm on a stage, talking to kids about peace. They are clapping for me and I am winning souls."

Although she often has nightmares about the shootings, RaiChel tells Bobby that "God has him lying still cause he's healing him from the inside out."

LaVonne has difficulty moving past the incident, and she has been afraid to walk to the corner store. Cars driving past her with loud music blaring scare her.

But the family sees hope in Bobby's healing. They enjoy the teamwork in helping him with physical therapy.

At least 50 people have visited to tell him of injuries and wounds they have overcome. He has piles of cards from strangers.

Tracking the survivors

Stories like Bobby's rarely make the news. He's a survivor.

"Homicide is so telling, so graphic," said Helen Bassett, executive director of the Alternatives to Violence Coalition, a partnership of Twin Cities-area organizations. "But the story of the survivors is not tracked because it's not the attention-grabber."

At Hennepin County Medical Center, the new system to track shooting injuries is partially in place. When it is in operation throughout the Twin Cities area, Bassett said, it may suggest solutions.

"What is the cost when someone is shot in the arm and can no longer use the arm?" she asked. "Who pays the cost for that? The family suffers an emotional loss. But this all becomes a public cost."

But Bobby is thinking about another cost, the cost of society having to live in fear of violence.

"You can't go anywhere now and feel safe," he said. "I thought I could be safe going to my aunt's house and picking up my sister. I had done it all the time.

"I'm just going to live my life everyday and do whatever I want to. You can't really worry."

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