



Sharing a life lesson; After a stray bullet rerouted him from the football field into a wheelchair, a Minneapolis youth is telling his peers how devastating guns truly can be. (NEWS). Kimberly Hayes Taylor. *Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN)* (Nov 20, 1997): p01B. (729 words)

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Four months after a bullet severed his spine during a drive-by shooting, Robert Brown III is making a recurring dream come true.

The 15-year-old sophomore at Benilde-St. Margaret's High School in St. Louis Park is speaking to his peers, telling them what a devastating impact a violent act can have. On Wednesday he went back to Washburn High School, where he played freshman football last year, to tell his story to help stop violence. Hundreds of students, including those at Washburn, signed pledges promising not to bring guns to school and to avoid anyone who carries one.

Accompanied by his mother, Ava Brown, Brown came to affirm that pledge. Bracing himself, he shared his story - how he came to use a wheelchair after a bullet ripped through his back on July 15, a night when he planned to play ball in open gym at Washburn.

He told how it all happened so fast. He had just left home to visit his aunt. He, his two sisters and niece were leaving the south Minneapolis house and had reached the car just as his cousin was returning home. Someone drove by shooting at his cousin. The bullet missed him and hit Brown and his sister, 18-year-old LaVonne, instead.

LaVonne, shot twice in the legs, has healed.

But Brown is still undergoing physical therapy for his back injury, which has left him paralyzed from the waist down. No arrests have been made in the case, and the Browns haven't seen their cousin since that night.

"That one little bullet changed my life. My entire life," Brown said. . "Once they leave that chamber, bullets are free. They go where they want. For me, it stopped everything, all the plans I had that night. I planned to play football this year. I know it doesn't look like it, but I almost died."

Brown delivered a strong message about friends, even about family.

"You might think that your homeys have your back," he said. "But when it comes down to it, they won't be around. I thought my cousin had my back. And he hasn't been around. You would think if anyone would be there, it would be family."

Although her sadness is evident in her eyes, Ava Brown told students that she is blessed.

"A mother's worst nightmare is for her children to be gunned down in the street," she said. "I almost lost all four of my children that night. I'm glad my son is alive, that I didn't have to put him under."

Just last week, Ava Brown sang at the funeral of a young man from her church who was shot to

death at 23.

"Five of my friends have buried their sons," she told students, who listened intently.

Breaking the silence

Ava Brown told students they must learn to speak up if they know someone is carrying a gun or that something is about to happen, even if they have to do it anonymously.

"This code of silence is killing our society," she said. "I wish someone had come to me and said, 'Did you know Bobby's cousin is involved in something? Something that might get him shot?' Then I wouldn't be standing here with my son today."

Genevieve Dunagan, 16, seemed not to blink as she listened to their words.

"I never knew it could happen to somebody I know," she said. "It was always out there somewhere."

Mandrell Garner, 17, could barely speak when Brown rolled out of the room.

"I knew Bobby from the halls. I gave him rides from football practice. We played football together," he said. "One minute it's like that. Now it's like this. It shows that anything can happen."

Garner said Brown's fate also has changed his life. He said he is more careful about choosing his friends and associates.

"Somebody might be coming to look for them and I might be associated," he said.

Bree Maddox, 17, and Brown used to joke around last year, calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend. She also knows his family.

"It's so sad," she said. "It hurts."

But Ben Van Thorre, 15, who went from classroom to classroom introducing Brown as his friend and fellow football player, sees the bright side.

"It's really good that he goes out and talks about it," Van Thorre said. "His mom is right. She's lucky he's still here."

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