

Her daughter was the first victim of a revenge killing this year. Now Columbus police want to end vicious cycle. BY ALVA JAMES-JOHNSON November 11, 2017

Seventeen-year-old Destiny Nelson never was shy about birthdays.

“She would wake us up in the middle of the night, and say, ‘It’s Destiny Day! It’s Destiny Day!’” her mother, Amber Daniel, recalled. “And I’m like, ‘We know it’s your birthday, now go back to sleep.’”

Daniel made the comments Thursday on what would have been the teen’s 18th birthday. But instead of her daughter trying to wake her, all Daniel had were memories.

“What aggravated me last year, I would give everything to have that today,” the grieving mother said. “It’s hard.”

Nelson, a student dually enrolled at Early College Academy and Columbus State University, was shot and killed at Bull Creek Apartments on Jan. 16, after spending the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday with friends.

The shooting was Columbus’ second homicide for the year 2017.

Police have said they believe Nelson was gunned down in retaliation for the Jan. 5 killing of 22-year-old Dominique Devonte Horton near Cusseta Road and 32nd Avenue – the first homicide of the year.

Nelson was not involved in the slaying of Horton, said Maj. Gil Slouchick, and police believe it was a case of mistaken identity.

So far in 2017, the Columbus Police department has investigated 29 deaths as homicides, while the Muscogee County Coroner, who does not differentiate between a homicide that police consider a murder and one it categorizes as manslaughter or a justifiable shooting, says there have been 36 homicides in Columbus this year.

Lt. Greg Touchberry said at least 10 of the homicides have been revenge killings. He said no one has been arrested in connection with Destiny Nelson’s fatal shooting, and the case is still under investigation. But he says it’s an example of how innocent people get caught in the crossfire.

“As far as Destiny Nelson goes, I would tell you, our No. 1 theory on that to this day is that it was a revenge killing in a case of mistaken identity,” he said. “It’s terrible. ... That poor girl never done anything to anybody, and she got killed.”

### **Unintended Targets**

The shooting occurred after Nelson returned home for dinner, her mother said. The family began getting ready for bed, because Nelson and two of her siblings had to go to school the next morning. Other children in the home at the time of the

incident were Nelson's three sisters — ages 18, 11 and 9 months old.

Someone knocked on the front door, and the family's life changed forever.

"After that, it was kind of like a blur, and I don't know what really happened," Daniel said. "It sounded like firecrackers going off in the house. ... Destiny never made it to that door. All I know is that she was on the ground, and my oldest daughter was screaming, 'Mama, Mama, something is wrong with Destiny. Destiny thinks she got shot.'"

At 11:53 p.m., the teenager was pronounced dead at the hospital. A doctor told Daniel, "There were so many bullets, I stopped counting at 14."

"It's just an injustice; I feel my child was massacred over something she had no knowledge of," Daniel said Thursday. "... Somebody knocked on my door, looking for the wrong house. They didn't even bother to see if they had the right house or the wrong house, they just started shooting."

The family has since moved because of the tragedy. Daniel said they remain frustrated because they've heard very little from police over the past few months, as the revenge killings in Columbus continue.

Touchberry said retaliation just seems to be "the flavor of the month" when it comes to violent crimes in Columbus. This year there have been multiple revenge shootings at an apartment complex in the 1400 block of 24th Street, he said. Those killed at the location on separate occasions were: Lavonte Thomas, 26; Glen Hollan Adipi, 23; Datrell Roberson, 23; and Xavier Scott, 28.

Others killed in what police believe to be revenge killings were: Erik Parker, 28; Brandon Scott, 34; Cody Mathis, 21; Tamir Harris, 33; and Takelia Johnson, 19.

Johnson was killed Sept. 3 in a drive-by shooting in the 900 block of Ewart Avenue.

"I will tell you Takelia Johnson was not the intended target," Touchberry said. "... Takelia had made some mistakes in life, but she didn't deserve to get killed in the street.

"And that's part of the problem," he continued. "We're not dealing with expert marksmen, and you could literally be standing at the wrong spot, and if somebody thinks someone next to you did them wrong, you could get killed."

At the same time, the city is still reeling from the 2016 Peachtree Mall murder case in which Anthony Meredith, 24, was gunned down while shopping for an Easter dress for his 3-year-old daughter. That murder was in retaliation for the November 2015 killing of Christopher Twitty, who worked with Meredith as a drug dealer prior to the shooting.

In May, all three defendants in the case were convicted of Meredith's murder.

They were Xzavaien Trevon Jones, 19; his sister, Tekoa Chantrell Young, 24; and Terell Raquez McFarland, 26. All were friends from Hardaway High School.

### **Inaccurate Reports**

Touchberry said some cases appear to be revenge killings initially, but play out differently upon further investigation. He said that has happened in the case of Tremaine Taylor, who was fatally shot Aug. 31 on Henson Avenue.

Seventeen-year-old Clayton Perry, who was arrested for the Aug. 15 shooting of James Francesconi on Wickham Drive, accused Taylor of killing Francesconi. He told police Taylor had “money on his head from gang members for having been involved in the shooting” upon his death.

Touchberry said Taylor and Perry have been linked to Francesconi’s death. But witnesses have said friends shot Taylor by accident while playing with a gun, and lied about it.

“Initial reports aren’t always accurate,” he said. “... Just because something is put out on Facebook doesn’t mean it’s the truth or it will ever hold water in a Superior Courtroom. It has to be checked on and verified.”

On Tuesday night, Kuamane “Lil Q” Ford, 19, was killed near the intersection of Sherwood Avenue and 44th Street, where Greater Beallwood Baptist Church is located. He had been wanted for questioning in the Takelia Johnson homicide.

“Could it be a revenge killing? Maybe,” Touchberry said. “Could it be somebody wanted to silence someone to prevent them from ever saying what they know? Yes, it could be. He had several warrants out for his arrest already. Could it be somebody that he did something wrong to that wanted to get back at him? Yes.

“Well, we get the wonderful job of having to go through all that and figure out what the evidence supports,” he said. “... It’s easy to throw out all sorts of scenarios at the beginning, but you don’t want to get tunnel vision.”

What frustrates the police department is that most people choose not to get involved, Touchberry said.

“Most of these killings this year, if people would just tell us what they saw, we’d have people in custody,” he said. “We spend most of our time trying to convince people to talk to us. At the end of the day, how do I make you tell me what you saw? I can’t.

“Just like Takelia Johnson and Destiny, they didn’t deserve that,” Touchberry continued. “So, how do you step over Takelia Johnson and then refuse to talk to me about who killed her? And, literally, that’s what’s going on out there right now.”

Touchberry said even shooting victims lying in the hospital refuse to cooperate with police, and they offer to sign a waiver of prosecution.

“My guess is when you have someone lying on a table in a hospital shot, and they tell the officers that show up, ‘Hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll sign that sheet of paper that says y’all don’t have to do nothing,’ what do you think they’re saying?” he asked. “They’re probably saying they’re going to take care of it themselves. ... That seems to be what’s pushing revenge killings.”

### **Disconnected from Society**

J. Aleem Hud is the executive director of Project Rebound, a youth empowerment program. He chaired the social work department at Tuskegee University from 1987 to about 1992, and he started Project Rebound to help children being suspended and expelled from the Muscogee County School system.

Hud said revenge killings and other violent crimes are part of a bigger problem that Columbus faces.

“This is not the first time in history that disadvantaged groups who are disconnected from what we call the ‘civil society’ have their own rules and their own laws,” he said. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world, basically. I’ll get you before you get me. Therefore, there’s no honor among thieves, so to speak. Everybody is out for themselves.”

“That’s the symptom, though,” he quickly added. “It has taken Columbus, Ga., 30 to 35 years to get to this point. ... These people involved in these crimes are victims of the lack of conscientiousness of our political, faith-based, corporate and educational leadership.”

When he first moved back to Columbus from Detroit in the mid-1980s, Hud said, he began seeing symptoms that he knew would develop into bigger problems. He said crack cocaine had hit the community at the same time that the city was losing mill and other manufacturing jobs.

Governmental policies dismantling the socioeconomic safety net, as well as mandatory drug-sentencing laws separating many fathers from their children, have contributed to the problem, he said. The proliferation of gangsta rap also exacerbated the problem, he said, glorifying a life of crime.

“The economy that many of these young people have grown up in is an economy based upon Food Stamps; it’s an economy based upon drug money and the drug lifestyle,” he said. “In other words, all those things that people do to survive living in an urban environment. Therefore, many children are brought up in families where they are selling drugs and doing these illegal things. And when the family breaks down, the community breaks down.”

## **Too Close to Home**

On Thursday, Daniel reflected on her daughter's short life while sitting at home with her brother, Gary. She wore a blue T-shirt with Nelson's smiling face and the words "Gone but Never Forgotten."

Daniel, a customer service representative for a local company, said she took the day off from work to celebrate her daughter's birthday. Later in the day, she attended a tree dedication ceremony at Early College Academy, where Nelson was a senior before her death.

At the event, held in Nelson's memory, students with tear-stained faces filed out of their classrooms and gathered in the courtyard where the crepe myrtle was planted. Many of them wore blue "Destiny" T-shirts while placing rocks with personalized messages to Nelson at the base of the tree. A saxophone rendition of "Amazing Grace" played over the sound system.

Before ending the ceremony, the students blew bubbles toward the sky and reflected on the impact Nelson had on their lives during a brief moment of silence. About 10 family members were present, including Nelson's 73-year-old grandmother.

Nakiya Grumsey, a senior, read letters that students had written to Nelson, many of them referring to her as their best friend.

Susan Hernandez, a life science teacher, said the school is a close-knit family and Nelson's death was a significant blow.

"She truly is a great person, just sweet and caring and loving," Hernandez said, still describing her former student in the present tense. "There's no way anyone could have met her and had an issue with her. She was just so open and wanting to spread happiness.

"It's been traumatic, very traumatic, because of the sheer unexpectedness, and the horrifying way that it occurred," she continued. "It's just been devastating all the way around."

Hernandez said the violence in Columbus is just becoming too much and it's affecting everyone.

"I don't know why the crime has spiked in the sense that it has," she said. "It's just hard because this is my hometown; this is where my children are going to grow up. And it's shocking how things could happen in your own home, as was the case with Destiny. You just feel you should be safe in your own house, and that turned out not to be the case for her."

Arlington Neely, 19, is a 2016 graduate of the school. He said Nelson was a member of Future Business Leaders of America when he served as president. He attended the tree dedication ceremony to pay his respects.

Neely said there have been so many killings in Columbus that he's almost becoming numb to the violence, but Nelson's case was different.

“This one touched really close to home because it was someone that I knew,” he said, “and somebody you wouldn’t expect to be in that situation.”