Central City violence takes tiny victims

These are the faces of young children killed by gunfire in New Orleans' Central City neighborhood in the past few years: top left, Jeremy Galmon, killed September 2010 at a second line parade; top right, Keira Holmes, killed December 2011; bottom left, Nola Mae Wise, killed 2012 and bottom right, Trinity Allen, killed this month.

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By NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune
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on August 31, 2013 at 7:35 PM, updated September 01, 2013 at 12:38 AM

A kindergarten graduate celebrating at another child's birthday party. A toddler playing with friends in a grassy courtyard on a Sunday afternoon. A little boy sitting in a car with his grandma at a second-line parade. A barely toddling girl in the arms of a caregiver walking down the street.

These were the final and carefree moments of children whose blood has spilled on the streets of New Orleans' Central City neighborhood.

In the last three years, four young children - Jeremy Galmon, Keira Holmes, Briana Allen and now Londyn Samuels - have been caught in crossfire. They died in a section of the city where fear and anger reverberate each time another baby is shot dead.

CENTRAL CITY BABY KILLING

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Juliet Linderman, Katherine Sayre and Danielle Bell

The violence has continued, showing up young lives and leaving candlelight vigils for tiny victims, sun-bleached teddy bears and sidewalks, and heartbroken parents and grandparents crying "why?"

They asked again last week, after 1-year-old Londyn Samuels of Harvey was hit by a bullet that first tore through the18-year-old bystander carrying her down Saratoga Street. She became the youngest of the children shot dead in Central City since 2010.

"Whoever did it, please turn yourself in so we can have justice," Londyn's aunt, Ashley Samuels, implored.

Investigators questioned three people following a four-hour SWAT standoff at an apartment building in the 2800 block of LaSalle Street. But by Saturday, no one was in custody and police were still looking for suspects. Londyn's babysitter was in stable condition early Friday, but police refused to release information about her over the weekend.

At a vigil for London Friday night, family and neighbors lit candles and scattered flowers and stuffed animals on the sidewalk where her body fell.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu, speaking of other vigils for slain children he's had to attend, called the mayhem "a drumbeat of death that is taking the precious from us."

"This is not who we are as people," Landrieu said. "This is where we live, this is not where we are supposed to die."

The hunt for London's killers began just as the road to justice was ending in the case of 2-year-old Jeremy Galmon, shot during a second-line parade on Nov. 7, 2010.

His mother, Delasaonia Galmon, sat silent and alone in a courtroom across town from London's vigil Friday night, as a jury announced that it had found two cousins guilty of killing Jeremy. The men, Bernell "Jimmy" Richard, 24, and Lamont Pollard, 31, now face an automatic sentence of life in prison.

Jeremy Galmon liked his big Wheel. Cheerios and "Clifford the Big Red Dog."

Moments before he was going to die on that September afternoon, Jeremy had been sitting in a parked car with his grandmother, while his mother watched the parade nearby at First and Dryades streets. When gunfire and chaos erupted, Jeremy yanked his head out of the car window and was struck in the cheek.

"I didn't want to lose him," Delasaonia Galmon would say later. Her last words to him had been: "I'll see you soon."

Slightly more than a year after Jeremy's death, the neighborhood endured another child's shooting death. Keira Holmes, just days shy of her second birthday, was playing with other children on a patch of grass at the B.W. Cooper public housing complex on Dec. 19, 2011. Around 4:45 p.m., gunmen cruising the Broadmoor area fired on Emmett Allen, 19, as he walked through the complex.

When Allen ran into the courtyard where children were playing, a hail of bullets followed. One struck Keira in the head.

"God, please send your mercy down to New Orleans, Louisiana," a preacher thundered during a vigil for Keira a few days after she died. "We got babies killing babies."

Keira Holmes, 2, who was killed by gunfire in the B.W. Cooper housing development December 16, 2011.

Members of another gang, the 110'ers street group, were charged earlier this year in connection with Briana's killing. The indictment blamed the gang for 15 murders.

Briana Allen, 5.

When Briana's godmother, Tynia Allen, heard about Londyn Samuels' shooting last week, it brought back painful memories. Tynia Allen is Ka'Nard's mother.

"I dropped to my knees and said a prayer for their family, because I know what happened to my family," Tynia Allen said of the Samuels. "These innocent children are out there, losing their lives, and it has to stop."

'You have to worry about everything'

Some lifelong residents of Central City said at times they feel like they are living under siege.

"I'm scared. I'm really scared," said Cynthia Battle, 54, one of the parents who gathered Saturday at a second-line parade staged at the Ashe Cultural Arts Center on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard. "I'm thinking a bullet might pass us, and I don't let them out anymore. When I was coming up, you would walk around. Now, it's terrible. You have to worry about everything."

Londyn Samuels, age 1, of Harvey, was shot to death in Central City Thursday, Aug. 29.

As a child, Battle said she knew her neighbors, walked freely to and from the store and the playground. But now, she has eight grandchildren and no longer feels safe walking the streets of her neighborhood.

Just the other day, her 10-year-old grandson told her he's afraid to go outside.

"We are tired, we are fed up and we are frustrated by the lack of love, respect and dignity for life amongst all people," said Councilwoman LaToya Cantrell, whose district includes parts of Central City.

For Al Ams Jr., an anti-violence activist whose father was killed 26 years ago, the solution is not to rely only on police and prosecutors. As another young child is mourned in Central City, he said the community must get on the same page.

"I've buried thousands of children since my daddy was killed. We have to stop making excuses when our children are killed in a residential neighborhood," Mims said Saturday. "We've got to teach our children. And it takes a village, but the village has to be on the same page."

John Harper and Michelle Hunter contributed to this report.

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