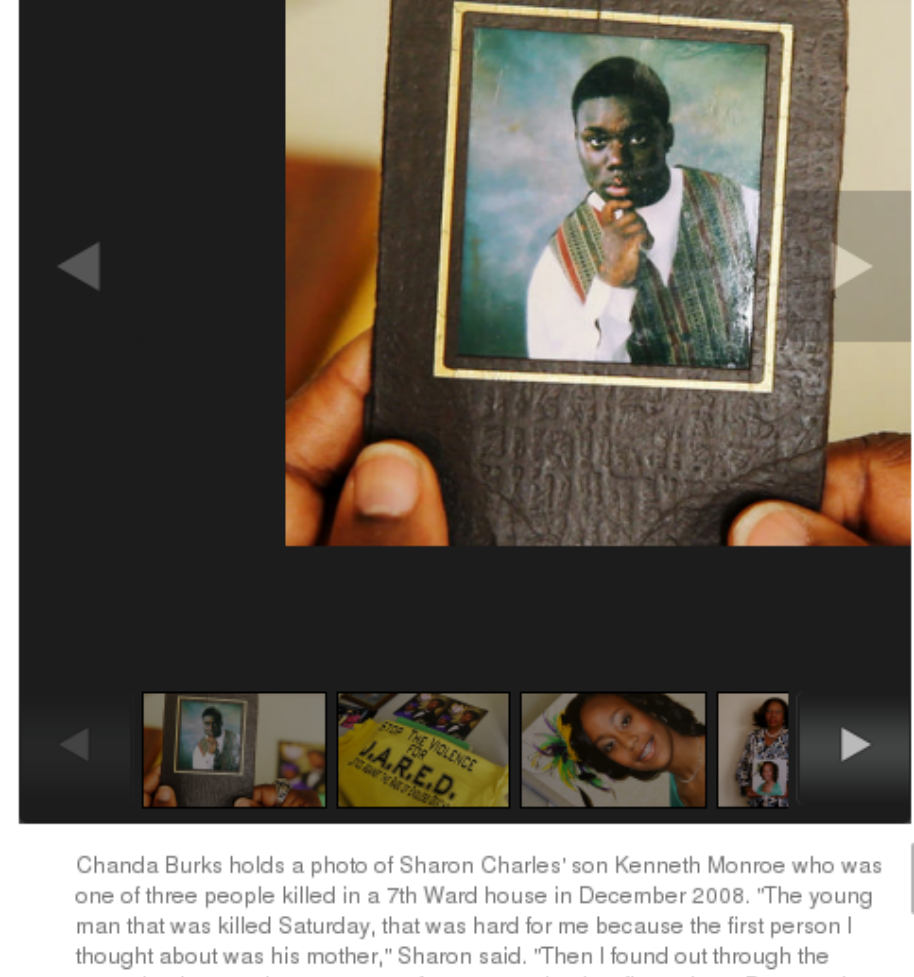


Mothers who lost children to gun violence mark one-year anniversary of program that helped them heal

comments



Chanda Burks holds a photo of Sharon Charles' son Kenneth Monroe who was one of three people killed in a 7th Ward house in December 2008. "The young man that was killed Saturday, that was hard for me because the first person I thought about was his mother," Sharon said. "Then I found out through the program that he was the son of a mother who had lost her son to gun violence."

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By Danielle Bell, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on October 19, 2013 at 8:00 AM, updated October 19, 2013 at 10:59 AM

After a bullet meant for another man left her son, Christopher Guilbeau, blind and in need of around-the-clock care, Lynn James spent years barely able to function. In 2009, two years after the shooting on Elysian Fields Avenue, a seizure triggered by skull fragments in the 23-year-old's brain finally led to his death.

"The bullet didn't immediately take his life, but I lost my child just the same," James told a crowd of mothers, relatives, friends and city leaders gathered at the Family Center of Hope on St. Charles Avenue last week. "But I'm here to tell you there is hope to escape the darkness that has consumed you, but you've got to talk about it."

It was the first time James was able to speak publicly about the grief that kept her disconnected and in a place so dark she contemplated suicide.

It was a big moment. But she wasn't alone.

Members of the support group Helping Mothers Heal gather with executive director, Rev. Pat Watson (center) to celebrate the one year anniversary of the program on Thursday (Oct. 17) at the Family Center for Hope on St. Charles Avenue.

The Rev. Pat Watson started Helping Mothers Heal in October 2012 in hopes of giving moms a safe place to discuss the range of emotions they experience after the loss of their children. The group's mantra is: "turning pain into purpose."

Watson, who is the executive director, said she got the idea after speaking at the New Orleans Citywide Summit on the African-American Male last year.

As the conference was ending, a distraught mother who had lost her son to gun violence approached her. "The city has programs to help stop the violence, help stop the shooting. But who's going to help me deal with the loss of my son?" Watson said she looked around at the crowd for answers, but the room had fallen silent.

"No one knew what to do. No one knew what to say," Watson said. "I went and prayed with her and asked her what she needed, and because of that we are here today."

What started as a six-week intervention program turned into a dedicated group of mothers meeting once a week for the past year.

Some lost their jobs and contemplated ending their own lives. Others were tempted to turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their pain.

As the mothers took turns speaking before the crowd at the one-year anniversary of the program, they talked of progress they had made. As the women celebrated their successes, organizers announced plans to expand the program into other parts of town under the guidance of the mothers who have completed the inaugural program.

Community leaders, including District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro, members of the **New Orleans Police Department** and Tyrone Walker, who heads Mayor Mitch Landrieu's office of faith-based initiatives, fielded questions from mothers who participate in the program about how they can work better with community leaders in dealing with social issues.

Watson said the group will expand its services to mothers at a newly renovated center on Washington Avenue that is set to open in January, 2014. It will serve Central City, Gert Town and Broadmoor. Beyond that, the program also will provide weekend and after-school programs, job readiness and crime prevention services.

"Our goal is to expand even further into communities plagued by violence, reach these mothers within 72 hours of their loss and try and make an immediate impact," Watson said.

Since renovations began on the Washington Avenue building in 2007, Watson said there have been three murders right in front of the building. "I think that really justifies our presence in the community, and we will serve as a beacon in that neighborhood to overturn the tide of violence," she said.

Chanda Burks lost her son **Jared Francis**, 18, in 2012 when a gunman opened fire on an Algiers street outside their home.

"When you lose a child, you lose your sense of purpose," Burks said. "No one understands where you're coming from. But with a program like this, it gives us a new purpose: to help and heal other mothers suffering from the same tragedy."

"When mothers heal, the community can heal, and maybe we can prevent these tragedies from happening again," she said. "When you lose a life, you reach out to another because life is precious."

For James, the program did nothing short of saving her life after her son's death. "And I know we all can agree, and I thank God. I'm glad I don't look like what I've been through. And we will go on by the grace of God."

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James was one of 15 mothers who gathered one evening last week to talk about the children they lost to gun violence and what the women called life-saving support they got from Helping Mothers Heal, a program that marked its one-year anniversary this past week.

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