

Reflections on the Loss of My Grandson: How Life Events Change Social Work Practice

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Abstract: This firsthand account sheds light on my (Gantt's) experience as a grandmother and former victim advocate who lost her young Black grandson at the hands of another young Black male. I was a school social worker at the time. In this piece, I and second author Greif describe how I received support from colleagues and clients. My experiences have made me a better social work practitioner as I work to make meaning of my loss.

Keywords: Black males, homicide, gun violence, grief, loss

Introduction

This article is dedicated to the memory of the first author Gantt's beloved grandson, DeVonte.

The inaugural issue of *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* published an article by Agathi Glezakos (1995) who described arriving at her dying mother's bedside too late. Her grief was abated over time by providing for a female client, who reminded her of her mother, what she could not provide her own mother. In essence, she had the opportunity to work through her guilt and sadness in an adaptive way. Twenty-seven years later, in this same journal, Clary and Hernandez (2022) advised social workers to practice self-care in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. They wrote, "I witnessed many colleagues reach—and some surpass—their breaking points, needing to take multiple days off to take care of themselves and reset" (p. 9). These parallel narratives collectively express the opportunities and the struggles that social workers often face. Glezakos (1995) had an opportunity to take care of herself following a death and Clary and Hernandez (2022) want social workers to practice self-care to minimize the impact of the pandemic and future traumas.

Social workers, like many helping professionals, not only have to take care of people in extremis but must manage their own reactions to what they are witnessing, especially if it resonates with their own experiences as it has for many with the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies & Cheung, 2022). The last few years may have been especially difficult for social workers of color. Ross et al. (2022) found that social workers of color experienced more significant concerns during COVID than White social workers. Lipscomb and Ashley (2020), two Black social workers, described the enormous pressure they felt providing clinical services in 2020 while experiencing the simultaneous stress of COVID and racial protests.

Coping with tragedy and death, as Glezakos (1995) did, unfolds over time and takes many forms. These can include integrating aspects of the deceased into one's identity, keeping the deceased alive through memories, and finding meaning in the loss (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). In working with the bereaved in a group context, Knight and Gitterman (2014) extol the value of mutual aid where people can learn from each other's experiences and give and receive from

each other in ways that do not unfold with individual treatment. Boss (2006), in writing about trauma and resilience, wrote about the search for meaning: “It means that one can eventually find some logic, coherence, or rational reasoning about what happened” (p. 74). How one socially constructs oneself can be key to coping with death; who one is as a person is a reflection of one’s interactions with others. Social workers help clients make meaning out of their losses and may call upon their own resources to make meaning when they experience a loss.

As a social worker who has practiced for more than thirty years, I have helped many individuals and families who experienced a tragedy. However, despite my skills and training, I was not prepared when a tragedy landed in my own backyard. That phrase carries both figurative and literal meaning for me. On January 4, 2015, my 22-year-old grandson DeVonte was shot. Shortly after, he was found deceased in a nearby backyard. He was a young Black male, and he was murdered at the hands of another young Black male.

After a period of turning inward to process the deep pain that I was experiencing, I had a desire to turn outward and to use my experience to help others in some way. Eventually, and it has taken years, I chose to make meaning of his death by sharing my story with other practitioners. My hope is that by sharing, social workers would be better able to help others experiencing a similar situation ... whether they are a client, a colleague, or themselves.

Background

But it is not only my own journey that prompts this writing now; it is what we see every day in the news with gun violence. When I look at the following statistics, I know my personal experience is not unique. “Homicide is a leading cause of death for young people in the United States aged 15–34, but it has a disproportionate impact on one subset of the population: African American males” (Sharkey & Friedson, 2019, p. 645). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention listed homicide as the leading cause of death in 2017 (the most recent year that these data were available) for Black males ages 15 to 34 (Heron, 2019). This was higher than for the comparable groups of White males, Black females, and White females. According to the Violence Policy Center (2020), the homicide rate for Black male victims in 2017 was 37.32 per 100,000 as compared to 4.45 per 100,000 for White males. Furthermore, statistics from the FBI et al. (2019) reveal that young Black males are most often murdered by another young Black male.

The Shooting

On Sunday, January 4, 2015, my day began as usual. I attended church service. (In her research, Boss, 2006, found spirituality can help with coping.) That evening, while at home, my youngest daughter and I were reminiscing about the holiday break. It was so joyous for me. I gave gifts to many of my family members. I also delivered gift donations to many families with whom I was working. As a school social worker, I was off for the holiday break and was to return the next morning. Then we heard on the news that a shooting had occurred in our city. I shudder when I remember the fast-moving footsteps down the stairs and the shrill voice of my daughter who exclaimed, “It was DeVonte. DeVonte is dead.” As happens so often, she became aware because

of a post on Facebook. Immediately, we left the house to figure out what had happened. After spending some time going to different hospitals and then to the police station where we were joined by many others, the police confirmed that it was DeVonte. The confirmation was given first to his mother (my oldest daughter) and me while we were upstairs in a separate room. I then had to go downstairs to bring up his siblings. Although very difficult, I did not allow my facial expressions to reveal this heart-wrenching news until they had the chance to get upstairs and have the solace of their mother. However, on the inside I had already begun to wail.

A very long and sleepless night followed for me. I wanted to get to my elderly aunt to tell her the news before she found out by hearing it on television or seeing it in the newspaper. After I gave her the news, we cried together. I felt so sad but also comforted to have the support of the most senior member of my family. I also told DeVonte's mother that we needed to drive in the morning to the state correctional institution where DeVonte's father was incarcerated to break the news to him. I had traveled many times to the prison, but this time the hourlong ride felt like the longest ever. We sat in the waiting area as the guard went to get DeVonte's father. Finally, he came into the room where we were sitting. He looked at us and said, "I know. It is my son." He broke down, triggering us to do the same. The sadness that I felt for him was even deeper because of the physical distance that resulted from his incarceration. I stayed in touch with him throughout the subsequent events, trying to ensure that he had the support that he needed within the prison. He later described how some of the other inmates stood by him. He ended up doing the same for other inmates who later experienced a similar loss. While not a formal group, this is the mutual aid process that Knight and Gitterman (2014) describe when doing group work that can help the bereaved cope with death. A friend whose son was also murdered while he was incarcerated shared a powerful statement with me that validated my feelings about DeVonte's father. He said, "Sometimes society looks at other inmates and says they're losers. In my book, they're amazing people who still have feelings, who actually care." This serves as a reminder that, as a social worker, it is important to find out about and include, in any way possible, family members who may be incarcerated.

Looking back, I remember how excited I was on Christmas Day, 10 days before he was murdered, when I heard from DeVonte's mother that he would be coming to my house to join us for dinner. I rushed to get his favorite foods, especially the macaroni and cheese that he loved so much. He would be bringing along his six-week-old son. I was so happy, and I remember telling him before he left after the family dinner to stay in touch. He replied, "I will, Grandmom." I did not know that would be the last time that I would see him.

The Viewings, Funeral, and Burial

I was the family member in charge of contacting the coroner's office and the funeral home. It was a grueling process as we wanted to see DeVonte's body as soon as possible but could not until certain tasks were accomplished and his body could be released. The day or two that we had to wait seemed so much longer to me. It was a cold winter day when my family and I had the first chance to view him. Despite his mother being an adult now, my maternal instincts kicked in. I felt she still needed to be comforted in a way that only a mother can do. This reminded me how important a mother's role is no matter the age of her child. She was

“paralyzed” in a way and needed to be taken inside the funeral home by wheelchair. In many ways, I felt powerless. Nothing I could do or say would be able to take the pain away. I was jarred with a beginning sense of finality as I looked at DeVonte’s body lying still upon the bier.

My family held two public viewings before DeVonte’s funeral. Because there was also coverage in the local newspaper, many people attended. It was overwhelming to me to witness the outpouring of love and support. I wondered if DeVonte realized how much he was loved and valued when he was alive. At one of the viewings, a mother who had a son who I was working with at school saw me. She realized that there was a familial connection between her husband and DeVonte. The encounter did not make me feel uncomfortable. Instead, I gleaned from her expression that she saw me in a different light; not just as a helper but also as someone who also experiences difficult events. During my own time standing there in front of DeVonte’s body, I could smell what I suspected to be embalming fluid emanating from his body. That smell haunted me for a long time afterward.

I was sitting in the front row at DeVonte’s funeral. It was painful to see the grief-stricken faces of all, but especially the young people that were close to his age. Sadly, for many of them, despite their young ages, this was not the first time they had lost a friend or family member to gun violence. My heart still mourns for them. While I was thinking about those friends and family members in attendance, my mind was also on those who were not able to attend. One friend was also shot that night and therefore witnessed the entire event. On this day, he was still hospitalized. I think about how there is no one else in this world who saw firsthand what he did. And then there was also DeVonte’s father who, because of being incarcerated, could not be there. I obtained permission from the warden for him to view a recording of the funeral that I had arranged for someone to make. I set this up with DeVonte’s father specifically in mind. I also spoke with his counselor who granted permission for him to make a brief phone call to me right after he viewed it. He commented that he could hear us crying on the recording. I was thankful that he had the opportunity to view the funeral though it was difficult to hear the sadness in his voice. As was also mentioned by two of the pastors there, I felt like someone was stolen from us. This was a life gone too soon. All of this happened for a very senseless reason. I still grapple with the question of why. All I can do now is imagine the man DeVonte had yet to become. I looked with deep sadness at his young son who would not even remember his father. DeVonte’s children have begun to ask questions. I expect that there will be many more. I stand ready to assist with answering their questions as they arise. I will do so honestly but also in a way that is appropriate for their ages. Since DeVonte’s death, I have heard others share that this is their greatest fear—deciding what to say to the children. I share this uncertainty.

The wailing that occurred when the casket was finally closed pierced my soul. I was reminded of the significance of my role as DeVonte’s grandmother as I was the first person to speak. I also stood beside his mother as she went up front to share some words. At that time and throughout this experience, I had to be strong for her and others even as I was dealing with my own grief. Sometimes it baffles me that I was even able to be so strong. As we exited the church, the weather was comparable to what I felt inside ... cold, rainy, and dreary.

I was quite moved by the responses of DeVonte's friends. Many were willing to lend support from the moment of his murder. Several of his closest friends and family members served as pallbearers. As can be seen in Figure 1, his pallbearers, leaning over his casket, displayed loyalty and camaraderie up until the very end. Watching them, I could not help but think how, as young Black males, they often seem misunderstood. I have been behind closed doors as a social worker with many young Black males with similar life experiences. Despite the tough shell that is often displayed outwardly, many have deep pain and trauma inside. This experience reminded me that they grieve just like all individuals do. I was struggling to make sense of all of this even as an adult. How much more difficult was it for them at such young ages? Losing DeVonte has prompted me to fight and stand up for these young Black males even more.

Figure 1

Pallbearers Leaning Over DeVonte's Casket¹



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I think back to my first client death as a social worker. I was a graduate student at the time. I remember how I contemplated whether to attend the funeral. This was a family with whom I had a great deal of involvement. I decided to attend. I did not say much, but I was present. Later I learned that my presence was important to them. I was reminded of this when several colleagues attended one of the viewings or the funeral. It meant so much to me. If they spoke to me, I do not remember what they said, but I do remember their comforting presence.

My Own Spiritual Coping

Mancuso (in Alton, 2019) defined *spiritual coping* as

any form of coping that incorporates what a person holds sacred. Spiritual coping can consist of behaviors (e.g., praying), but can also take the form of thoughts (e.g., remembering that God is by one's side through a crisis), feelings (e.g., experiencing emotional intimacy within one's religious community), or attitudes (e.g., trusting in a larger spiritual plan for one's life). (para. 4)

Growing up as the child of a preacher, spirituality has always been an important part of my life. I am not sure how I would have survived this experience without having my spirituality and faith to draw upon.

For example, on the night of the shooting, while a multitude of people and I were gathered at the police station, I asked those who so desired to come aside with me while I prayed. That prayer was happening at an extremely difficult time. We were awaiting confirmation that DeVonte had indeed died. Yet, I felt a peace come over me even though I did not have an answer. I felt that, despite what had occurred, God had not left my side.

While at the police station, I also called a couple of pastors whom I had known for many years. I did so despite the very late hour. Both responded promptly. I truly felt supported by them on that night and beyond. DeVonte's mother chose one of them to speak at his celebration of life service.

On the morning following the shooting, when I was due to return to work, the first colleague I called was a woman who attended my church and who was also one of the school administrators. We had grown close, and I felt more comfortable sharing the news with her first. I asked her to notify the appropriate personnel and inform them I would follow up later. Because of the relationship we had, I also trusted that she would take care of that for me until I could contact people myself.

Another example of how my own spirituality enabled me to cope was through music. I have always loved and found comfort in songs of the faith. I enjoy songs of worship and praise. The words in many of the songs helped me, as they do still, to get through difficult days. Praise and worship music playing in my house became a constant, whether anyone was at home or not. Upon returning home from a long day of all I had to do following DeVonte's death, the music allowed me to come into an ambiance of peace.

Words from “My Testimony” by Marvin Sapp (2012) have particular meaning for me following this experience:

So, if you see me cry,
it’s just a sign that I’m
I’m still alive
I got some scars, but I’m still alive
In spite of calamity
He still has a plan for me
And it’s working for my good
And it’s building my testimony
(stanza 3)

I believe that part of the plan is for me to share my story with others to enlighten them in a way that can be of help as I am doing through penning this article.

Social and Emotional Support

As social workers, we are accustomed to being the helpers. We can be on the receiving end also.

Support Received from Colleagues

One colleague set up a schedule which enabled others to sign up to provide meals to my family and me. I felt very supported by another colleague who added that I was someone who had helped so many others and encouraged others to now do the same for me—the mutual aid process. This was extremely helpful considering the myriad of things that needed to be done while also dealing with very intense feelings. This support continued on for weeks. Another colleague brought a warm pot of soup to my house. I remember its smell when he came inside my house and gently made his way to the kitchen. His calm presence was so comforting. I’m also reminded of the seemingly small needs that are very appreciated when taken care of by another. For example, a colleague that was on her way to DeVonte’s funeral texted me to see if I needed anything. The weather was inclement, and I had forgotten my umbrella. I asked her to bring me one. She instantly replied that she would.

It has been more than nine years since DeVonte was murdered and colleagues still at times make gestures that let me know they are there for me. One colleague has texted me each year on the anniversary of DeVonte’s death. I am not sure she realizes how much that means to me. Social workers spend so much of our time reaching out to our clients that we can easily overlook the needs of those who are working right alongside of us (Clary & Hernandez, 2022).

While there have been many instances where I felt supported by colleagues, there have been a few others where that support and empathy felt absent. On one occasion I was in a meeting with members of a student services team. Most, if not all, were aware of my experience. Right before the meeting, a homicide took place in the nearby community. Most present were aware of this. Only one person, a school counselor, checked with me to see if this may have triggered me in

any way. I don't have the expectation that everyone in my workplace should be available to respond to me. But it was disappointing that in a room full of helpers it seemed like only one was in tune. And not just for me, but for the community in which this was unfolding and for our colleagues who worked at the nearby school.

Support Received from Other Professionals

I soon realized that I needed to pursue ongoing professional help for myself. I am grateful that by this point in my career I had learned the importance of self-care and that it was okay for me to seek help. Furthermore, help was necessary if I was going to be able to continue functioning in my personal and professional life. I realized that I needed to fill my own reservoir so that I could resume pouring into others.

Having natural abilities and tendencies as a helper, I am often the one whom others looked toward both inside and outside my family. Following the sentencing hearing, my family and a few family friends gathered to debrief with the prosecutors. My brother declared my role as the matriarch of the family. While humbling, and a position that I do not regret, that sometimes feels like a lonely place. While I am operating from a strong and functional position, others often do not notice my needs. It reminded me that I communicate that to others. Even if I was not able to express my feelings and needs to those in my immediate circle because of the intensity of their grief, I had to let someone know. At many points, I had to remain strong and carry out tasks that needed to be done while others were not able. In some ways, this also delayed my own process of mourning. This was a reminder to me of the importance for social workers and others to provide support in the long term and not just during the immediate aftermath of such a tragic loss as this.

The victim advocate, working on behalf of the district attorney, provided one-on-one support. She also connected me and my family to a monthly support group for families that had experienced the homicide of a loved one. While led by a social worker, we were encouraged to talk to each other, the hallmark of group work (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). Short-term counseling was also provided through that office. I continue with counseling as needed. My colleagues have been godsend and have helped me to process and make meaning of such a horrible experience.

Navigating the Legal System

In my work, I often assist individuals and families with navigating systems with which they are unfamiliar. Following my experience, it was the legal system about which I had to quickly educate myself.

On the same night a vigil for DeVonte was held, a detective offered to walk me through the area where DeVonte was murdered and to explain his theory of how the murder occurred. Initially I felt conflicted about whether to take him up on his offer. However, as difficult as it was, I took the opportunity. It helped me to fill in some of my gaps in understanding.

Others (including DeVonte's mother) have shared with me their uncertainties about how much they were able to handle during court proceedings that involved the defendant despite the need to know and hear certain information. One mother told me, "The worst experience was listening to the coroner on how he died. I couldn't watch the video. I didn't want the last thing that I see is him fall." Although the victim advocate encouraged me and my family to step out while the coroner gave his presentation, I decided I needed to hear what was presented.

Attending court presented another difficult task for me as I was the one in the family who gave the victim impact statement prior to sentencing. I spent days working on it and relied on my personal faith (see Boss', 2006, consideration of spirituality as a coping device) in order to write what I would say to the defendant face-to-face. I did not allow any family member to read it beforehand. So, they all heard it for the first time when I presented it. It seemed that my words were powerful and piercing because, although I was told in advance by the attorney that the defendant may not look at me, he made brief eye contact when I addressed him directly. Also, a friend later reported that the judge appeared moved as evidenced by his body language. I felt satisfied that I had completed the daunting task that was assigned to me.

As a social worker trained in family systems, and as a fellow human being, I am acutely aware that the defendant is also part of a family. This brings to mind a comment I heard from a father whose son was similarly murdered. After meeting the mother of the defendant, he told her, "I'm looking at two victims. We're both victims. Nobody won out of it. Nobody won out of the whole deal." In essence, two families are affected.

Returning to the Work of Social Work

Eventually, it was time to return to work. I remember wondering if I would ever be able to. I tried but was not ready on the first scheduled date. My colleagues recommended an extension of my leave. It was reassuring when several said, "We got this. Take care of yourself."

When I finally returned, sympathy cards littered my desk. After a while I was able to read them and was comforted by the words that were shared. But it was not only colleagues that comforted me. As I walked into a middle school emotional support class to provide a social skills lesson, I was greeted warmly by the teacher and students. With the teacher's guidance, the students made cards for me. I showed one of the cards to my supervisor who was brought to tears even though she told me that she rarely cries. Its author was a student whom many associated only with negative behaviors. His card showed that there was so much more to him as a person, something that resonated for me with my grandson. Another student commented to me, "Let us help you." While being mindful of boundaries, I felt it was important for me to be receptive to their kind gestures as modeling for them how to be open to help can be powerful metaphorically.

I experienced the same kindness from parents. Given that my experience was so public because of the nature of it, many were aware of what happened without me telling them. One parent gave me flowers on a home visit and expressed that she realized I could identify with her own struggles. Through all of this, my heart was filled with gratitude. I was grateful to be seen not simply as a social worker but as a human who also needed love, support, and empathy just like

everyone else. These gestures also reinforced my understanding of the importance of both giving and receiving support. The time that I quietly spent reading these and other cards, emails, and condolences that were posted on the funeral home's website was an enormous help to me. I eventually read each and every one of them. On many occasions they triggered my sadness in a way that brought tears. But I also understood that these expressions by others helped me in my healing process.

Then, as well as now, I must be mindful of the use of self-disclosure. There have been times when it was appropriate to share my experience with the goal of helping the person to whom I was disclosing. On other occasions, it was sufficient that I could just draw from my experience without disclosing it.

In Remembrance

As difficult as it is, I have acknowledged some negative choices that DeVonte made the night he was murdered. Boss (2006) might refer to this as the ambiguity and ambivalence that accompany some deaths and which can make coping with death more difficult. I understand that in order for me to heal, I must acknowledge the truth. I don't mind telling the darker side of the story about DeVonte, as long as I can tell the whole story about DeVonte.

Yet, it is also important to me that DeVonte is remembered for more than just the snapshot of time during which his life tragically ended. There are so many other parts to who he was than what transpired on that tragic night. I am reminded of how he so willingly helped my mother (his great-grandmother) during the later years of her life. He would empty her commode even when some of the adult family members did not want to do that job. DeVonte graduated from the high school where I had previously been employed. On many occasions following his death, people had stopped and given me unsolicited feedback and praise about something he did to help them. All of this reminds me that he was valued.

On the other hand, I remember some of the insensitive and hurtful comments that were posted online about DeVonte after his death. In one instance, I responded online in a polite but direct manner. Some people even tried to attach a negative connotation to DeVonte's nickname, "Slowbucks," as if it was all about money. But, oh, it meant so much more to DeVonte. Slowbucks is a clothing company originating from Queens, NY. Being the man of fashion that he was, the brand was something he really liked wearing. I eventually decided not to respond because there were so many ugly comments. I felt hurt but also angry that others could make comments about someone who they did not know at all. How did they think they had that right? I stopped reading media material for a while.

The year in which DeVonte was murdered was the second deadliest so far in the century for homicides in that county. Eight months after he was murdered, the police chief Keith Sadler held a news conference September 10, 2015, which is no longer publicly available. Of the victims, Sadler said, "No one is going to shed a tear in here." Insensitive comments from the public were one thing. But hearing them from a law enforcement professional took my anger to a deeper level. How cold! His response raised questions inside of me. Would his response have

been different if the victims of the recent spate of murders had not been young Black males? Where was his concern? Did he even think about the mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, friends, children, and others who were hearing such a comment? Did he think that the lives of young Black males such as these (and indirectly their families) are worth caring about? As I taught clients throughout the years, I decided I needed to advocate for myself (and my family). I reached out to him to express my thoughts and feelings in a productive manner. He never responded. I wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper instead to express my concerns. I included comments about how the detective, contrary to him, responded in a very compassionate and personal manner by offering to come to my home to speak with me. I gladly accepted with much appreciation.

To honor and remember DeVonte's life as well as to support young Black males who are vulnerable to involvement with gun violence based on the statistics shared previously, I have established a scholarship in his name. It is awarded annually to a senior who is graduating from a local high school.

Implications for Practice and Research

As noted by Hudgins (2020), homicide of young Black males at the hands of other young Black males is a topic often marked by silence. Considering this observation and my own experience, several implications for practice and research come to mind. First, social workers are in a prime position to engage with those, like myself, who have this lived experience. I was lucky to be helped by a network of services that included a compassionate detective as well as group support and a victim advocacy system, often staffed by social workers. Social workers can provide opportunities for these individuals (and families) to share their stories when appropriate. I believe there are those that long to be heard. A mother who had lost her son to murder once said to me, "I am really glad that God leads you from your heart to listen so you can know firsthand from the people that experienced the loss of a loved one through gun violence ... that you're willing to even just speak out and go places and take our experiences and take how we feel with you so people can hear what it's like." Sharing narratives can be powerful, and the search for meaning-making (Boss, 2006; Knight & Gitterman, 2014) could enable social workers to deepen their understanding of these individuals and their families and develop strategies that meet their needs.

Such strategies must include other children in the family and family members who may be incarcerated (Hurd, 2017). Talking about death with children can help them understand it better. They too should be given a means of expressing loss that is age appropriate. Further, by including DeVonte's father in the community of those who were in pain, not only was he helped, but a potential healing force was unleashed for other incarcerated individuals when he provided solace to them.

While sharing narratives may help the bereaved, we must also work toward prevention. Lindsey et al. (2017) point out that "building positive, trusting relationships with African American boys is vital to their ability to cope with life challenges" (p. 381). As a former school social worker, I know that these relationships must start early in the home, in the community, and in the schools

where we must be on the lookout not only for those who appear to be at risk but for all children. Connections that are made early can sustain people through difficult times. Research on working with families following a homicide has been ongoing and includes potential interventions for families and in group settings (e.g., Sharpe et al., 2022). Individual stories gained through qualitative research also need to be gathered in a sensitive manner. Talking through experiences can be healing and potentially traumatizing for children and adults. Padgett (2017) writes, “the sensitive nature of qualitative research almost guarantees that emotionally laden information will surface” (p. 129). This raises the research question of *when* to interview someone who has experienced what I have. I am a different person today than I was nine years ago. Thus, the purpose of and the methods behind research must be carefully thought out before research enters this complex world.

My Journey Continues

Papachristos and Wildeman (2014) found that the risk of homicide is highly concentrated in urban areas: Among gun homicides, 41 percent took place within a network composed of less than four percent of the population of the neighborhood. This parallels Goldberg’s (2015) documentation that the shooter today is often the victim tomorrow. Because I was working in an urban high school, this hit home for me. The Black male students that I interacted with were in the age range of those for whom homicide is the leading cause of death (as cited previously). Because this is more likely to occur at the hands of another young Black male, it was a grim reminder that these Black males were at risk of being a victim or a perpetrator.

A longtime colleague and friend said (of young Black males), “their village is different” than what he had. He grew up in circumstances like those of DeVonte and many other young Black males. However, he pointed out a key difference. He believed that having an intact family and great community support made a difference for him. Losing my grandson in this manner and having acquired knowledge energizes me to do all I can as a part of their village, to make it more responsive to their needs, and to bring others into the village—Black, Brown, White, male, female, and non-binary.

Additionally, in my work with families, I share in the journey of those who have a similar experience as I walk alongside them. I believe that my personal experience enables me to empathize with them in a deeper way.

Conclusion

Scheyett (2021), in writing about social work’s role after the death of George Floyd and others, urges social workers to surround ourselves with people who give us hope and to give hope in return. Clary and Hernandez (2022) described the social workers who successfully coped with tough times: “They maintained boundaries at work; responded to their mental, emotional, and physical health needs; and came to work refreshed and ready to take on their responsibilities each day” (p. 9). My personal journey continues as well. A friend whose son was similarly murdered said to the young Black male who had murdered her son at his sentencing, “You know, we have something in common. We’re both doing life. Because my life will never be the

same.” The same goes for me. I know that my own journey, because of this experience, will be a part of my life for the remainder of my days and will have a profound impact on my practice. By taking care of myself and making meaning of DeVonte’s death, I can receive hope and give hope to others.

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