Remembering Heaven’s Track Star:
The Web of Community Violence, Student Voice, and Resilience #LLT

by
Susan E. McLaughlin-Jones, EdD¹
B. Shermone Cowans²
Te’Osha Raglin
Shana Berryman

Abstract
With community violence increasing (PTSD: National Center for PTSD, 2015; National Drug
Intelligence Center, 2008), more students in our nation’s schools tap into their reserves of resiliency (c.f. Connell,
Sprick, & Aber, 1994; Gayles, 2005; Hanford, n.d.) before ever walking through the classroom door. The
following is an auto-ethnography of a diverse, urban high school which recently experienced the high-profile
death of a popular student-athlete due to community violence. Told from the recounting of three close friends, the
administrative team, and social media postings, this paper will explore how national and international media
attention, formal and informal responses from the school, and the reactions of the larger community shaped how
high school students experienced the tragic and premature death of Trinity Gay³, “Heaven’s Track Star”.

Introduction
On Saturday, October 22, we found ourselves sitting in the back of the balcony of a filled sanctuary of a
mega-church that serves the Lexington, Kentucky community and outlying counties. We had all just filed past the
open coffin and bier in the front of the church where we said our good-byes to 15-year-old Trinity Gay. The
previous Sunday, the local news feeds began reporting a young teen was injured in crossfire at a restaurant
parking lot during the wee hours of the morning and had died of her wounds in the local hospital. Trinity Gay was
a bright student in Freshman science class the year before, and we each had just spoken to the sophomore track
star on Friday before school let out for the weekend. By 2:00pm on Sunday, BBC America had picked up the
story because Trinity’s father is an Olympic athlete. Within a few more hours, celebrity Twitter feeds had
expressed condolences to the Boyd-Gay family. We were devastated.

Throughout the previous week, the tragic death and investigation was detailed in national and
international newsfeeds because her father is an Olympic athlete; However, a piece of information was missing.
This was not a story about the daughter of an Olympic athlete; it was a story of a child who had been cared for by
some of the school’s teachers since infancy, and navigated the complex stratification of high school social circles
with ease, and whose absence is felt greatly by students and staff alike. To her track teammates she was a natural
talent with an amazing work ethic. To her closest friends she was kind, generous, and unassuming, despite having
a famous father and once taken a small role in a feature film. She was beautiful on the inside and out. Despite the
appearances of a blessed life, she drew people to her with her sweet disposition and charm.

On this Saturday, the lower sanctuary of the church was filled with places reserved for Trinity’s
teammates from track, family, and local community leaders. During the service, these friends of Trinity’s—who
laughed with her, cried with her, and shared the daily intimacies of growing into womanhood together—sat as far
away from the speakers as possible. They did not have a formal role in the memorial on the previous Monday that
was organized by the track team; but, they did sit next to the chairs in Child Care & Development and in the
school’s cafeteria that had been turned into informal memorials by grief stricken students. It is concerning that the
girls that sat with Trinity during class—all of whom probably considered her to be the most likely to “make it”—
would now be reimagining their own futures with such a bright life cut short.

¹ Dr. Susan McLaughlin-Jones has been a classroom teacher in Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington, Kentucky for
over 20 years teaching classes that include Advanced Physics, Collaboration Art, Resource English IV, and self-contained
EBD Biology. The Culturally Engaging Framework for Instruction and Leadership which emerged from her 2012
dissertation won the 2016 Mensa Copper Black Award for Creative Achievement. Please see CV attached to the end of this
document.
² Co-authors are current 11th graders at Fredrick Douglass High School in Lexington, Kentucky, guided by the lead author
who had them together in class during the 2015-16 school year at Lafayette High School.
³ Student is named due to publicity that occurred surrounding her death, and with the knowledge and support of the Boyd-Gay
family
The chemistry teacher who helped care for Trinity as an infant, supporting her teenaged parents to stay on focused on academic and athletic goals, sat next to us. She still supports Trinity’s mother as she continues to work through the grief of losing her only child. Here we all sat…in the back…away from the seats reserved for those “closest” to Trinity…with little voice in how she was mourned or recognition of the depth of our grief.

Reflecting on the events surrounding Trinity’s death and subsequent memorials, the voices of some students and faculty who knew Trinity well were lost in the ensuing media frenzy. Because the theme of this conference is “Administrators (Up)rising and (Up)lifting Student Voices,” these three young women—who had just a year before “borrowed” their teacher’s cell phone to take a whimsical selfie—are sharing their story and their experience in how the community and school district handled the death of a promising student-athlete with the hopes of informing administrator response to similar tragedies.

Unfortunately, Lafayette High School (LHS) is no stranger to young lives being cut short by community violence. This whole story played out twice more over the next two months…and then, again, this past August. However, despite the violence in or community, our high school and district administration has kept our students protected within our school walls.

As these young women have worked together, sharing their experiences, they have blossomed from deeply wounded high school Sophomores to impassioned Juniors who have found their voice. This project is submitted as an auto-ethnography. The young authors are sharing their personal stories freely and with the oversight and permission of their parents. As this project is not affiliated with an academic institution, it has not had IRB oversight. However, care has been taken to protect and support these young authors as they explore the community and district response to the untimely, accidental death of their well-beloved classmate Trinity Gay.

The project has grown. In June 2017, they presented their experience to Kentucky teachers at the statewide KEA Talk Conference where ideas about improved district response to community violence were generated by the audience in a professional conversation. These ideas will be included in the recommendations. This project has moved beyond the academic paper and become one filled with student voice, sharing an experience missed by most practitioners about how community violence affects the educations of the survivors left in the aftermath. Since embarking on the project, one of the authors had a gun pulled on her on the bus, another had her bus windows shot out with a BB gun. The threat of violence is pervasive in the lives these young women. Their mostly male peers—that could one day become their husbands—are dying by gun violence, leaving these young women behind as witnesses.

During the funeral, we were challenged by Trinity’s grandmother to “pick up the baton.” These young authors and aspiring academics have not only picked up that baton, but they are running with it.

Framework

Grit and resilience (Hanford, n.d.) as it influences success in schools has been explored as one way to improve student achievement. While school success positively correlates with resilience (c.f. Connell, Sprick, & Aber, 1994; Gayles, 2005), there has been little attention as to why resilience is necessary for students to be successful in schools (McLaughlin-Jones, 2015). The implied assumption is that resilience is a growable skill, not a finite characteristic. School leaders work to provide a safe environment conducive to learning (Sinek, 2014) but have little control over the community influences our student confront. Yet few administrators and professionals experience or comprehend the persistent community violence of some of our students considered At-Risk. Once again, our most vulnerable students are being told they are unsuccessful because they lack a necessary characteristic for school success—much like they were once told their skin color, zip code, or access to health care was to blame.

Neglected in research is how many students from historically underserved demographics may deplete reserves of resiliency (c.f. Connell, Sprick, & Aber, 1994; Gayles, 2005; Hanford, n.d.) due to external influences, before ever walking into our nation’s schools. With violent crimes on the rise nationally (PTSD: National Center for PTSD, 2015; National Drug Intelligence Center, 2008) more students are confronting the remnants of these violent acts. Teachers often have little comprehension of how pervasive violence and the cycle of anger permeates students’ relationships, visions for the future, and value systems. One of the co-authors describes her experience with community violence as, “It’s like a web that doesn’t end. In some neighborhoods, the gun violence is just constant. Saying R.I.P. is becoming normal.”
Exposing educators to the real experience of teenagers in a small town—not Chicago or Detroit sized cities which bear an even larger burden—will inform how to improve support for students that are continually exposed to traumatic events in their neighborhoods.

**Context of Case: School and Community Analysis**

Lafayette High School—located in Lexington, Kentucky—is one of 5 large district high schools. In the 2016-17 school year, 2377 (PBIS, End of Year Discipline Report 2016-17) students entered the halls. Lafayette serves a diverse urban population, drawing students from downtown, University of Kentucky graduate housing, and affluent subdivisions. Along with students districted to the school, Lafayette also serves students who are enrolled in the Pre-Engineering Magnet program and the School of the Creative and Performing Arts (SCAPA). Lafayette is a PBIS school where 88% of students are successful under Tier 1 behavior structures. The administrative team consist of a principal in his first lead position, two seasoned associate principals, an administrative dean and a dean of students. It’s been reported that this is the smallest administrative team in the state despite being one of the largest high schools (personal communication with the principal).

Students at Lafayette speak 67 native languages. As of 2015-16, the population was 73.3% White, 14.36% Black/African American, 6.04% Hispanic, and 6.3% Other. 5.93% of students participate in special education programming, and 1.99% are English Language Learners. Twenty-two AP courses spanning both core-content and enrichment are offered to students (Lafayette High School Schol Profile, 2016).

The 2016-17 school year began with a rocky start. The first teacher work day, the principal was involved in a heavy car accident. While not really related, the school year was plagued with similar crises throughout. The death of Trinity Gay affected the largest part of the student body. A month after Trinity’s death, a middle schooler well known by LHS students was shot and killed when he answered the door at Thanksgiving. On December 6, a two-year-old was caught in stray gunfire in the LHS district. In January 2017, another 15-year-old LHS student was shot during a fight with another teenager. This sophomore class has been hit hard beginning in 8th grade with having to cope with suicides and accidental deaths of classmates, friends, and family members. Trinity’s death was unique because it was high-profile; however, it was not an isolated traumatic event in the lives of the students (see Table 1 on the next page). This list of juvenile/young deaths is alarming not just because of its extensiveness and that most of the shooters are also juveniles; but also because this is only the deaths, not the victims who survived: the 11-year-old shot while attending a birthday party (WKYT, 2017), the 9-year-old that was shot in the shoulder in his car (WLEX18 News, 2015), the 15-year-old shot in the ankle (Eads, Centre Parkway drive-by shooting injures teen; police looking for suspects, 2017), nor where a man was shot in front of one of our middle schools during a football game despite have no connection to the school (ABC36 News, 2017). It is also alarming because it does not include accidental or health-related deaths like Star Ifeacho’s (Alfonso III, 2017) that also deeply affected the Fayette County Public Schools community. The names on this list were generated by the authors in response to “Who of your friends and family that has died recently?” The details and dates were added after researching the news stories.

On the Monday evening following Trinity’s death, the LHS Track team organized a memorial for the community. Her father, Tyson Gay, flew in and recounted how even famous athletes were sharing condolences. Shoshanna Boyd, her mother, and all the cousins and extended family that once thought of Lafayette High School as home attended as well. The superintendent and school board members were also in attendance.

All of this happened under the national context of the racial conflicts that were enveloping the country in the run up to the 2016 presidential election. The crowd was neither white or black, nor poor or affluent. We were all pink and purple and united in our grief, and it was understood her death was not racially motivated. The associate principal stood in solidarity next to a man wearing his gang affiliations openly. Tyson called for an end to the violence, to have Trinity’s death become more.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Juvenile</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>Additional info</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co–Author’s sibling</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaz Black</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>HCHS</td>
<td>2012, March 17</td>
<td>Triple shooting</td>
<td>Inside a home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezavion Lindsey</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>TCHS</td>
<td>2013, June 16</td>
<td>Unintentional</td>
<td>Half-brother charged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio Franklin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>LHS graduate</td>
<td>2014, April</td>
<td>Stray gunfire</td>
<td>All LHS students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Krueger</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>University of KY (LHS District)</td>
<td>2015, May 7</td>
<td>Robbery Victim</td>
<td>Prior LHS student alleged perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaal Gossett</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>BSHS graduate</td>
<td>2015, November 22</td>
<td>Robbery Victim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb Hallet</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>LHS graduate</td>
<td>2016, January 6</td>
<td>Robbery victim</td>
<td>Sister still attends LHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariyah Coleman</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(BSHS District)</td>
<td>2016, September 8</td>
<td>11:00pm. Prior shots heard</td>
<td>Victim was pregnant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity Gay</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>LHS</td>
<td>2016, October 16</td>
<td>Stray gunfire</td>
<td>International story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Jones</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>(TCHS district)</td>
<td>2016, November 18</td>
<td>Basement of house,</td>
<td>Parent home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel Juarez</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>LMS (LHS district)</td>
<td>2016, November 24</td>
<td>Mistaken identity/ hit</td>
<td>Happened in his house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Gallman</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(LHS district)</td>
<td>2016, December</td>
<td>Accidental during robbery</td>
<td>Assailants were known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo Travers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jessamine Co.</td>
<td>2017, January 12</td>
<td>18-year old shooter</td>
<td>Grandfather accessory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby Durrum</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>LHS</td>
<td>2017 January 18</td>
<td>LHS Shooter</td>
<td>Borrowed gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devontae Howard</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(LHS District)</td>
<td>2017, May 27</td>
<td>Shot in head</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Williams</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(LHS district)</td>
<td>2017, July 1</td>
<td>Street corner</td>
<td>Multiple wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean Howard</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(HCHS district)</td>
<td>2017, August 5</td>
<td>Altercation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The references for each of these stories can be found in the *Works Cited* page at the end of this paper.

Lexington boasts a population of approximately 320,000 (US Census Bureau, 2017). In the wake of the 1997 Phillip Morris v. Williams decision (Younger & Rosenbaum, 2007), Lexington made a conscientious decision to move from an agrarian community and embrace urban development. For example, just off I-75 the famous Madden farm that brought celebrities in town for raucous Derby Eve parties has since become the lucrative Hamburg Pavilion shopping center and the new Fredrick Douglass High School. Likewise, Fritz farm has been developed into the upscale Summit retail center in the south end of town. Since 1996, the city has experienced an on average population growth of 1.7% per year, as tobacco fields have been turned into commercial properties. During this period, small tobacco patches that used to spot the yards of single family homes to boost income have almost entirely disappeared as the work to raise tobacco is no longer worth it on a small scale. Unfortunately, this increase in population and decrease in cash flow to single families coincides with the Oxycontin and opioid pandemic that has plagued the rest of the country. Lexington is nestled between I-64 and I-75, an easy 14-hour drive from Florida, 5 ½ to Chicago, IL and Detroit, MI each. This makes Lexington a sweet spot for drug traffickers.
Table 2: 1996-2016 Population v. Murders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Murders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>238,817</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>256,669</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>296,545</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>305,201</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>308,501</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>310,725</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>314,767</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>318,449</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>27*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(compiled from US Census Bureau, 2017; WKYT News Staff, 2017); *data through October 2017.

Table 2 (above) shows a 1.7% per annum increase in population since 1996. Lexington’s police force, however, has increased only 0.14% per year since 2009, and the authorized positions on the police force has decreased by -0.3% per year (see Figure 3 below). Meanwhile, the murder rate has increased from 14/year to 23/year—a per annum increase of 3.2%. October 2017, the current murder tally is 27, with two months left in the year. The murder rate in Lexington, KY is rising, the population is rising, and the police force is not keeping up a proportional strength. Granted, the data shown here is narrow and incomplete, but it does draw into question why a community with an increasing population and murder rate has a declining police force.

Figure 3. 2009-15 Authorized, sworn, and civilian strength of force

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sworn</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorized</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfilled</td>
<td>(26)</td>
<td>(53)</td>
<td>(76)</td>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(32)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Compiled from Lexington Police Department Annual Report 2015, 2016; Shaw, 2013)

Social media posts on face book and twitter also contributed to the context of the students’ and administrator experience as outside observers commented on the circumstances surrounding the incident, placing blame on Trinity, and her parents to varying degrees neglecting that 4 reckless, adult men—one a felon—chose to solve their differences with a shoot out in a busy restaurant parking lot near a college campus. If Trinity had not been in that parking lot, its highly likely someone else would have been injured or killed.

Regardless of the reasons why murders have increased in Lexington, the school system is charged with the emotional health and physical safety of its students. While juggling the usual teenage drama, school work, and family struggles faced by average American youth, these students are also overcoming a tragic death and processing grief slightly more often than every other month. If resiliency is a major indicator of school success, what happens when your resiliency is used up resolving traumatic grief bi-monthly?

Community violence is sapping student’s reserves of resilience. Students closest to the violence did not get voice in how the school and community elected to grieve. In the spirit of “...(Up)rising as Advocates and (Up)lifting Student Voices,” the raw stories of these young women’s experience as they surmount obstacles that they face—not just with Trinity’s murder, but in repeatedly confronting violence in the immediate community—are important for helping school administrators support students through similar extreme emotional events. In writing this paper, these young African American Sophomore high school students will have an opportunity to
have their voice uplifted, and contribute to efforts to better understanding—and hopefully stopping—the web of community violence. Voicing their first-hand experience of deaths and gun violence of the youth in our community has reinforced the need to become vocal to stop senseless shootings and help others overcome similar circumstances.

Research Questions
(1) What challenges did participants face confronting the death of a close classmate/student and the ensuing international media coverage?

(2) What strategies supported students in overcoming the challenges?

Participants:
Trinity and her four good friends, confiscated my cell phone in class one day in November 2015 and took a selfie with the 5 of us. In the picture, Trinity’s left hand hauntingly covers her face almost foreshadowing the events less than a year later. The stories told in this paper will be directly from the girls in the picture (Figure 1 below). These young women are sharing their their experience because in all the attention on Trinity’s father in the news, and the multiple memorial services, these friends of Trinity who sat next to her, laughed with her, and drove their teachers insane together, never had the opportunity to give voice to how the tragic death of Trinity and community responses affected them.

Figure 1. Author, co-authors, and Trinity Gay in a selfie from Fall 2015.

Despite community violence touching students more frequently, it has largely been kept out of our school, due mainly to the calm and comforting response of the administrative team. During the school day, students exist in a relatively secure and safe environment. Due to his influence in keeping the violence at bay, the principal’s response to questions posed by these young women will be included in this paper, as will anecdotal comments from the young women’s parents.

Methods
Each of the participants—the three co-authors and the lead principal—responded independently, verbally or in writing to the following questions:

1. Who was Trinity to me?
2. How did I find out about her death?
3. How did people react to it?
4. How did my family react to it?
5. How did the community react to it?
6. How did it affect you?
7. How are you dealing with it?
8. What did people do?
9. How do you feel towards it?
10. What was the funeral like?
11. What has happened since?
12. Is there anything else important to share?

Additionally, the principal was asked to respond to these prompts in context of decisions the were made in handling this tragedy at the school level, and in the context of the other events of community violence that have affected our school and our students. Once the authors have responded on their own, they came together coded the data. Responses were shared anonymously and sorted into “what went right?” and “what went wrong?” From a group discussion, 4 underlying themes emerged which authors then expounded on for clarity and continuity.

These themes (a) take students’ grief seriously, (b) violence is pervasive in students’ lives, and it’s getting worse, (c) listen to students, and (d) students need time to grieve.

In June 2017, the authors presented their experience at the Kentucky KEA Talk Conference at Edith J. Hayes Middle School in Lexington, Kentucky. They presented their case and findings to teachers from across the state in a 75-minute breakout session. In the audience of about 25 practitioners, there were 7 teachers from Lafayette High School, a few more from another FCPS high school which had just recently experienced the loss of a popular athlete from a sporting incident. By the end of the presentation, a thoughtful list of suggestions to improve school and district response to these tragedies was compiled.

As they are minors, the students’ mothers will each have full review of the content in the paper, and sign off on each step of the process. This project has been approved by the district superintendent, the high school administration, and the Boyd-Gay family.

Findings

These past 3 years of high school have definitely not been typical. There have been so many deaths of friends and students that putting “R.I.P. “ in front of their name would be unfathomable. Some have passed away from suicide, freak accidents, gun violence, car accidents, etc. The number of deaths from gun violence compared to all other causes, however, is sickening.

Understanding how these terrible events affect students is difficult until witnessed first-hand. The following four themes rose out of discussion over responses to the original prompts listed in the Methods section. For ease of reading, quotes from the co-authors have been italicized, but not attributed to a specific co-author for privacy.

1.) Take students seriously:

They say trouble does not last; but, when friends are continuously dying, it is very close to home and it hurts. Teachers kept saying, “It’s okay,” when it was clearly not. Is it wrong to feel consumed with grief the day after a close friend dies? Life does go on, and it is each of our responsibilities to do what we can to live it well; however, it is not “OK.” Violence is never “OK.” Pointless murder is never “OK.” That it might be us tomorrow is not “OK.” Normalizing trauma does not is not a healthy response, and it minimalizes our very real, and natural grief.

Depth of grief cannot be determined by the assumed relationship with the victim. Gun violence affects kids across the district. Trinity practiced cross country at Dunbar High School, had attended middle school in a neighboring county, and knew many students across the state involved in AAU, and school running programs. She may not have attended Dunbar, but their students were as affected by Trinity’s death as LHS students were by one of theirs collapsing on the basketball court afterschool and dying of a heart infarction. The students in the community change feeder systems regularly, districting boundaries run through neighborhoods, and magnet programming provides a larger peer group than just our own schools. They had played on the same basketball team with him or went to school with, grew up with him or how ever else they knew him. Many of our students, already reeling from the other deaths experienced were thrown back into grief by this well-liked student’s passing, but our grief was overlooked because it happened at Dunbar.
Even students who did not know these students well were affected. Adolescents often absorb the emotions of those around them and insert themselves into tragic incidents, and make them personal. These emotions are as genuine as those who were close and should be treated as well. Drama on social media can increase emotional responses. In Trinity’s case, the news media camped on our front lawn and added drama.

*Teachers seem unaware how much pressure exists on us to succeed in school even when one of our fellow classmates or friends have been taken away from us. It is very important that this gets attention from teachers for them to realize how much it affects us students.*

2.) Violence is pervasive in students’ lives, and it’s getting worse:

*Violence is a lose-lose situation: one life gone, another in jail. It feels like it will never stop. Those of us that survive, that witness, that grieve, are left to soldier on despite the violence that surrounds us are left with more questions than answers, more fear than solutions. Each time an event happens, a cycle occurs of sadness, remorse, and regret as we come together as a community, then the lessons seem to be forgotten until we are reminded again.*

In the same 2015 freshman science class, was another student who was a different kind of victim of gun violence. In April 2014, his older brother was at a local park when three other boys from our school began shooting at him. Unfortunately, when he returned fire, he accidentally shot an innocent bystander—who had graduated from our school a few years before. In August 2015, the brother took an Alfred plea and was sentenced to 7 years in prison (WKYT News Staff, 2015). With his family focused on his brother’s legal troubles and half the neighborhood shunning him, science and schooling was not the top of his list. For this student, he was fortunate to find a mentor in a local boxing program and is working to overcome his family’s struggles. Had his brother not returned fire, he might be the one dead. But had the students not had access to weapons, the story might be very different.

During the 1st week of January 2016, in another science class at LHS was the sister of a LHS alumni that had just graduated from our school in May. He was shot and killed because he was taking another boy home from a house near the University of Kentucky campus, just as 3 others tried to rob it (McKay, 2016)—another case of in-the-wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time.

Last fall in our district, in the 2-3 weeks following Trinity’s death, three boys were picked up and brought into school by local enforcement officers on different days. Unbeknownst to the officers, each of the boys was carrying a gun when they were brought to school. There was no intention of using it in school, and from newspaper reports, the students knew having a weapon on school grounds would result in consequences. The principal had not had anything like this happen in his 27 years in the school. Each student was caught because their demeanor changed as they were trying to hide the gun or engage in a conversation with school staff. Each of these three boys made it clear that they were carrying because they needed protection in their neighborhoods (WKYT News Staff, 2016).

*We hear gun shots nearly every night in our neighborhoods. Floyd’s blood still stains the sidewalk a few blocks away. There has been no rain and no one has cleaned it up. One of us spoke to him just an hour or so before. He had been shot once before. How is it a 16-year old can be shot twice in his life?*

Students have to deal with a variety of deaths, and have become desensitized to the causes, especially gun deaths. Saying “RIP” has become normal along with memorials and the question, “Why?” Shootings only seem to permeate student defenses when the victim was going about routine tasks. Trinity was getting food. Floyd was walking home (WKYT News Staff, September). Angel was answering the door (WKYT News Staff, September). Nova was sleeping (Eads, 2 charged in shooting that killed 2-year-old, the fourth juvenile killed in 2 months, 2016). Shooters are callous, and disregard who else may be around.
Shooting is the way my friends die. Before high school, it was someone else’s friends. Now it is happening to our friends, neighbors, and families. High school is when guns are more popular and the testosterone of puberty reaches its peak, but maturity of the prefrontal cortex has not fully developed. Being mad becomes angry. Being sad becomes depressed. Being happy becomes ecstatic. Teens struggle to deal with these feelings. As for boys, their way of “dealing” seems to be finding comfort with guns. As soon as one person makes them mad, the cycle repeats.

Having experience so many deaths at such a young age affects students deeply. They wonder who is next or even if it they might be next. These students watch all of their surroundings. They are afraid to go anywhere. These teens worry they are going wake up to another phone call to hearing another friend has been lost. No matter who it is getting killed, it is affecting all students in some way. Every time it happens, students in the community have to spend energy and resiliency processing their grief or re-processing a past lost.

3.) Listen to students.

When I first heard about Trinity’s death, it was early in the morning and I didn’t want to be alone. I went to my friend’s house. When I walked in the door her mom didn’t say anything, she just hugged me. It was what I needed. She understood.

One of the most supportive things that happened that first day back to school, was seeing the teachers visibly upset. Many students had to make the choice to stay home or not that first day back. Those of us who went to be with our friends found teachers crying while they stood their morning supervision duties. That let us know it was OK to hurt, but also gave us a role model for soldiering on. Teachers were there, in school, and they were hurting too. It showed that they really care for students. Many teachers did not teach that day. They let us talk. Being listened to helped. There was an assignment in every class, but in many classes, there was very little focus on the academics.

The school district provided a support team to speak to students. Students could choose to go to the library and speak to a district counselor, write on a memorial art piece, sit with each other and share stories, or pet a service dog brought in for comfort. Many students took advantage of this opportunity. In the morning, the library was filled with students and faculty. Those number steadily reduced throughout the day as students found strength to return to class. Students reported, however, it was difficult to “open up” and share grief with personnel from downtown with whom they were unfamiliar. These counselors had been trained for this type of event, but lacked the trust capital needed to be brought into the confidences of students.

One of the co-authors describes how she hid her need to talk following her older brother’s murder a few years ago,

When my brother died, it took me a month to go back to school and do old activities I used to do like going to Boys & Girls Club of Brookhaven, because of me grieving so badly, crying all the time, and putting on a fake smile, so people don’t have to ask all the time and bring up my brother. Thing was, I still wanted people to check in with me and make sure that I’m doing okay, even though I’m not. I just wanted people to talk to me about how I’m feeling and how I’m doing... from time to time.

This need to connect is pervasive within the student body. Impromptu memorials were hung around the school. The fence to the stadium has track shoes, uniforms and notes strung to it that were left for the rest of the year (See Figure 2 on facing page). These impromptu memorials were expressions of grief initiated by the student body. While they were outlets for grief, they also served as daily reminders of Trinity’s passing to the students that sat next to her in Spanish, Child Growth and Development, or the cafeteria where her seat was protected from others using it by the students.
School administration grappled with these student initiated memorials. They need to decide how many to leave them up, how long to leave them up, and what to do with the articles once removed. These decisions needed to balance a respect for students’ grief and need for an outlet, but reduce sensationalizing the event.

These memorials have since been taken down. The items were packed up and sent to Trinity’s family. One item was left on the wall by the library—a charge from Tyson Gay to “protect each other” (See Figure 3 below).

The principal revealed during a faculty meeting, that in the process of working to help students process their grief, that nearly a year later, he had neglected to take his own time to process and reflect. A few days after her death, Trinity had been scheduled to receive academic letter and bar for her classroom performance. She never received those items, but the school had them mounted on a plaque as a gift to her parents (see Figure 4, above). During our conversation, the principal proudly displayed this academic memorial for Trinity and requested it be included in this report to demonstrate that Trinity was not just an accomplished athlete with a bright future, but also star student.

The need to remember, for grief to be heard, is universal. Students, teachers, and administrators all need to give voice to their feelings, and know that their feelings are important. However, it is not enough to ask, “Are
you OK?” Students reported teachers should ask, “How are you feeling?” and revisit how they are feeling and how they are coping over time. This helped students to feel connected to the school, and feel safe in expressing grief.

4.) **Students need time to grieve:**

*Trinity was shot Sunday morning. Her memorial on the track was on Monday night, even though we didn’t have school. Tuesday was the first day back and the PSAT was given to us on Wednesday. I mean my friend just died, please don’t ask for my book report on Friday.*

After each death, it took about a week to get back on track with school. When these events happen, a little compassion goes a long way. Schoolwork can offer a distraction from the intensity of pain when its raw, but give students time to remember that Shakespeare is important too. Also, students assume grief is visible, as it feels like we are carrying the weight of the world; they may not ask for extensions on assignments. Students need a moment to catch our breath, re-focus, and begin again.

Tuesday and Wednesday after Trinity’s death, the school was somber. A respectful silence over took the hallways that are usually loud with teenage exuberance. Administration had very few behavior disruptions. On Thursday afternoon, the spell was broken and students began acting out. Friday afternoon, that pent-up energy was released in many behavior referrals, fights, and excessive behavior incidents. During the aftermath of Bobby Durrum’s death 2 ½ months later (WLEX 18 News, 2017), the administration was prepared for the behavior uptick, and addressed the needs of students struggling to express pent-up emotions and energy.

*A year later, we still need time to grieve. Everyone does that knew Trinity. Her father was famous; but, she was still another regular friend we would see at football games or in class, it is very hard when we do get that moment to think and realize that she is never coming back. Her death was sudden: and, yes, life goes on. Please don’t ask for my book report on Friday.*

*Some days, we are still in denial of her being taken away so soon. So many questions cross our thoughts that there are no answers to. A year after, we still have off days. There are days where we cannot talk about what happened, and only cry to express the loss. We try to stay positive: she’s no longer in a sick, cruel world and is resting peacefully with all the other angels!*  

*Some days are easier than others. but the question still lingers, “Who would take such a beautiful soul like hers?” The gun violence that took this beautiful soul away from us so early is senseless.*

Overcoming grief requires multiple re-cycling of stages that happen at different rates for each student. The school still administered the PSAT on Wednesday that week. It was more stressful than other tests because we kept thinking “where did she sit?” “where is she right now?” “is she really in a better place?” Focusing on the questions was a challenge. It was hard having class where was next to ours, and having to wait and wonder if she was going to come in late—then there was fresh grief as we remembered she would no longer sit with me in class, or eat with me in the cafeteria. They expect us to test and do work that same day or even that same week and expect us to do well on the assignments instead of giving us time to grieve. It is nearly impossible for us to focus and function with the recent death of our friend or family member on our mind.

Safety is the priority need on Maslow’s Hierarchy (McLeod, 2017). Students that are not feeling safe will have little motivation to do school assignments and engage in schooling. It is these students who benefit most from the sustained relationships promoted by cultural responsiveness (Gay, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

**Recommendations**

We have been lucky so far. This pervasive gun violence has been kept out of our schools. Guns that come into schools are found due to strong relationships (c.f. Gay 1995; WKYT News Staff, 2016). After each death, it took about a week to get back on track with school. When these events happen, a little compassion goes a long way.

Given the number of weapons out there, and how often they are in the hands of our students, it is only a matter of time before one is brought into our schools and used. We are working on borrowed time. The district
needs to work ahead now and draw up how to respond in the aftermath of such a traumatic event, if it has not done so. The county seat should recognize a growing trend that will soon, if not already, affect all constituents.

From KEA Talk, Edith J. Hayes Middle School, June 2017

The following recommendations to improve district response for future events were developed during a 1½ hour session of KEA Talk. Thirty educators from Lafayette High School, other FCPS Highs schools, other KY districts such as Jefferson County Public Schools (Louisville-Metro), and the Kentucky Department of Education polled their collective experience with many of the same tragedies. They recognized educators can no longer view these events as isolated incidents, and just like we plan and train for other school emergencies, we must also plan to address the aftermath of student trauma…not “if” it happens, but “when” it happens.

The following is the major recommendations that stem from that discussion, led by the authors:

1.) Boys grieve differently from girls. Instead of opening libraries, open gymnasiums to grieving students where adrenaline can be worn off...AND talking can happen.
2.) Students have not built trust relationships with district personnel. Train 4-5 teachers at each school to respond to school crisis.
3.) Remind teachers that all students matter and to keep responses consistent from event to event. (No bad mouthing one, then praising another)
4.) Our schools are connected communities. A tragedy at Dunbar affects kids at many of our schools. Have a system in place for these students across the district to grieve.
5.) Progressive writing for grieving students. “How are you feeling? What do you need? How are you coping?” at intervals following the event.
6.) Until the community violence improves, schools need to be aware that students are facing real and repeated trauma in their lives.

Suggestions for city government

Two major themes arise from this data that are not addressed: (a) every gun in the hand of a teen had to be bought, traded, found, or stolen for a legal gun owner; and (b) many of these incidents are related to drug trafficking and the opioid crisis that is plaguing Appalachia. Unfettered growth has brought in a group of people who are not connected to the rich history of Lexington, and our location on the intersection of I-64 & I-75 provide traffickers with easy routes of escape and commerce. The combining of housing communities in the Centre Parkway-Gainesway area, has left a vacuum of leadership where our kids no longer feel protected by the formal government structure. The lose-lose situation is that it has become practical for our teens to arm themselves in their neighborhoods because the reality is, they do not know who else might be armed. Law enforcement should begin tracking not only the perpetrators that shoot, but the person who provided the weapon to a minor in the first place—if they are not already doing so. Until students feel safe under city governance, these events will continue and escalate.

The data also provides a bleak picture of Lexington’s support for its law enforcement officers. The force, while well within recommendations for a population of its size, has not kept up growth with population itself. Interestingly, the number of authorized positions have been dramatically unfulfilled. What dynamic is preventing qualified applicants to pursue and be hired in these positions? A couple of suggestions worth investigating: (a) is pay, benefits, and pension compensation for dangerous, hard work commensurate with similar communities facing similar challenges? (b) is a workplace dynamic and/or leadership causing qualified officers to resign at a higher rate than expected?

The uptick in community violence is not isolated to Lexington. Many communities are experiencing similar struggles. What is different is that, so far and finger crossed, school leadership and the safety provided by school administrators has kept guns and gun violence out of our schools.

Conclusion:

Trinity is gone. The 1st anniversary of her death will pass in just a few weeks—aft that will come a seemingly never-ending series of 1st anniversaries of other friends. We sat in class together, walked the halls together, ate lunch together, laughed together, got in trouble together, etc. Now, the friends we did everything with, went through the year with, cried with, laughed
with, is no longer here to do those things with us anymore. Every time we see her picture or hear her name, we realize that sharing our story is necessary to help teachers and administrators fully understand how losing our friends feels, and how we wonder if we are next. We said our goodbye’s that Friday, expecting to see her again that Monday and plenty of other days and years. Instead, all we have of Trinity now is the precious memories to cherish, which will never be enough.

After the death of Trinity, it seems that gun violence was becoming more common not only in the city of Lexington, but the victims are becoming younger and younger. Teenagers are not children, nor adults. The way teens cope is completely different from how previous generations did. Social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat make it easier to share our grief with friends, but they also expose us to abuses of strangers that benefit from the 20/20 vision of looking back and anonymity. They blamed her for sneaking out, criticized her mother for not knowing where her child was, and accused her father of being absent or neglectful for being out of state to do his job and support her financially. Trinity made the choice to sneak out, but that is nearly a rite of passage for teenagers—the punishment for that should be a grounding, a loss of privileges, a stern lecture but it should never be death. Imagine her mom answering the door for officers wrongly thinking her sweet daughter is tucked away snug in her bed. Fate is unpredictable. Would she still be alive if she had stayed home, or could a stray bullet have caught her there like it did 2-year-old Nova, the 4th Lexington juvenile killed by gun violence in the two months following Trinity’s death (Eads, 2 charged in shooting that killed 2-year-old, the fourth juvenile killed in 2 months, 2016)?

People—especially outsiders—only saw what they wanted to see in the media—a child of an Olympian killed. What about all our other friends who are dying? They were so caught up with Tyson being an Olympian that they completely ignored that she died because a white father and son duo—one a felon—opened fire in a restaurant parking lot against another man. Felons are not allowed guns. Is the person who supplied the gun being prosecuted?

The more we talk about Trinity’s situation and add all the other senseless deaths, it’ll really open people’s thoughts and minds about guns. It’s not all about, “Why did he have a gun?” or, “Why was she out so late?” There’s more to the point of the story, such as a life was taken. There’s an infinite number of ways that Trinity could’ve died before that day. There are countless numbers of ways that we could’ve died on that specific day, too. There’s an even more infinite chance of us getting hurt at four in the morning and dying. The point is not where she died or even why she died. The main key is that Trinity Gay is no longer with us because of guns. Floyd Dunn isn’t with us because of guns. Caleb Hallet isn’t with us because of guns. “Shooting” isn’t just a word to us, it’s a recurring threat. It’s a web of violence and it’s not stopping. Saying “RIP” is becoming normal.

REFERENCES


Retrieved February 12, 2017.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The young co-authors would not be present at this conference without the support of numerous people and organizations. We are both grateful and amazed at how much support came from our community and strangers. Thank you; we are humbled and promise to pay it forward.

Fayette County Public Schools and Superintendent Dr. Emmanuel Caulk
Lafayette High School and Principal Mr. Bryne Jacobs
Frederick Douglas High School and Mr. Principal Lester Diaz
KEA Talk and KEA Student Program
UCEA for waiving students’ registration

The following provided generous donations through a GoFundMe account that allowed the co-authors to fund their trip to Denver:

| Group Tour Media, Ellie and Ben DeVries | Catherine Hudson |
| Olivia Yinger | Preston Gibson |
| Jerome Gault | Daquiri Ams |
| Josh Bornstein | Erin Anderson |
| Gerado Lopez | Lauren Sherrow |
| Brook Curry | Irene Yoon |
| Mary Laffey | Belinda Rubio |

15
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ms. Shermane Cowans is a current 11th grader at Fredrick Douglas High School. She is on track to graduate in May of 2019. Her current aspirations include social work, elementary education, and racial justice advocacy. She is currently exploring Kentucky state schools due to their affordability. She will be the first woman in her family to attend college.

Ms. Te’Osha Raglin is a current 11th grader at Fredrick Douglas High School. She is on track to graduate in May of 2019. She is an accomplished softball player, though this year she intends to focus on her academics. Her current aspirations include communications, and social justice. She is exploring both Kentucky schools and historical black colleges.

Ms. Shana Berryman is a current 11th grader at Fredrick Douglas High School. She is on track to graduate in May of 2019. She has expressed an interest in Spellman University since her freshman year, as she has a relative that attended. She has not yet chosen a specific field of study.
ACADEMIC DEGREES

Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky
*An Exploration of an Elementary School’s High Accountability on Statewide Testing*
- Links identified structures supporting student achievement to literature and proposes potential universal mechanisms contributing to the achievement gap which may be addressed to reduce disparate student achievement
- Identifies application of stereotype threat for overcoming organizational inertia

Master of Education, Educational Administration, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky

Bachelor of Science, Physics Education, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania

AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2017 Presidential Award for Excellence for Math and Science Teachers (PAEMST), KY Finalist
2017 Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) 212° Award
2017 Fayette County Education Association (FCEA) Excellence in Teaching Award
2016 Mensa Copper Black Award for Creativity for the *culturally engaging instruction and leadership* framework
2014 Closed the achievement gap for African American students on ACT test and documented double-digit growth for many ESL/ELL, *At-risk*, and lower SES students *WITH 135 MINUTES OF INTERVENTION.*

2013 Fayette County Education Association (FCEA) Excellence in Teaching Award
1991 U.S. Coast Guard *Special Operations & National Defense* medals—1st Gulf War

CERTIFICATIONS

Administrative Instructional
Principal Statement of Eligibility, Kentucky Rank 1, Physics, Kentucky
Administrative I, Pennsylvania Instructional I, Physics, Pennsylvania

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Publications
- “Improving Student Achievement through Culturally Engaging Schools,” (ch.13)
- “Overcoming Teacher Isolation through Strategic Leadership,” (ch.14)

Peer-Reviewed Paper Presentations
University Council of Educational Administrators, (UCEA)
- Remembering Heaven’s Track Star: The Web of Community Violence, Student Voice, and Resilience #LTT, (2017)
- A Pilot Test of *Culturally Engaging Instruction*: A Message to Educational Leaders, (2014)
Peer-Reviewed Paper Presentations, continued

Kentucky ACT Leadership Symposium
- Overcoming the resiliency requirement for students from diverse backgrounds, (2016)

KEA TALK: Conversations in Effective Teaching Conference, K-12 sessions
- Invisible backpacks: Are your students equipped for their journey? (with Melanie Trowel, 2017)
- Leading change: How to get good ideas moving forward, (2016)
- It’s easier than you think: Novice reduction in diverse schools, (2016)
- Unpacking Culturally Engaging Instruction: Repurposing tired old lesson plans, (2014)
- Culturally Engaging Instruction: The next level of cultural competence, (2014)

Mid-South Educational Reform Association, (MSERA)
- Closing the Achievement Gap with Culturally Responsive Leadership, (with Tricia Browne Ferrigno, PhD, 2012)

National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, (NCPEA)

International Symposium on Educational Reform, (ISER)
- Closing the Achievement Gap with Culturally Responsive Leadership, (2012)

Invited Contributor to Panels, Committees, and Focus Groups

2017 Council of Post-Secondary Education contributor, Conversation Playbook for improving communication with families from historically underserved populations to increase access to postsecondary education

2017 Kentucky Education Association Student Program (KEA-SP):
- “Invisible Backpacks: Are your students equipped for their journey?”
- “Clarity, Consistency, and Collaboration: Culturally Competent Classroom Management” with Melanie Trowel

2017 Classroom highlighted on Al Jazeera website: “How to close the educational achievement gap in the US: An initiative is closing the gap between African American students and their peers by recognising collectivist culture.”


2015 Mensa KY—Bluegrass Youth Organizer

2015 Culturally Responsive Initiative Core Team, Kentucky Department of Education

2015 LIFT Conference, Lexington, Kentucky Presenter to Upper Middle/ Lower High School Students
- “Secret Codes for School Success”


2012 University of Kentucky, EDC 724, Guiding and Analyzing Effective Teaching, Guest Speaker
- “Engaging a Multicultural Classroom” for Dr. Sharon Brennan
**Employment and Work Experiences**

1996 – pr. Classroom Teacher/ Teacher Leader, Fayette County Public Schools, Lexington, Kentucky
1996-00 Henry Clay High School: Collaboration (LBD/EBD) Biology, Int. Sci., Art, Chemistry

**Teacher Leadership**

2017-pr. FCPS Equity Council member (elected): Advise school board about equity issues
2017-pr. KEA Behavior Management Cadre & Trainer
2017-pr. FCEA Board Member 2016-17
2016- pr. FCPS New Teacher Internship Cadre: Support new teachers in meeting district expectations
2015-16 Aspiring School Leaders Internship: Collaborated with district schools for project support
2015-pr. PBIS Coach (Building): Increase Tier 1 behavior data through data driven decisions
2013-pr. Initiated FRANC (Framing Reform in Achievement in a New Conversation): Improved school culture and removed barriers for students from historically underperforming demographics
2013-pr. Substitute Admin. Team Member: ad hoc substitute for principals to maintain student discipline and school safety
2010 – 11 ESS (Extended School Services) Coordinator: Oversee Title I program and grant funds at building level to improve student success for historically underserved students
2000 – 10 Coach for Swimming and Diving Team: Organized practices schedules to increase team presence at state level.
2004 & 08 Varsity Cheer Sponsor: Established a culture of excellence in practice and competition.
2007 – 14 KTIP Mentor Teacher: Coached intern teachers to meet state-wide professional expectations with 100% success rate!
2006 Summer School Administrative Assistant: Maintained attendance records, trouble shoot technology for tech-based credit recovery.
2004 – 10 CHAMP’s Coach: Work with teachers to improve classroom management skills
2004 – 06 Smaller Learning Communities (SLC Grant) Team Leader: Partner with leadership team to implement grant requirements for re-visioning of school to improve student achievement

**Other Employment**

Fostered growth and development for students age 18mos-18 years, recreational through Level 8, State and Regional qualifiers.

1991 – 1995 Annex Building Coordinator & Director of Gymnastics Program, Greensburg YMCA, Greensburg, PA; Increased class enrollment from 40 to 200 students, team enrollment from 8 to 40 members, & team skill from Level 4 to Level 8; Elected Competition Chair for Western PA YMCA Gymnastics League to assure fair competition practices

Military indoctrination and leadership training; Sailed USCG Barque Eagle across Atlantic Ocean navigating by sextant; Small boat station operational duties including scraping sun baked seagull guano off the roofs of lighthouses, & boarding and checking compliance of international container ships; Political goodwill ambassador to Japan for 1 week.