

Healing Myiesha - A year after a senseless act of violence left her severely burned, a young girl struggles to return to the normal life she once knew

Detroit News, The (MI) - Saturday, June 2, 2001

Author: The Detroit News ; Sarah Webster

DETROIT -- Kids can be so cruel. That's why Orlando "Shawn" Hicks and Chuangaree Powell stood in the hallway at Macomb Elementary School on the city's east side last September.

They peered through a little rectangular window on the red door of their daughter's kindergarten classroom to see what the future might hold for their little 5-year-old daughter, **Myiesha** .

They knew one thing for certain: Since June 2, 2000, when a senseless firebomb had eaten through their daughter's face, arms and hands, life hadn't been the same.

The process of patching **Myiesha** back together, into her bubbly, pretty self, was still a work in progress. The skin on her face and arms looked unnatural -- multicolored and ragged, a landscape of bumps and scars. Her head was partially bald. Perhaps worse, her personality had become withdrawn, even mean-spirited.

Violence against children has many consequences, and it can take many forms. In Metro Detroit, some 4,000 kids became victims in 1998 and 1999. Intentional burn cases are thankfully rare, but Children's Hospital of Michigan recorded at least 23 such cases during the past two years.

Most of those cases were abuse by a parent or guardian, but some, like **Myiesha** 's, came at the hands of people with other motives, such as revenge or malice.

Myiesha had steel security bars covering her bedroom window, so whoever threw the Molotov cocktail through them had to stand very close to the window to get the bottle through.

It's doubtful that the bomber saw **Myiesha** and her 2-year-old brother, Dontez, asleep in bed during the dark of night, but it's possible.

Adults can be cruel, too.

Living on Chelsea Street

Powell had put **Myiesha** and Dontez to bed about 10 p.m. that night. Under their mother's direction, they had brushed their teeth and slipped on their pajamas. It was hot outside, so Powell put a fan in the summer-steamed room.

Her husband had gone out with friends, and Powell eventually fell asleep on the couch while watching TV.

The family has lived on Chelsea Street, off Conner Avenue near City Airport, for years. **Myiesha** 's maternal grandmother and extended family members live in the house right next door.

Chelsea is sandwiched between one nice street to the north, with well-kept lawns and neighborhood watch signs, and a troubled street to the south, spotted with boarded-up and burned-out houses. Vacant lots are littered with weeds and stripped cars.

More and more, Chelsea has come to resemble the street to the south. One house even has the word "THUGS" printed in large letters across the front in silver paint.

At first, the neighborhood's decline bothered Hicks, who retrofits security doors and windows for a living. But he outfitted his whole house in steel protection and decided to cope as best as he could. The neighborhood wasn't all bad.

"You try your best to get along with everybody," he says. "I thought that was what I was doing."

Then, about 1:45 a.m. on June 2, someone made their way through the overgrown field next to his home and firebombed his children.

A nightmare begins

At first, the crash that woke Powell from her sleep sounded like lightning.

The bomb had smashed on the wall above the bed where **Myiesha** and Dontez were sleeping, showering them with fire. The flames from a Molotov cocktail usually burn out quickly, but the smoke can be thick and deadly.

Powell instinctively ran outside as smoke filled her home. Then, she realized what had happened and screamed at her mother's house for help.

A nephew and his friend tried to save the children, but couldn't get inside the smoke-filled house. They listened to the children scream -- "Mama! Mama!" -- until Powell could no longer bear the sound and ran inside to save them.

"It was just something I had to do," she remembers.

She brought Dontez out first, and then **Myiesha**. Neighbors, who clamored out of their homes to help, poured water over **Myiesha**'s body.

Dontez suffered some minor burns to his forehead and hand, but **Myiesha**'s Rugrats pajamas had melted into her skin. Some skin hung right off her body.

A barrier destroyed

The skin is a life-critical barrier. It keeps out bacteria and seals in water.

Without it, the body leaks water and protein in a yellowish fluid. The patient becomes vulnerable to infection. And a body without even a small percentage of its skin has trouble retaining heat, so the body temperature can drop dangerously low.

Because of the physical stress, other chain reactions also are triggered. The body goes into shock. Organs swell like balloons. Breathing becomes strained.

Doctors and nurses, suited in scrubs, goggles and gloves, had been alerted about **Myiesha** 's injury and were waiting when she arrived by ambulance at Children's Hospital.

A team of nurses went to work, cleaning off the burned skin as quickly as possible with forceps.

Myiesha had third-degree burns, which kill the skin's deepest layers, over 20 percent of her body.

To prevent infection and prevent water loss, nurses wrapped **Myiesha** in gauze infused with an antibiotic cream.

In the first weeks of recovery, **Myiesha** looked like a mummy. Only her eyes, red raw lips and fingertips were exposed. The enshrouded **Myiesha** communicated mostly by tousling the sheets with her unscathed legs or wiggling a charred fingertip.

Colorful balloons and get-well messages from **Myiesha** 's preschool class quickly filled her room.

"I can read her lips, but it's really soft," Chuangaree said, gently rubbing the healthy skin on **Myiesha** 's legs.

'They know who did it'

People in **Myiesha** 's neighborhood say they know who bombed the house they accuse several drug dealers. But Hicks says he never had any hope that the fire department, which investigates arsons, would arrest them.

Detroit arson investigators suspect a neighborhood dispute, perhaps with a family member or friend of the extended Powell family, who live next door to the Hicks, resulted in the firebombing, says Detroit Fire Lt. Donald Catlin.

"People think they know who did it, but nobody saw," he says.

Unless there is new evidence, the case will remain open.

"At least, she's alive," Hicks tells himself.

Even a hug hurts

Alive, but in pain.

"Burns are probably the most painful injury you can sustain," says Dr. Marc Cullen, director of the burn center at Children's.

Even air hurts exposed, raw nerves.

Myiesha screamed when the nurses removed her gauze, washed her wounds and rewrapped her body every day. She wailed even more when she reached out to her parents for the comfort of a hug and couldn't get it -- because there was simply nowhere for them to safely embrace her tiny body.

Her loud, insistent and sometimes exhausted cries routinely echoed through the fifth floor of the hospital, where a team of specialized doctors and nurses worked arduously to patch **Myiesha** back together.

Only narcotics, general anesthesia and the occasional distractions of her father calmed her.

"My-eee-sha, My-eee-sha," Hicks quietly sang to her, in a lullabylike cadence.

Her eyes peered back, with love and pain, through a mask of gauze.

The **healing** starts, slowly

The skin has reparative properties that allow it to regrow when burned. But in deep third-degree burns, those elements have been scorched away.

"Those patients need to have their skin replaced," Cullen explains.

That means doctors must do a skin graft -- in which healthy skin is sewn over the burned-out wound. Grafts are most difficult to perform on the hand and face, as was necessary in **Myiesha**'s case.

Cullen decided to transplant skin from **Myiesha**'s back onto her face. It was a good site, because the skin there is thick.

Grafting is done by removing the top layers of skin on the donor site and moving them to the burn site. It works because the reparative elements on the top layers will grow down into the wound site, and the thin layer of skin left on the back repairs itself.

However, the skin on **Myiesha**'s back is much darker than her face used to be, and Cullen made a detailed plan of how he would stitch her face, making as-neat-as-possible patches around the eyes, mouth and ears.

The whole process took at least three surgeries, beginning on June 6. Each lasted about four hours. What came next -- the **healing** -- is unpredictable, especially in children.

"They are still growing," says Cullen. "Scar management is difficult."

Nursing wounds at home

Today, cash-strapped hospitals aim to keep a burn patient hospitalized only a day for each percentage of body burned. That gave **Myiesha** about 20 days of in-hospital care and meant her parents would have to learn quickly how to take care of her at home.

Each day, while nurses peeled away the gauze, bathed **Myiesha** and wrapped her in new dressings, her parents watched intently. The home care could be gory.

For **Myiesha**, the whole process hurt. When the dressings came off, dead skin was tugged away from her raw wounds. Even the mildest water continued to sting. She regularly cried and screamed.

Slowly, there was less gauze, less pain. **Myiesha** began to feel more comfortable in her new skin, and her skin actually looked more comfortable on her. Heavy moisturizers made it pliable and less taut.

She studied herself in the mirror, smiling and slipping on gold hoop earrings and a blue bucket hat. Her lips were able to receive kisses again, and strong-willed **Myiesha** demanded them.

Soon, she was outfitted in pressure garments, which were used over the grafts to make sure the new skin took and to help manage the scars and keep the grafts smooth and in place. She received cloth wraps for her arms and a plastic mold for her face.

On June 22, **Myiesha** ran out of the hospital -- back to Chelsea Street, where the family would live with grandma until their smoke-damaged home could be repaired.

Hicks did the work himself. He repainted the smoky black interior. He cut the thick overgrown weeds in the lot next door. He also added chicken wire outside the security bars that cover the windows.

When they eventually moved back in, the parents also swapped bedrooms with the children, so **Myiesha** wouldn't have to sleep in her old bedroom again.

Back to the hospital

Myiesha's scars started to get worse soon after she returned to her neighborhood.

On July 5, **Myiesha** was readmitted to the hospital after her wounds stopped **healing**.

Parents often have a hard time keeping up the 24-hour nursing care that is necessary, Dr. Cullen said. Three weeks later, **Myiesha** went home again.

After a summer of regular hospital visits and surgeries, **Myiesha** noticed her brother had gone to preschool while she remained at home. She wanted to go.

Her parents didn't think **Myiesha** was ready. They worried about how other kids would react to her, and how she would react to them. Hicks and Powell worried that their daughter has become more aggressive since the fire.

"It's made her meaner," Hicks said.

But **Myiesha** went to school, in a hat to cover her bald spot. Later, her mom gave her extensions and put them up in a ponytail to conceal the bald spot on her head.

"My mom told me that if any kids made fun of me to tell her and she would talk to my teacher," **Myiesha** says.

She has never needed to do that, though.

"They're my friends," **Myiesha** explains.

It's difficult to tell if the kindergarten kids treat her differently during their brief half-day program. While **Myiesha** laughs, dances and jokes around at home, she can be quiet and studious at school.

On a recent school day, she sat quietly at her desk drawing a picture of a nurse, which is what she wants to be when she grows up.

The consequences of the fire may get worse as time passes.

While most kids have a summer of fun planned, **Myiesha** will endure months of follow-up surgeries. Doctors will put balloons in her neck to stretch out her skin and slowly pull it up her face. Called autografting, the procedure aims to leave her face looking more natural. The surgeons will also try to fix her bald spot and some of her many scars.

"She told me that they are going to put her face back the way it was," says Beverly Armstrong, **Myiesha**'s teacher.

Whether that happens will depend on how **Myiesha** and her family care for the skin and how her growing body adapts.

Emotional wounds may worsen as **Myiesha** grows up and realizes what has been taken from her, in childhood experiences and appearance. She may grow angry or bitter as she seeks an explanation about why the bombing happened or why there has been no justice.

For now, everyone around **Myiesha** is working to minimize the potential damage.

Before **Myiesha** 's surgeries begin, the family will take a trip to Cedar Point. Then, eventually, **Myiesha** and her family will move away from Chelsea Street.

Someplace, Hicks hopes, where **Myiesha** can simply be an innocent kid again.

BURNED

In November, **Myiesha** 's hair is long enough to accept braided extensions. Powell finally gives in to **Myiesha** 's desire to "look like the other little girls in her class" and spends more than four hours giving her a new hairdo.

The firebomb came through this open window a year ago today. **Myiesha** no longer sleeps in the room beyond. When asked why, she almost whispers, her eyes cast down, "I was burned."

How to help

To make a donation to the Children's Hospital of Michigan Burn Unit, send a check to Children's Hospital of Michigan Burn Unit, 3901 Beaubien, Detroit, MI 48201. Or call (313) 745-5373 for more information. The hospital web site is www.chmkids.org/chm/

Register for conference

The University of Michigan Health System's Trauma Burn Center will co-host the 2001 World Burn Congress, an international conference that brings together those whose lives have been affected by the devastating consequences of burn injuries. To register, call the Phoenix Society at (800) 888-2876.

More information

More information about preventing and treating burns can also be found online at:

The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors Inc., www.phoenix-society.org

U-M's outreach fire prevention program, www.med.umich.edu/opm/newspage/tbopp.htm

Fire safety tips, www.med.umich.edu/1libr/child/child33.htm

Caption: In September, **Myiesha** returns to Children's Hospital for an outpatient procedure. Hicks carries his anesthetized daughter into the operating room for a steroidal injection procedure that will reduce the scarring on her face. **Myiesha** strides through the hospital's lobby with her dad running interference on the day the doctors let her go home. In her determination to get out as quickly as possible, she leaves her mom behind signing her release papers. The atmosphere is glum when father and daughter find themselves back in the same burn unit room they checked out of just two weeks earlier, after the wounds aren't **healing** as they should.

Myiesha 's mother Chuangaree Powell and nurse Meagan Loken carefully lift her from the hydrotherapy tub. Her newly grafted skin is sensitive to the change from warm water to cool air.

Myiesha hasn't slept in the fire bombed room since the incident. Her bed, which she bounces on with her brother Dontez before school, is in the room next door. Every morning, Powell gets **Myiesha** into a clean elastic body suit that provides the pressure the outer skin layer normally exerts. She wears it day and night. Nine months ago, **Myiesha** 's classmates at Alexander Macomb Elementary gave her a wide berth. Now, one of her best friends is Jasmine Smith, left, who shares her kindergarten class table. The moments after leaving the hydrotherapy tub are some of the most painful. **Myiesha** clutches her mother's fingers and screams until she is hoarse.

Myiesha spent 20 days in Detroit Medical Center's Children's Hospital of Detroit undergoing three skin graft surgeries on her face, arms and hands. The face of **Myiesha** Hicks, 5, is a roadmap of misery following three skin graft surgeries to repair her firebombed face and hands.

Each day at Children's Hospital's burn center begins with a spell in a tub of warm water to soften her charred skin and ease movement. The staples holding her new skin in place are an innovation on traditional sutures. The face of **Myiesha** Hicks, 5, is a roadmap of misery following three skin graft surgeries to repair her firebombed face and hands. Each day at Children's Hospital's burn center begins with a spell in a tub of warm water to soften her charred skin and ease movement.

The staples holding her new skin in place are an innovation on traditional sutures. "Give me some sugar?" asks Orlando Hicks, but **Myiesha** isn't in the mood for kisses after enduring her daily body wraps, which Hicks had to learn how to apply himself before he took **Myiesha** home from the hospital.

Edition: No Dot

Section: Features

Page: 01D

Index Terms: BOMBINGS ; FIRES ; CHILDREN ; MEDICAL CARE

Record Number: det9812380

Copyright (c) The Detroit News. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.