

SURVIVORS OF DEADLY DAY TRY TO LIVE AGAIN - 2 MEN SHOT AT WESTLAND STORE COPING DIFFERENTLY

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Fuad Abuali arrived in his new country a year ago and began carving out a life.

The Jordan native started culinary classes at Schoolcraft College, the first step in his dream to cater lavish parties and banquets.

He looked forward to weekly outings with his cousins to catch the latest comedies or buddy action movies starring Jennifer Lopez and Eddie Murphy.

But that doesn't happen anymore.

Life changed for the young man when he walked into a Westland party store in September to buy a pack of Marlboros and all hell broke loose. Caught in the middle of a botched robbery, Abuali took a bullet to his neck.

Now Abuali makes sure to get home before dusk. He won't go out after dark. He can only fall asleep at night with a light on.

And still the nightmares won't go away.

"My mind is not the same," said Abuali, 29. "It's like east to west, a 180-degree change. I don't like to go out. I feel afraid to go out."

Outwardly, Abuali and Conrad Hasper, the only survivors of the massacre that left four others dead, are healing. So are the owners of Neil's Party Store. They have reopened the store and are working 12-hour days to attract customers who are still too afraid to shop there.

Inwardly, each is coping with the shootings in his own way. But they share the flashbacks, uncertainties and moments of what if.

"I'm afraid for the future," Abuali said. "I don't know what will happen."

FUAD ABUALI: A loss of security

Would-be robber turned triggerman Michael Schofield is to blame for Abuali's lost sense of security. After the shootings, Schofield and his companion, **Leslie Gordon**, fled empty-handed, police said. They led police on a high-speed chase along I-275, I-696 and the Southfield Freeway.

Schofield's white Corvette crashed at an exit and the couple ran. The police had them surrounded when they said Schofield shot himself in the head with a 9mm gun.

Gordon, 24, was arrested and faces trial in February on charges of first-degree and felony murder and assault with intent to murder.

The cold-blooded killings were captured on tape by a store security camera. But Abuali does not need to see it. He replays the events every night in his mind:

Gordon unlocks the front door and greets him as he walks into the store. Another customer, James Kuebler, walks in behind.

He hears the first gun blast.

The bullet knocks Kuebler to the floor.

Then the second shot.

Abuali leans forward to grab the counter. He falls.

Gordon stares at him blankly. She hums as she walks back and forth among the bodies.

Mostly, though, Abuali remembers the lake of blood. His own and Kuebler's.

"I can't explain these things for anyone," he said. "When you feel not safe. When you go to buy something and then . . ."

He snapped his fingers hard. "Like that you are dead."

Except for the occasional headaches and numbness on the left side of his body, he has recovered physically from the shootings.

Abuali has found comfort at home in Westland where he lives with his parents and younger brother. He had been living in Jordan, separated from his family, for eight years because he was unable to obtain a visa until last year.

The thought that he could have died alone on the cold floor of the party store after being away from his parents for so long brings tears to his eyes. He described a "screaming fear" that pushed him to get up off the floor, stagger to his car and drive the 3 blocks to his parents' house.

"I think, 'Let me see my parents,' " he said. "I was away from them for eight years. Then I come here one year and I die alone? No."

These days, he wrestles with mounting medical bills from his three days in the hospital after the shooting. He has no health insurance and owes more than \$15,000.

His only hope is that his application to the Michigan Crime Victim Compensation Fund is accepted. The fund offers financial help to victims who have suffered personal injury or a loss of earnings because of a crime.

"This thing is very bad for me," he said. "I need lots of time to get back to normal. Now, I get bills and bills and bills I can't pay."

He returned to work as head cook at a public school two weeks after the shooting. He said he pestered his doctor to go back to work early because he couldn't stand the solitary hours at home.

CONRAD HASPER: 'He wants to move on'

Conrad Hasper wants none of that.

He doesn't want to talk about the shooting. He doesn't even want to think about it.

In recent weeks, the store clerk has shut himself off from most of the people he knows, including his friends at the party store where he worked for about three years. He moved to the Ypsilanti area and hasn't forwarded them his new address or phone number.

His circle is small -- his roommate, his sister, her husband and their three young children.

"He hasn't really talked to many people," said his sister, Crystal Lefler, 23, of Westland. "He wants to move on and get over what happened."

Through his sister, Hasper declined a request for an interview.

Lefler said her brother has always been an introvert, but the shooting has made him retreat more.

Physically, his recovery is remarkable, Lefler said.

Hasper, 24, was the first of the six men shot. The bullet shattered his cheekbones, upper jaw and nose. And, though he has no feeling in his upper lip and jaw, he is starting to get his sense of smell back and is eating soft food.

Two weeks ago, doctors removed the wires that clamped his jaw shut. They are waiting for the swelling to go down and his skin and bones to heal before they do reconstructive surgery.

"He looks great for what he went through," Lefler said. "He could have died."

Hasper also has a mountain of medical bills. Lefler said he owes about \$40,000 for his five-day hospital stay, and he has no health insurance.

He hopes he can receive victim's compensation, but for now, he's living off donations from fundraisers, his sister said.

He is not going back to Neil's Party Store, his sister said. He wants to work for a retail chain, like Meijer or Wal-Mart, where he hopes there is less likelihood of a holdup.

AMY AND NICK BAKKO: 'You can't forget it'

At Neil's, the boards with hand-written notes from well-wishers and the bulletproof barrier sealing off the cashier are the visible traces of that deadly September night. On the sidewalk out front, the city planted four saplings to remember each victim.

The store's owners, Amy and Nick Bakko, installed more lights outside and inside, hoping the clientele they built over the past 10 years will return.

The couple, like Abuali and Hasper, are grateful to longtime customers who have stayed and the local community for its generosity and support.

But the good intentions don't heal their pain. The night of the killings, the Bakkos left the store about an hour before Schofield and Gordon walked in. Nick Bakko was supposed to have been behind the counter, but he switched shifts with his cousin who worked at the store, Feras Shaina, 29.

Shaina was shot right after Hasper. He was on his knees, begging for his life, when Schofield shot him in the head, police said.

"You will not forget it," Amy Bakko said. "We're here 12 hours a day. You can't forget it."

But the couple never thought about leaving the business where they have toiled and invested their savings.

"We couldn't close down," Amy Bakko said. "This is our bread and butter. Where else are we going to go?"

The Bakkos hope Hasper comes back, too. His job is there if he wants it, they said.

Hasper dropped by the store when the couple reopened it two weeks after the shooting. He talked and joked with customers as he had in the past.

But it wasn't the same.

As for Abuali, he still stops by the store for his Malboros, but only during the day. He's hoping to go back to school next year, if he can get his finances in order.

He never talks about the shooting with his parents, Asad and Fatima Abuali. He doesn't want them to relive their anguish. Abuali said he had never seen his father cry until that night.

"I would like to help them forget about what happened," he said. "But how can I? First, I need something for me to forget what happened."

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Caption: Photo AMY LEANG/Detroit Free Press

Fuad Abuali, 29, is recovering physically, but he's haunted by memories of the bloodshed.

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