

TEENAGE LIFER SAYS HE HAD TO ASK HOW TO SHOOT

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Damion Todd, 17, said he had to ask a friend how to use the shotgun that he fired out of a car window toward a group of teenagers leaving a back-to-school party in northwest Detroit.

"The guys in the car were like, 'Let's scare them like they scared us,' " **Todd** said during an interview in the Wayne County Jail, where he awaits a mandatory life sentence for first-degree murder scheduled to be handed down Tuesday. If he could go back to that night in August, he said, "I believe that I just would have went home."

Todd said he and some friends had left the party in the 17500 block of Sunderland when some other youths fired at them. His grandmother, who raised him, taught him to walk away from a fight, he said, but his friends wanted to retaliate.

As the car, with **Todd** and three other youths, neared the house just after midnight Aug. 16, **Todd** said, he pulled the trigger three or four times, believing the gun fired single bullets. Melody Rucker, 16, a student and athlete at Benedictine High School, was struck by at least 100 shotgun pellets and killed. Vinita Smith, 16, was wounded in the arm.

Todd did not know Melody, but has heard that she was a giving person who brought laughter and happiness to others.

"Even if she had been a bad person, I would still have felt bad because it was an accident," he said.

A YOUTH who was with him told him someone had been shot, but he was unaware that he had killed someone until two days later when he was arrested, he said. "I asked God to forgive me and that's really who I have to prove myself to. I tried to prove myself to the judge and my jury by telling them I had not intentions of shooting or harming anyone."

In a voice not yet possessing the resonance of a grown man, **Todd** described himself as "an easy person to get along with." He said, "I can say I'm still the same person, but, you know, I learned from my mistakes."

Todd said he won't let himself think about spending the rest of his life behind bars, and his family shuns that vision. "You know, I don't really want to get any negative thoughts like that on my mind," he said. "I'll just take it day by day. . . . I'm not going to give up."

He and the car's driver, Vernard Carter, also 17, were convicted Dec. 16 of first-degree murder. Derrick McClure, 17, who told police the gun belonged to his brother, was convicted of second-degree murder. The fourth teenager in the car, Dewayne Smiley, testified for the prosecution and was not charged.

Todd grew up in his grandmother's home on Murray Hill near Outer Drive, just blocks from where the slaying occurred. He lived mostly with his grandmother, a religious woman who said her grandson is a good child who always obeyed and respected her. Hers was a home with strict prohibitions against drinking, profanity and discord.

His mother, Pamela **Todd** , 35, a singer, songwriter and producer, traveled a lot during her only child's first 10 years. She and her son's father, a lawyer, never married. But she said her son was close to his late grandfather and his stepfather, her husband.

HE HAD no prior criminal record and was a member of the young adult choir at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, his grandmother's church.

The Henry Ford High School senior had average grades and was a member of the Police Athletic League. His trophies and school certificates are displayed with pride in his grandmother's home. He had skipped school, "but not on a regular basis," he said.

Todd and his family plan to appeal the conviction, and pray that he will get another chance.

"The only difference between Melody Rucker and **Damion Todd** right now is that they can never see her again and we can never be with him again," said Thea **Todd** , 29, **Damion Todd** 's aunt. "That's the only difference because both families have lost somebody that they dearly, dearly loved."

After the convictions, John Rucker, Melody's father, said the verdict was warranted. "From what's going on now with young people . . . the only thing I can see that's going to change them is stiffer penalties," he said.

Todd says he understands how the Rucker family feels.

"I include them in my prayers every night," **Todd** said. "That's one of the things that I would really like to get out of this. I pray every night and I ask the Lord for them to forgive me and my friends for what has happened."

Jail had brought him closer to God, he said.

"I pray a lot more. I read my Bible a lot more," he said. "I feel that just because I'm locked up, I'm still kind of free; my soul, my spirit is free."

CUTLINE:

Friends mourn 16-year-old Melody Rucker, who died after **Damion Todd** fired a shotgun at the crowd outside a home where a back- to-school party was breaking up.

Damion Todd

Young mourners carry Melody Rucker's coffin for her services in late August.

Caption: Photo PAULINE LUBENS

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