

COPS HOLD SUSPECTS IN TEEN'S SLAYING

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Cherrel Thomas had her hair done Monday -- short-cropped with braids in the back. Later Monday, she posed for snapshots with family and friends, showing off her new style.

On Wednesday, her family took the film in for one-hour developing. They needed a picture for her obituary.

At just 15, her family's shining star, **Cherrel** was shot and killed Tuesday night in a possible dispute over stolen clothing, police said Wednesday.

She is at least the fourth Detroit girl killed with a gun since Feb. 25.

Two Detroit men, 17 and 21, were in custody late Wednesday, police said. Two weapons, including an AK47 semiautomatic assault weapon, were recovered. The 17-year-old is the suspected gunman.

"I'm tired of hearing about these girls dying, and when it actually hits home, it's just devastating," said **Cherrel's** great-aunt, Jacqueline Anderson, who lived above **Cherrel** in a two-apartment home on Detroit's west side.

Police said **Cherrel** was with two other women in a car near Cloverlawn and Stawell at 9:30 p.m. when someone fired shots into the car, hitting **Cherrel** in the backseat. Anderson said **Cherrel** was out with an older cousin and friend.

The two women in the Chrysler Concorde with **Cherrel** were looking for another woman they believed stole clothing from one of them, Inspector William Rice of the homicide section said in a statement.

"It's awful, isn't it?" Clementine Chism, the head of the anti-violence group Save Our Sons And Daughters (SOSAD), said Wednesday.

SOSAD was created in January 1987 after a horrific year in which one of Chism's sons -- 16-year-old Derick Barfield -- was among 43 children killed by gunfire.

Newspapers decried the "slaughter of the innocents" in the mid-1980s. In 1985, 11 teenagers were shot -- none fatally -- in a restaurant near Cody High School. In 1986, Detroit police records showed that on average one child under 17 was shot every day. In 1992, the Free Press profiled 12 children shot to death between October 1990 and March 1992.

Then, as now, easy access to guns and illegal drugs were blamed.

"The combination of weapons and illegal drugs is lethal," said Jeriel Heard, director of the Wayne County Department of Community Justice.

Detroit Police Chief Jerry Oliver said, "The only thing we can do is do our damndest to catch the bad guys and prosecute them."

The March 23 drive-by fatal shooting of 3-year-old Destinee **Thomas** (no relation to **Cherrel Thomas**) apparently resulted from a dispute between rival Detroit drug gangs. After the shooting, authorities, including Wayne County Prosecutor Mike Duggan, announced Project Destinee to develop information on every member of the two gangs and prosecute them.

Duggan said Wednesday that Project Destinee is working well but arrests won't be made for weeks. He also pointed to Project Safe Neighborhoods as a successful effort to prosecute perpetrators of gun violence.

Launched in March, Project Safe Neighborhoods has identified 51 criminal defendants facing gun charges for possible federal prosecution. The federal system has tougher sentences for felons who use guns.

"When we take down those two organizations, we'll be in a credible situation where we can say to other organizations: 'disarm or you're next,' " Duggan said.

At MacKenzie High School, where **Cherrel Thomas** was a freshman and played trombone and baritone tuba in the school marching band and jazz ensemble, many hearts were saddened.

"She brought spirit . . . and made our kids enthusiastic about band," MacKenzie band teacher Michael Carrauthers said Wednesday. Carrauthers said **Cherrel** was to play with the school jazz ensemble at a district-wide honors program next week, and in the school's music concert May 23.

Math teacher Vivian Cone said, "You could see the joy of life in her eyes." Cone said the school's two social workers notified **Cherrel's** teachers early Wednesday and helped faculty and many of the school's 1,700 students handle their grief.

Known as the comedian of the family, **Cherrel** lived with two brothers and two sisters. She was raised by their grandmother, Sharlene **Thomas**.

"She had high hopes and big dreams," Anderson said. "Her mother wasn't in the picture, but **Cherrel** was well-loved."

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FOR HELP

* Save Our Sons and Daughters provides individual grief counseling and support group counseling for children and adults. 2441 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday for appointments. Support groups meet 6-8 p.m. Monday and Thursday. Other support groups available. For information, call 313-361-5200 or 877-361-5282 anytime. Crisis response services are available for institutions. All services are free.

* "The Bereaved Parent" by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff, Penguin Books 1978 (recommended by the University of Michigan Health Education Resource Center).

Caption: Photo J. KYLE KEENER/Detroit Free Press

Cherrel Thomas, 15, posed for this photo Monday with a friend's baby.

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