

FAMILY COPE WITH LOSS OF SON WHO HAD WALKED ALONG THE STRAIGHT PATH

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, December 22, 1991

Author: JANET WILSON Free Press Staff Writer

Damiso was the joy of his parents' later years.

The last of Nathaniel Riley and Geneva Rambert Riley's eight children, and the only one still at home, he was an affectionate, chubby 17-year-old who never grew too old to hug and kiss his parents.

Nathaniel Riley named his son Damiso because in Swahili it means "one who is praised."

When Damiso was 2, the elder Riley eagerly retired at age 55 after 18 years on a Ford assembly line. "I retired for him, I wanted to be with him.

"He was a wonderful boy. He was our little man."

It didn't matter how much Damiso's parents loved and coddled their son. It didn't matter that he was one A away from the honor roll, that his mother had just bought him a new pair of jeans, that he was a Junior Mason, that he drove his mother everywhere because she never learned to drive, that he could fix the clock on the VCR.

Damiso Rambert Riley was a teenager in Detroit.

He died Nov. 9 of 10 gunshot wounds, fired directly into the car he and his friends fled to when shooting broke out at a birthday party. Three kinds of bullets ripped through his smooth skin, through the little bit of baby fat left on his growing bones.

His friend Billy Smith Webb, who lived on the same tree-lined street in west side Detroit, was also killed, shot 17 times.

They were not drug dealers, they had no guns and they lived with their parents in comfortable homes with neatly raked lawns. Both deaths were mistakes, witnesses said. The **killers** thought they were someone else.

Hurry home

On Thursday, Nov. 7, Damiso (pronounced duh-MISS-oh) kissed his parents good-bye as they left for a weekend in Atlantic City. He would stay with his oldest brother nearby while they were gone, and his daddy had told him he could use the old gray Pontiac either Friday or Saturday night.

Damiso chose Friday. He had been invited to a "Sweet 16" birthday party for Tamika Leath, a Cooley High classmate he had tutored in accounting. She had earned an A and invited him to her party in gratitude.

Early Saturday morning, Geneva Riley called to check on her family. Her daughter-in-law said everything was fine. She didn't reveal that Damiso had never come home, and that she and Damiso's sister were frantically calling hospital emergency rooms across the city.

Geneva called again that afternoon with good news for Damiso: Her husband had decided Damiso could use the car Saturday night, too, if he wanted.

This time, Damiso's older brother took the call. "Mama," he said. "You need to hurry up and come on home. Damiso's dead."

Geneva and Nathaniel left Atlantic City at 5 p.m. in the backseat of a friend's car and arrived home at 3 a.m. For five hours, they sat in their living room, waiting. At 8 a.m., they drove to the morgue.

50 teens killed

Another year is closing on the city's grim crime statistics. Nearly 300 **black** teenagers have been gunned down, and at least 50 have died, Detroit police records show. The families struggle to find reasons to celebrate a new year, to go on with life.

"I can't sleep," says Nathaniel Riley. "I don't sleep the whole night. I never could go to sleep until I heard that old car coming in the driveway."

Families like the Rileys tend to be overlooked. They worked hard for their single-family homes, raised their children carefully, displayed their kids' trophies in the living room, strung up lights on the tree out front each December.

"People need to know it's not all bad kids that die," says Damiso's father.

The Rileys have spent six grueling, sleepless weeks since they put their child into frozen ground at 6 Mile and Lahser. They are leaving Detroit on Christmas Eve to spend a week in California with their middle son.

"I don't want to be in this house on Christmas," says Nathaniel Riley of the home he once loved. "When I'm here alone, it all comes down on me."

Damiso's parents say they never thought once in 18 years about leaving their pretty wood-paneled house, and they still won't move, as painful as it has become.

"I was born and raised in Detroit. I raised eight children here. This is the first house she picked out," Nathaniel Riley says, gesturing with his chin toward his wife. "She knew she wanted it as soon as she saw it."

"No, we didn't ever want to leave," Geneva Rambert Riley says quietly. "This is a safe block. I don't know about three blocks away, but this is safe. The block where Damiso was killed is a nice block, too. It looks like a nice block, anyway. I still really don't know what happened. The only things I find out is when I go to court."

What happened?

The parents of Damiso and Billy never can know exactly what happened. No one agrees.

This is what they've learned from statements in court and brief newspaper accounts: A fight started between the birthday girl's brother and another teen who brought a gun. Shots were fired in the dimly lit basement. Damiso and Billy fled to the parking lot and dove through the windows of Billy's parents' car. Three young men followed, fired endless bullets at them, cursed at them and shot again and again when they realized they weren't dead yet.

A day in court

The families stand marooned in the hallway of a courthouse in downtown Detroit, just a week after the murders, surrounded by loud teenagers in bright parkas snapping gum and fiddling with their hair. These people were at the party where Damiso and Billy were killed.

No one talks to the families. The Rileys try to talk to the Webbs, but Billy's parents are wrapped tight in their grief and find it difficult to speak to anyone.

A judge is to decide whether there is enough evidence to try 15-year-old Cota (Peanut) McKinnon on two counts of murder, assault with intent to murder and possession of a weapon. The other two young men wanted for murdering Damiso and Billy were arrested Dec. 10 in Warren, Ohio. Extradition proceedings will delay their trials for months.

The courtroom doors finally open. McKinnon is led in.

Tall for his years, the baby-faced teenager comes in uncertainly, darts a glance at the benches for his mother and sits in the defendant's chair, his back to the spectators.

The prosecutor slowly reads the autopsy reports to the court stenographer. It is the first time Damiso's parents have heard them.

"Damiso Rambert Riley, a 17-year-old **black** male . . . died of multiple gunshot wounds, three to the left side of the back, one to the left buttock . . ."

Geneva Rambert Riley's body flinches involuntarily, appearing to take each bullet herself. The litany goes on in a flat drone.

". . . Three to the back of the left thigh, one to the right buttock, one to the right thigh, one to the scrotum . . ."

Nathaniel Riley adjusts his hearing aid so he can hear every word, then gently removes his glasses and weeps silently, the tears rolling down.

". . . involving the vital organs -- lungs, liver, gall bladder, bowels and blood vessels, common iliac artery and lumbar spine -- causing massive internal bleeding."

Done with Damiso, the prosecutor begins the catalog of Billy Smith Webb's death. It is equally terrible.

McKinnon listens intently, and his entire body slumps. His head sinks so low that all that appears is an empty pair of shoulders.

The day after the shooting, McKinnon's cousin told police that McKinnon said he shot at the car. This day, McKinnon's cousin grins smugly at the prosecutor and recants all his testimony to police.

Chief District Judge Alex Allen decides McKinnon should be tried. The date will be set at yet another hearing, which means a four-hour wait for a 10-minute decision.

No holiday joy

"The Friday after Thanksgiving, Bill would always bring the tree in, and then we put the lights up. It was a tradition in our family, every year."

William Webb, who works with the city's forestry department, is reminiscing about his only child.

"This year, my sister sent my nephew up with the lights, but, you know, none of them worked. Twenty strings of flasher lights, not a single one worked.

"Last year, I fell off the ladder while we were putting up the lights, and Billy came running around. 'Dad, are you all right? Are you all right?' "

Billy had asked his parents this fall if he could move south to live with his grandparents and finish high school. He wanted to go to college. "He said too many of his friends here were getting killed," William Webb says.

The parents were reluctant to part with their only child. But, like parents in any danger zone, they decided Billy would be safer somewhere else.

"We decided he would move down there this coming August." William Webb stops, his eyes wet.

"That's what my mind keeps coming back to. I was able to raise him right, to keep him out of trouble. And then this happens. I know I've got to keep going, but I don't know how."

'It helps me to cry'

Nathaniel Riley has asked William Webb to join him at support group meetings where he has found solace. Webb says he's not ready to join the group of people who have lost their children to violent criminals.

Says Riley, "It helps me to cry for other people's children as well as my own."

Damiso's mother has returned to work as a secretary at the Wayne County Youth Home, where her son's accused murderer will spend his Christmas. Sitting on her living-room sofa, she speaks flatly about life before and after Damiso.

"I just want to be out all the time. I can't stand coming home anymore. It's so quiet.

"The phone never rings. Damiso loved that phone. As soon as he came in the front door, the phone would start ringing off the hook. He would go lie in his room with a big bowl of soup and the phone in his ear. We don't cook anymore. We don't feel like eating. When Damiso was here, I used to cook two chickens, a whole one just for him.

"I have seven children now. I used to have eight. I have two boys now. I used to have three."

Caption: Photo Color WILLIAM DEKAY

: Nathaniel and Geneva Riley, with their daughter Damisa, are recovering from the shock of the death of their 17-year-old son, Damiso, who was killed by mistake at a Sweet 16 party. Damiso Riley was one A short of the honor roll, and he drove his mother everywhere because she never learned to drive.

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: WWL

Page: 1H

Index Terms: HOMICIDE ; JUVENILE ; DETROIT ; SHOOTING ; DAMISO RILEY ; STATISTIC ; FAMILY ; REACTION ; EFFECT

Record Number: 9102170372

Copyright (c) 1991 Detroit Free Press