

**THIS YEAR, 26 KIDS WERE KILLED IN DETROIT. - THIS IS ONE VICTIM'S STORY. HER NAME WAS AJANEE POLLARD. SHE WAS 7 YEARS OLD. ONE LIFE TAKENMANY ARE TORN**

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Bullets came from all angles, shattering the back windshield and ripping through the trunk of the white Buick Regal. The mother and her children cowered together, screaming and trying to get their heads low.

When the attack finally ended, Liz Niebrzydowski gathered herself and, with the help of a brother and neighbor, carried her bleeding babies up the short walkway into her northwest Detroit house.

Inside, she frantically checked each child's wounds. Blood covered the front porch and living room. The kids cried from fear and pain, confused about the bullets that had pierced their bodies. Liz continued to scream.

She would later swear she saw Ajanee standing in the living room, reassuring her mom she was OK.

But Liz knows that couldn't have happened.

Ajanee was still in the car, blood flowing from a single wound to her head.

"My baby died alone in that car," Liz recalled.

Ajanee knew her killer.

His name is Willie Robinson. She called him Uncle Will.

Robinson, then 24, was a friend of the family, at least at **one** time. And for at least **one** summer, he was intimately involved with Ajanee's mother.

To win her affection, he doted on the girls. He'd chase them playfully in the house. He'd take Ajanee and her two sisters to McDonalds, or to the park or to a movie.

Robinson's family described him as a big kid himself. He loved video games and spent much of his free time playing with nieces and nephews.

He loved children, his family insists, including his 8-year-old daughter and his fiancee's two children, 8 and 5.

Robinson and his fiancée of two years, Kiasha Lize, had tried to work through a rocky relationship. Lize, 26, said she thinks **one** reason Robinson acted as he did on the day Ajanee was killed in February is because their relationship was foundering and he was taking it hard. He had started to smoke marijuana **more** than usual and drink heavily before the shooting, she said.

Lize said Robinson was drunk and high that day, Feb. 25. He had gone to Ajanee's neighborhood to confront a man with whom he had a dispute. The man was a cousin to Ajanee and occasionally lived in her home.

Lize said she believes Robinson did not realize children were in the car.

"He might have just snapped," she said. "For him to hurt anybody on purpose, it's not possible."

Robinson was born in Columbus, Ohio. He has **one** brother and two sisters. As a teen, he lived with his father, now a Wayne County sheriff's deputy, in Columbus. But he never returned to high school there. He finished ninth or tenth grade before moving to Detroit for good.

In 1994, Robinson met Joel Allen. The two became best friends and they lived close to each other. They also became tight with Ajanee's father, Jason Pollard, and **one** of her uncles, Anthony Niebrzydowski. The adults played cards and hung out together.

"They were over here all the time," said Ajanee's mother, Liz Niebrzydowski. "They even slept here."

A beautiful girl

Although Ajanee knew joy in her short **life**, it was also marked by poverty, unstable adult relationships and violence.

Her parents, Pollard and Niebrzydowski, met as teenagers in Detroit. They never married, but lived together for six years.

"We tried," said Niebrzydowski, who turns 26 on Saturday. "We gave it our best shot, and we made three beautiful daughters together."

Pollard also has a 6-year-old son, Jason Jr., from another relationship.

Ajanee was like **many** other girls her age. She liked music, chocolate doughnuts, peanut butter and jelly and Barbie dolls.

But Ajanee grew up quickly. As the oldest child in her family, it was her job to look out for her younger siblings. She took that responsibility so seriously it earned her the nickname Little Woman or Little Mama.

She was fiercely possessive of things that belonged to her and wrote her name on anything that was hers. Clothes, books, CDs, and, of course, toys, including the Easy-Bake oven she got for Christmas last year.

Her mother, who called Ajanee Nay-Nay, remembers how Ajanee loved to sing, especially "U Got It Bad" by Usher and songs by Britney Spears.

She attended second grade at Houghten Elementary. Her favorite book was "Curious George."

Her favorite color was blue. Her favorite creatures were spiders. She loved going to the mall and was in a pen-pal club with students at Novi High School.

Ajanees pen pal, Monica Urso, 17, a Novi High senior, said the pair wrote each other weekly. She remembers the joy on Ajanee's face when they met in person at the high school.

"I carried her around the school on my shoulders that day," Urso said recently. "It seemed like she really looked up to me. She had a lot of promise."

Urso also spoke at Ajanee's funeral March 5.

Standing next to the tiny coffin inside Body of Christ Christian Center in Detroit, Urso could only say, "She touched my heart."

#### Day of death

On a dreary day last February, Ajanee's mother was set for a trip to Fairlane Town Center where she planned to splurge a little with her income tax refund.

She put her kids in the Buick she borrowed from her brother's girlfriend. Huddled in the back seat were Ajanee, Aerica Pollard, 6, and Alyiah Pollard, 4. Six-year-old Jason was still inside the house with Liz Niebrzydowski's brother, Anthony, also known as Blue.

A few blocks away, Willie Robinson was hanging with buddies at a friend's house, smoking marijuana and drinking. Robinson complained that he was tired of being harassed and threatened by Donnell Brown, Ajanee's cousin, as a result of a dispute over a \$40 radio.

About a month earlier, Brown had sold the radio to **one** of Robinson's friends, who paid for it with counterfeit money. When Brown discovered the money was no good, he harassed Robinson, hoping Robinson could make his friend pay, court testimony later showed.

"Every time I see Donnell, he would either throw something at my car or say something to me," Robinson said in a statement to Detroit police after his arrest.

Robinson saw Brown outside Ajanee's home about two hours before the shooting. The two exchanged harsh words. Robinson's friend, Allen, was sitting nearby in Robinson's car. Brown threw a baseball bat at the vehicle.

Robinson left, but promised to be back.

Later, as he sat smoking marijuana and drinking beer with friends, they plotted how Robinson should retaliate. His friends told him that a gun, and only a gun, would scare Brown enough to leave him alone. They pumped Robinson up and got him excited, testimony showed.

Bryant Daniels, who goes on trial next month, accused of supplying the assault rifle used to kill Ajanee, told police he gave Robinson the gun for protection. Daniels said he thought Robinson was just going to show the M1 carbine to Brown and Anthony Niebrzydowski to scare them.

Around noon, Robinson hopped in his car with Allen at the wheel. They drove to Dolphin Street, where Ajanee and her family lived.

Liz Niebrzydowski and the children were in the borrowed Buick, waiting for her brother and Jason Jr. to come out. She had sent him in to wipe his runny nose.

As Robinson and Allen rolled up in their car, Robinson leaned out the passenger window with the M1 and shouted, "What's up now?"

Allen, 24, the son of a Detroit police officer, drove slowly, giving Robinson enough time to do as much damage as he could. Nearly a dozen rounds blasted the Buick filled with the children.

Robinson and Allen sped off.

The echoes from the gunfire gave way to screams from inside the Buick.

"Oh my God," Liz Niebrzydowski said, recalling all the shots at the scene. "It just wouldn't stop."

**One** bullet had shattered a bone in Alyiah's right leg. Aerica was shot in the right hand. Jason Jr. was shot in the back. He later lost his pancreas and part of his intestine. Niebrzydowski was shot in an ear and hand.

Later, Niebrzydowski was at Sinai-Grace Hospital, being questioned by police, when she saw an officer walk by with Detroit Homicide on his shirt. She started screaming.

She thought Jason Jr., also known as B.J., had died. She thought she was going to have to call Pollard and tell him because he had trusted her to watch his son for the day.

Police told her the child who died was not B.J.

It was Ajanee.

Pollard learned about the shooting from Niebrzydowski. He immediately called Allen's cell phone. Robinson answered, and Pollard accused him of killing the girl.

"Uh, uh," Robinson responded, according to Pollard.

Robinson hung up. Pollard kept calling back. Finally, Allen picked up the phone.

"Joel said he wasn't with Will and didn't know where Will was at," Pollard said. "I asked him what happened, and he said he didn't know."

Later, Robinson called police and said he wanted to turn himself in. He said they could find him at his sister's Southfield apartment.

The next day, Robinson and Allen were charged with first-degree murder.

The trial

In August, on the second day of trial in Wayne County Circuit Court, an assistant prosecutor employed an unusual tactic. He brought the surviving youngsters, **one** by **one**, into court to have them show their scars to the jury.

As he carried Alyiah into the room, the girl looked toward Robinson at the defense table and blurted out, "Hi, Uncle Will."

Moments later, at the prosecutor's direction, she pulled up her pink dress and showed the jury the bullet scar on her right leg. Aericia showed the scar on her hand. And B.J. showed where the bullet had entered his back.

"It's right here," he said, pointing.

Robinson's lawyer, Marvin Barnett, contended during the trial that Robinson only shot at the car to make a statement and didn't know anyone was in it. Barnett said he still believes that.

Robinson's sister, Laveta Robinson,<sup>27</sup> also said her younger brother had told her in countless conversations that he had no idea children were in the car. He had written her a letter, saying he loved Ajanee and was pained by her death.

The jury convicted Robinson and Allen of first-degree murder Aug. 23 after a **one**-week trial. They were sentenced to **life** in prison. Both men **are** appealing.

"Man, you just don't know how hard it is in here," Robinson recently wrote from Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility in Ionia to his sister. The letter read:

"Sometimes I just want to brake down and cry, but I don't becaus I'm trying to be strong for yall. I smile during my visits to keep yall smileing. Just like now I'm trying so hard not to cry while I'm writting this letter but I know **one** day I'm to break down harder than ever."

Robinson's family remains convinced that he was convicted on a charge **more** severe than he deserved, though they believe he should be doing time.

"At **most** it's involuntary manslaughter," Laveta Robinson said. "A child was killed, and it's terrible. We're very sorry for that. My brother is sorry for that. But because a child died, there was no way my brother was going to get a fair trial."

Allen insisted after his arrest that he only thought Robinson was going to scare Brown and Anthony Niebrzydowski. Allen's court-appointed attorney, Richard Cunningham, said he believes his client.

'Nothing's ever going to convince me that he intentionally drove that car over there with the intention of killing anyone," Cunningham said. "The bottom line is, you had a child killed. It's horrible. But I will go to my grave believing that all he thought was going to happen was he was driving over there to scare him."

The aftermath

In early December, just a week before she turned 5, Alyiah was watching television when she saw news coverage about the murder trial of Destinee Thomas, a 3-year-old fatally shot in the head as she played in her room. Alyiah piped up: "Mama, that's the court we were in."

This summer, Liz Niebrzydowski took her children to Hart Plaza for the fireworks show. Loud noises **are** too much for Alyiah. When she heard the boom, she didn't look up to see the dazzling display. She looked around for someone with a gun.

"She was very scared," Niebrzydowski said. "She made me cry because it dawned on me what she was going through."

Neither Niebrzydowski nor Pollard can bring themselves to say that Ajanee is dead.

Instead, they say the girl simply "got hurt."

Ajanee's mother spent Thanksgiving alone and crying and dreaded Christmas.

"I don't want to do this," she said, referring to celebrating the holiday, "but I've got to do it for them."

Pollard can't look at photos of Ajanee, who looks a lot like him. Some days he can't even look in the mirror, he said.

Depressed, he went months without a job. He said he feels tremendous grief and anger. In his eyes, there is a look of regret and rage.

"It seems like I let my baby down and I get disappointed in myself," he said.

Ajanee's sisters draw pictures for her.

On a recent day at the same house where they were attacked, they gathered in a tiny room with battered wood floors and a cracked window patched with plastic. A gray, boxlike space heater warmed the room. The only light came from a 13-inch television.

An 8-by-10 picture of Ajanee sits on an end table, next to the girl's Bible. The Bible holds her death certificate, funeral program and a lock of her hair.

Wiping away tears, Anthony Niebrzydowski said he misses Ajanee's energy and curiosity.

"I miss her asking me all those crazy questions about **life**," he said. "I miss watching her be her."

## SLAIN CHILDREN

The toll stands at 34. That's how **many** children age 16 and younger were killed in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties so far this year, according to records reviewed by the Free Press. Twenty-six of the victims lived in Detroit. **Most** died by gunfire. Among the **most** recent victims were three children killed in Livonia last weekend. For Thursday's story on child homicides and other coverage from this year, go to [www.freep.com/index/tragictoll](http://www.freep.com/index/tragictoll)

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Caption: Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE/Detroit Free Press

Ajaneé Pollard

Liz Niebrzydowski hugs daughters Aerica Pollard, 6, and Alyiah Pollard, 5, in their Detroit home. The girls still draw pictures for their sister, Ajaneé, who was killed by gunshots in February. Aerica and Alyiah were wounded in the attack, along with their brother, Jason Pollard Jr.

Ajaneé Pollard kept a journal as part of her second-grade schoolwork at Houghten Elementary in Detroit. In it, she wrote this poem about a rabbit. Ajaneé was killed by a gunshot wound to the head in February as she sat in a car with her family

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