

YOUTHFUL MELODY IS STILLED

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Melody Deshawn **Rucker**, the sunshine child, was buried Thursday. In life, she was the joy of her family, "Poochie" to her friends, a cheerleader, a basketball player, a member of the Angelic Choir at her church. In death, she was just another homicide victim in a city that has so many homicide victims that police apparently can't keep up with the count.

Her basketball coach broke down in tears before he could begin her eulogy. Her priest expressed outrage that guns are as common in Detroit as grace is in heaven.

Her teenage pallbearers talked about the everyday violence that this time touched too close to home. "What can you do about it?" someone asked them. Nobody seemed to know.

Melody Rucker was killed Saturday night by a spray of shots from a passing car, as she stood in front of a classmate's home on Sunderland, saying goodbye to her friends.

It was a few minutes after midnight and the last guests were going home from a chaperoned backyard party attended by about 50 teenagers from Benedictine High School.

Melody died before dawn. Another guest, Vinita Smith, is in fair condition at Mt. Carmel Mercy Hospital with a gunshot wound in the chest. Three youths have been accused of the attack. Police described them as party-crashers who were turned away from the gathering earlier in the evening and came back for a last grim goodbye.

A spokesman for the Detroit Police Department public affairs section said Thursday afternoon that the number of homicides in Detroit this year was not readily available.

"WE HAVE such anger," said Betty Combs, **Melody**'s cousin, standing outside St. Cyprian Episcopal Church before the funeral service Thursday. "We discipline ours. We clip things from the newspaper to show them what can happen. We tell them, 'We're being hard on you, but we want you to read this and take care.' "

The tragedy is that they do take care, and still the violence happens. The teenagers who attended **Melody**'s funeral in their good black suits and their silky Sunday dresses are not young people for whom homicide can be dismissed as an everyday affair.

They don't carry guns. But they know people who do. They aren't used to death. But they move through the world with a kind of alertness that no one should have to learn that young, and that fills their families with anger to think about.

NATE SPENCER, who took **Melody Rucker** to the movies on her 16th birthday July 1 and helped carry her coffin on Thursday, said he and his friends talk about the violence all the time.

"You know, you go somewhere, you always have to be ready for somebody to mess with you," Spencer explained. "You get new shoes, you got to think about somebody wanting them. You wear something new, you got to worry about somebody stealing it. It isn't right. It shouldn't have happened."

"It's terrible, it's ridiculous," said David Young, another pallbearer, who arrived too late for the party Saturday night but just in time to see the ambulance.

The 200 people who jammed the raftered church for an emotion-laden service heard every speaker invoke the same twin themes: the laughter and sunshine that **Melody Rucker** brought to life and the senselessness of her death.

"I was appalled, when the city began to discuss gun control, at how many people said it could not be done because there is a right to carry guns," the Rev. Orris Walker told the mourners during the eulogy. "The question is, what are we going to do about it after we leave this place?"

George Douglas, who coached **Melody** 's basketball team at Benedictine, described tearfully how she responded to his challenge. "When you have nothing else to give, I demanded of my girls, give me 10 percent more," Douglas said. "She was already ready to give. She comes from the **Rucker** family foundation, a foundation which builds character. And when you have a good foundation, you have a good product."

But outside the safe, protective boundaries of the **Rucker** family household, **Melody Rucker** had to move in a world where guns are a part of the wardrobe, where a pair of new shoes attracts predators as meat attracts sharks, where a going-back- to-school party ends with the spinning orange light of an ambulance parked outside. "It shouldn't have happened," Nate Spencer said. But it did. Why?

CUTLINE

Friends of **Melody Rucker** hold onto one another as her casket is carried out of St. Cyprian Church after funeral services Thursday. The woman at left is unidentified; the others are, from left, Nikki Griggs, Melissa Larkins and Dana Ross.

Vera **Rucker** , mother of **Melody Rucker** , is escorted to a car after the burial of her daughter at Metropolitan Memorial Gardens Cemetery in Belleville. Her husband, John, is behind her.

Caption: Photo Color PAULINE LUBENS

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