BROTHERS IN GRIEF: THE STAGES OF GRIEVING FOR A SCHOOL AND ITS STUDENTS FOLLOWING THREE SHOOTING DEATHS OF BLACK TEENAGE BOYS

Nora Miriam Nass Gross

A DISSERTATION

in

Education and Sociology

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2020

Supervisor of Dissertation

_____

Kathleen D. Hall

Associate Professor, Education and Anthropology

Co-Supervisor of Dissertation

_____

Camille Z. Charles

Professor, Sociology, Africana Studies, & Education

Graduate Group Chairperson

_____

J. Matthew Hartley, Professor of Education

Graduate Group Chairperson

_____

Jason Schnittker, Professor of Sociology

Dissertation Committee

John. L. Jackson, Jr.	Dean, Annenberg School for Communication
Nikki Jones	Professor, African American Studies, University of California, Berkeley
Joseph D. Nelson	Assistant Professor, Education and Black Studies, Swarthmore College

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This work is dedicated to Jahsun, Tyhir, Bill, Sy-Eed,
and the far too many other beautiful Black children robbed of their futures
by structures of poverty, injustice, and anti-Black racism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is going to be a long one because seven years of doctoral study is a long time and ethnographic work, though solo on the surface, is an endeavor that requires many, many people in the background making the work possible in so many different ways. There are people who, for confidentiality reasons, I cannot name here, and there will surely be people whose names I will think to add just after I push send on this draft. Sincere apologies for those I forget, and deepest thanks to all those who contributed to this project, but who cannot be officially acknowledged here.

First, I am thankful for my dream team dissertation committee. Kathy, you have been a steadfast source of support, encouragement, and understanding from even before I arrived at Penn. Thank you for caring about all facets of my life and allowing me to prioritize them differently at different moments. I am also endlessly appreciative of your incisive comments on my writing and willingness to read multiple drafts. Camille, I know I had to earn your respect over time, which has made your encouragement and support all the more meaningful. Thank you for always being up front and honest with me, for seeing the value in this work back when few others in the department seemed to, and for all the ways you have been in my corner. I know I am a better scholar and teacher because of both of you.

John, I'm so glad that it was your classroom I stepped into on my first day at Penn. I feel so lucky to have been able to collaborate with you on our film as well as various CAMRA endeavors. I've learned so much from these partnerships and from your mentorship over the years, and I have tremendous appreciation for your perpetual positivity and optimism! Joseph, I love that our academic lives keep winding around each other in new ways: from our first time sharing seats on a panel at the Teachers College conference, to Carol Gilligan's class, to Niobe Way's research team, to CSBGL/SPARC at Penn. It seemed only fitting to have you join this team as I conclude this stage of my academic life, and I'm so grateful for your insights and the way you light the way toward the next steps. Nikki, I have admired your work from afar for many years and I am honored that you were willing to come on board to share your expertise and insight. Thank you for your thoughtful engagement with my ideas and my writing. I look forward to staying connected through our work for years to come.

Countless Penn faculty beyond my committee were especially supportive in my early stages and, though they may not have known it, provided much-needed inspiration at critical moments throughout the research conception and design: Amit Das, Dave Grazian, Emily Hannum, Shaun Harper, Peter Kuriloff, Annette Lareau, Robin Leidner, Brian Peterson, Sharon Ravitch, Michael Reichert, Dorothy Roberts, Howard Stevenson, and Krystal Strong. More recently, Elaine Simon and Grace Sanders Johnson have been invaluable colleagues and supporters of both my research and my teaching.

Other senior scholars who have been generous with their time over the years in offering advice through conversations at conferences or phone calls include Michelle Fine, E. Patrick Johnson, Desmond Patton, Victor Rios, Patrick Sharkey, and Debra Umberson. Special thanks to Jocelyn Smith Lee for, among other things, her encouragement at a very critical moment to stick with the context I know best: schools.

I am appreciative of the multiple interns who helped me make sense of mountains of data by transcribing interviews, entering numbers into spreadsheets, and anonymizing social media images. Thank you Ajibola Bodunrin, Kim Craig, Amelia Galbraith, Kassidi Jones,

Rekha Marar, and Amari Mitchell for your hours of careful work and your attention to the sensitivity and confidentiality of the material entrusted to you.

I will be forever grateful to Penn for all of the beautiful, brilliant peers I met over these past seven years. I am especially appreciative that so many of my earliest friends – who helped me make the decision to come to Penn GSE or made it clear to me right away that it was the right choice – have remained in my life in such meaningful ways: Briana Nichols, forever my academic wife, without whom I could not have made it through these years; Charlotte Jacobs, my travel companion, writing partner, collaborator in so many ventures, and constant friend; and Kelsey Jones, the big sister I never had – even though we're the same age! And to Michelle Munyikwa for the numerous conversations about methodological choices, the technical logistics of writing a dissertation, and the Venn diagrams of literature – and the rest of 5-SOS for all the good times back when we were young and free! Calvin Zimmermann, who helped me, especially in those early years, to move between education and sociology – we will write together one day! And Mercy Agyepong – we're going on ten years of friendship – thank you for lighting the path from NYU to Penn and, now, showing me what being a boss on the tenure track can look like!

So much love to Lisette Enumah, Jeylan Erman, Jess Peng, and Treva Tam, without whom I don't think I would have made it through the last few difficult years. Thanks for your steadfast friendship, your company while studying, your workout motivation, and for being a source of giddy laughter, gossip, good advice, and tender care when I needed each.

The extended McNeil Atrium Crew: Sarah Adeyinka-Skold, Ellen Bryer, Yun Cha, Jeylan Erman, Dylan Farrel-Bryan, Lauren Harris, Peter Harvey, Liz Jacobs, David Kirui, José Loya, Haley Pilgrim, Treva Tam, and honorary member Tom Wooten. I have loved that I could always count on a friendly face whenever I was in the building and/or in need of a study buddy, and I will always treasure those two-table days. Special shout out to Jeylan, Lauren, José, David, and Pete for continuing this virtually during the final critical months of writing. I seriously don't think I could have made it through that tough period without our Zoom work sessions. Also thanks to the OGs from Annette's writing group who previewed what was coming ahead and always offered feedback and advice with kindness: Amanda Cox, Rita Harvey, and Aliya Rao.

To my ECS family over the years: Irteza Binte-Farid, Jasmine Blanks Jones, Katie Clonan-Roy, Christiana Kallon, Michael Kokozos, Julie McWilliams, Nora Reikosky, Jess Peng, Atenea Rosado-Viurques, Cristin Stephens, Rachael Stephens, and Quinton Stroud, and other GSEers OreOluwa Badaki, Sofia Chaparro, Coleman Donaldson, Lisette Enumah, Jason Javier-Watson, Kelsey Jones, Cassie Lo, Bethany Monea, Matt Tarditi, and Janay Watts who made GSE feel like home over the years. Thanks also to the Doctoral Fellows at CSREE (back in the day) from whom I learned so much about doing critical research on race and education, calling out injustices both in our places of research *and* within academia, and throwing shade: Nina Daoud, Lisette Enumah, Kalen Flynn, Charlotte Jacobs, Demetri Morgan, Ed Smith, and Calvin Zimmermann.

Extra love and thanks to my coauthors and collaborators Katie Clonan-Roy, Charlotte Jacobs, Pavithra Nagarajan, and Veena Vasudevan. I have learned so much from our collaborations and from your research and writing, and am grateful to have the spaces of our joint projects to further hone my thinking. And to Cassie Lo, my partner in research, I cannot thank you enough for helping me find "BP" and for being a comrade during the ups and downs of data collection.

I'm appreciative to have been part of the Africana Summer Institute community for four years and grateful to have gotten to know and hang out with Dana Cypress, Lisette Enumah, David Kirui, José Loya, Kiana Murphy, Angie Ocampo, Keyana Parks, Ian Peebles, Elias Rodriguez, Yosef Washington, and so many others during those often sweaty and stressful summer days and nights!

And what would I do without my CAMRA fam? Thank you for normalizing creativity in the academy. A special thank you to OreOluwa Badaki, Jasmine Blanks Jones, Juan Castrillon, Arlene Fernandez, Bethany Monea, Farrah Rahman, Melissa Skolnick Noguera, Leniqueca Welcome, and Tali Ziv who were teammates, thought partners, and friends over the years as CAMRA entered a new era. I've also loved getting to work on SSMF with newer CAMRA members Sophie Maddocks, Jake Nussbaum, Roopa Vasudevan, and Fellows Ajibola Budunrin, Dallas Taylor, and Nikki Thomas over the past year. I am grateful to the collective for their support – especially this past year as I thought through some of the trickier methodological and ethical dilemmas around the collection and presentation of visual data – and I feel good about the capable hands in which the future of CAMRA lies.

There were so many other people at Penn who supported me throughout this long doctoral journey in big and small ways over the years. Audra Rodgers, Katee Dougherty, and Marcus Wright in Sociology; Alex Posecznick, Lauren Scicluna, Ramon Monrás-Sender, Terence Newby, and the whole IT team at the Graduate School of Education; Vicky Karkov in Urban Studies; and Teya Campbell and Gale Garrison in Africana Studies – all of you were instrumental in helping me get through Penn's bureaucratic hurdles and to this point. Thank you! The folks in the Vitale Media Lab, the Annenberg Media Lab, and the Center for Teaching and Learning also came through at critical moments with key suggestions and technological support.

Thank you to my graduate students at GSE and undergraduate students and mentees from the Africana Summer Institute and Urban Studies. Teachers always say that they often learn more from their students than they teach, and I certainly believe that to be true with so many of you. I've loved getting to know you and learning from you, and can't wait to continue to hear about all the ways you transform Penn and the world.

I am lucky to have been able to join, even if briefly, so many meaningful communities while at Penn beyond Penn GSE and the Department of Sociology including the School Participatory Action Research Collaborative (SPARC), the Center for Experimental Ethnography (CEE), the Program in Urban Studies, the Racial Empowerment Collaborative, the Penn Injury Science Center, as well as the Critical Participatory Action Research Institute at the CUNY Graduate Center. Thank you to my mentors and colleagues in these spaces for opening my eyes to new ways of thinking and helping me see connections and implications in my work across disciplines and contexts.

Critical financial support during my years of doctoral study came from Penn GSE, the Urban Studies Program, the Center for Experimental Ethnography, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. Thank you for making it possible for me to survive financially during my six years officially enrolled at Penn without having to take on outside work. Other Penn-based support from the Gertrude and Otto Pollak Summer Research Fellowship, the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, The Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race and Immigration, The School of Arts and Sciences, the GSE Student Government, the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly, the Sachs Program for Arts Innovation, the Center for Africana Studies, and John Jackson, among others, made it possible for me to

attend conferences where ideas were honed, conduct summer research and create multimodal projects, and survive during my third year on leave.

Special thanks and love to Cleveland Pickett for being a steadfast friend since that day we met in the library back in 2014. And big thanks to Doctors Janice Asher, Vanesssa Stoloff, and Robin Risler for helping me stay healthy in body and mind, and especially supporting me through the most challenging periods.

Randy, you came in at the end of this process (where were you at the beginning?!), but you have helped me get through the final push with your steadfast confidence in me, loving encouragement, and deadpan jokes. As I prepared for the final stages of my program at Penn, I never doubted your commitment to traveling 8+ hours each way to watch me defend and then, less than a week later, returning to watch me graduate. Luckily, the world had other plans and you didn't have to do that – but I know you would have (and with a smile on your face), and that means a lot. I look forward to us seeing each other through many more big projects and accomplishments, fellow Doctor.

I applied to PhD programs in 2012 at my mom's encouragement even though I wasn't sure I was ready. As with everything, her unconditional love and confidence in me also came with concrete support – reading application drafts, sending care packages, reminding me to make doctors appointments. The same day I was accepted to Penn, we learned she was terminally ill with a brain tumor. Designing, carrying out, and writing up this project while my mother was dying was challenging to say the least. It was also, at times, cathartic and healing. Finishing this dissertation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the collective global grief it forged, was gut wrenching. I could not have gotten through either period without my dad, Teddy Gross, who was my earliest teacher, my most steadfast and reliable editor, and my best friend. Thank you for reading hundreds of pages, some many times, and listening to me present more times than either of us can count. Though I may not have always shown it in the moment, I'm grateful for the times you pushed me to develop more precise language and to workshop titles multiple times. There are more than a few words, phrases, and probably whole paragraphs in this dissertation that were inspired by our conversations. I will forever appreciate and treasure all of the writing – and life – lessons I have learned from you through your unending dedication to my work and my development as a person. I love you, and I know Ruth would be so proud of both of us for our commitments and accomplishments during the last seven years.

***

The most important thank yous of all go to a school full of wonderful people whom I cannot name here. The administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and most importantly, the students at "Boys' Prep" welcomed me into their worlds – their spaces of learning and work, their online communities, their day-to-day likes and dislikes, their expertise and their quirks, their vulnerabilities and hopes for the future, and the depths of their emotional lives. I am so grateful to have been able to learn from all of you and I hope this work has done some of your experiences justice. I am honored that some of you have become my friends, and I look forward to sharing this work with you and continuing to learn together.

I am especially grateful to the mothers and other family members of Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill, for allowing me to tell these stories even though it remains so painful and raw. I am in awe of each of you for your strength, resilience, and commitment to using your experiences to help others. I love each of you and commit to continuing to honor your sons' lives and memories in my future work.

ABSTRACT

BROTHERS IN GRIEF: THE STAGES OF GRIEVING FOR A SCHOOL AND ITS STUDENTS FOLLOWING THREE SHOOTING DEATHS OF BLACK TEENAGE BOYS

Nora Gross

Kathleen D. Hall

Camille Z. Charles

In the US today, gun violence takes the lives of nearly 3,000 youth annually, leaving a footprint of trauma in thousands of schools and affecting tens of thousands of the victims' friends and classmates, about whom very little research has been undertaken. During my two years of ethnographic research in an all-boys, all-Black Philadelphia high school, three students died in separate violent incidents. The dissertation shows the interactional and institutional mechanisms through which the grief that follows gun violence tangibly impacts Black adolescent boys' school engagement, relationships with peers and teachers, and ideas about their own futures – as well as the consequences of our society's too-frequent neglect of Black boys' emotional lives. Specifically, the dissertation offers a three-stage theory of institutional and personal grief within the school: The *easy hard*, *hard hard*, and *hidden hard* stages highlight a progression over time in how friends experience and express their grief and how school policies, practices, and individual teachers' behaviors support and constraint students' recovery. Drawing on ethnographic and social media observation, in-depth interviews with students and adults, and students' school records, I show, on the one hand, the efforts of administrators and teachers to care for and support grieving students and, on the other hand, the structural challenges they face dealing with boys' emotions in educational spaces designed to maintain order and respond to the perceived "crisis" of Black boys' education. The research uncovers layers of conflict between institutional mourning practices, leveraged to collectively recognize shared loss and then renormalize academic routines and classroom life, and students' unresolved (and frequently concealed) grief. Using the framework of racialized and gendered emotion work, I analyze the particularities of Black boys' individual and peer group grieving rituals, and assess the costs to their emotional and educational trajectories. My attention to boys' regular social media posts, in particular, reveals how the medium functions as a key vehicle for social solidarity and public emotional expression when it is silenced in school or stigmatized by stubborn norms of racialized masculinity. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for how schools might help students productively translate their grief into grievance.

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INTRODUCTION

On a Saturday evening in the fall of 2019, I attended a moving candlelight vigil outside the West Philadelphia home of a recently murdered teenager named Sy-eed. Although I had not known Sy-eed personally, he had been a student at the high school which was the focal point of a two-year study I had just completed exploring the effects of neighborhood gun violence on the young friends of its victims. Tragically, during the period of my ethnographic study, from 2016 to 2018, there had been three fatal incidents involving students at Boys' Preparatory Charter School, providing an ample, if painful, opportunity to observe the unfolding stages of adolescent boys' grief and to study how school policies and practices, as well as intimate peer relationships, create the spaces for both personal and academic setbacks as well as recovery.

Sweet and studious Sy-eed was shot and killed along with his mother, stepfather, and younger brother in their family home by his older, severely mentally-disturbed half-brother. Boys' Prep had been notified just before the end of the school day on Wednesday, the day before Halloween. Most students learned through posts on Instagram and other social media platforms over the course of that afternoon and evening. For nearly all of them, this was not the first time their lives would be permanently altered by the news of a murdered friend. In fact, Sy-eed was the fourth Boys' Prep student lost to gun violence in as many years.

The following two days at school, many of Sy-eed's friends walked the school hallways in a daze, not fully able to fathom the fact that their friend was gone, not to

mention the carnage that surrounded his death. They were still overwhelmed and distracted that Saturday morning when many seniors had to sit for the SATs. That evening, along with hundreds of neighbors and friends, they flooded the street in front of the deceased family's home with candles and white balloons. On one section of the sidewalk, a clutch of twenty of Sy-eed's classmates and teachers huddled together fending off the bitter cold in a group hug; it was one of the first truly cold nights of the season. A neighbor had brought out a thermos of hot cider and was offering cups to the boys and others. One teacher circled the group with a butane lighter igniting the votive candles that most of the boys were holding, adding the comfort of light if not of heat. The Boys' Prep students, sixteen to eighteen years old, most dressed not nearly warmly enough in light jackets, ever careful as they hugged and huddled not to burn each other with their candles, eventually made their way in a clump to the steps of Sy-eed's brick rowhome porch to place their candles beside the dozens of others. Yellow caution tape stretched from banister to banister, but the porch looked as if it was still in use – with lived-in cushions out on the chairs and a large trash can full of everyday trash.

One young man, who had been a senior at Boy's Prep the year before but had not graduated, told me that he was not doing too well. Referring to the number of peers he had lost during his years of high school, he lamented in a frustrated tone, "Every year, we don't get no breaks." Then, staring out at the crowd of his friends and former classmates in their grief, shaking his head for a while, he repeated the phrase several more times: "every year, every year."

***

As it happens, I had been to another memorial service earlier that day for an old family friend who had died unexpectedly a few months earlier at the age of 79. The service included a string quartet and professional ballet dancers, interspersed with moving tributes by friends from every stage of her long life. Perhaps because I was wearing the same dress that I had worn just seven months earlier to my mother's funeral, I experienced intense feelings of devastation and loss and the deep sense of mourning for an unfinished life – even when death befalls a person in her 70s and results from natural causes. A few hours later, these feelings were to intensify as I found myself surrounded by dozens of traumatized teenagers mourning the end of a life that had barely begun.

When I reached home that evening, emotionally drained from all the loss, I realized this was not the first time that I had attended two memorial events in a single day. In fact, it was the third. The first time had been more than a decade earlier when I was a first-year high school teacher in Chicago and was, in many ways, the moment when the seed for this research study was planted.

In November 2008, with Obama's historic election days earlier as the backdrop, my small charter school in Chicago experienced a devastating tragedy. In a freak accident on an overnight school field trip, three much-loved student drowned. AJ, Jimmy, and Melvin, sixteen and seventeen years-old, had been selected for the trip as school leaders, and they died in a valiant effort to save their friends as several rafts full of students all began to sink into a fast-moving river in the middle of a cold and rainy night. The following weekend, the whole school community attended a harrowing two days of funeral services for the three boys. While the city was in revelry over the recent election, our small school community was in mourning.

Back at school on Monday after the funerals, the Principal told me with a sympathetic smile that I had gone through "baptism by fire." I was the youngest teacher at the school that year, 22 and just a few months out of college. Though I had by no means led a sheltered life, I had experienced extreme privilege – growing up as the only child of a doctor and an educational program director on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, attending private elementary school, an elite magnet public high school, and then Princeton for college, and being white. I had been raised to be aware of the challenges of poverty, homelessness, and racial injustice in my community and my city, and to develop a lifelong commitment to play a role in alleviating them. But I had been mostly shielded from the specific problem of violence or untimely death.

The one exception during my early years came in eighth grade when a classmate of mine died after he was struck by a car at a notoriously dangerous intersection in Queens. I remember feeling confused and sad, but I did not find it challenging to continue on with business as usual because though Danny and I had shared a homeroom class, we had not really known each other. It did feel good, however, to gather with my classmates and teachers for a memorial service at the school and to work on an art project in his memory. I still sometimes flip through my high school yearbook and land on the page with Danny's picture, smiling back and full of life, but always and forever thirteen.

In 2008, just months before the deaths of my students, AJ, Jimmy, and Melvin, I lost my first close friend. Dave had been my high school classmate, a reliable friend through the challenges and new experiences of adolescence, and a big flirt. We got our first fake IDs together in the West Village, attended high school parties, talked about challenging homework assignments, rode the crosstown bus home from school together

sometimes. One summer during college when we were both back in New York, we went on a date and I always wondered if maybe we would find ourselves in the same city later in life and pursue a relationship. But during the summer after we graduated, Dave went on a solo hiking adventure and never returned. His body was found by other hikers a few days later under a fallen tree. I did not return to New York for his funeral because I was just about to start my teaching job in Chicago. And I did not really know how to grieve his loss until I watched so many of my young students experience the devastation of losing a friend way too early.

My teenage students in Chicago were deeply affected by the deaths of their peers. Over the two years that followed, I observed the various ways that students were coping with their grief. Some seemed to gain strength and motivation from the loss. They grew closer with each other, learning not to take their friends for granted, and more determined to work hard for their futures. But other students seemed to see the accidental deaths of their fellow students as yet another omen of doom, a sign that they ought never to expect to "make it out," that is, escape the perceived dangers of inner-city Chicago. These were students actively and desperately trying to resist the reputation of their city as a global capital of homicide, gun violence, and gang-banging. For some of them, the deaths of their friends in these unusual circumstances was the last straw. The thin jacket of a college preparatory school could not protect them from neither expected nor unexpected dangers. Hard as they had striven to imagine and to work for bright futures for themselves, many were now confirmed in the conviction that an early death likely awaited them. For years afterwards I reviewed those terrible days in my mind, wondering what more the school, my colleagues, and I could have done to help these traumatized

children, struggling to stabilize themselves after their catastrophic loss and make sense of it.

After the funerals for my three Chicago students, the next time I experienced multiple memorial events in the same day was in 2018, during the final phase of research for this dissertation. During the two years I spent immersed in the life of Boys' Prep as an ethnographer, three students were killed in neighborhood gun violence. The funeral service for the third boy happened to fall on the birthday of the second, the same day on which there had been planned a memorial fundraiser for the scholarship program his mother had developed in his honor. Within the span of a few hours, students went from a somber funeral to a celebratory bowling party. Some changed from t-shirts with one friend's image to another's. And I was hit once again with the magnitude and frequency of loss facing the young people who come of age in our country's poorest cities.

Coming to the Research

I moved to Philadelphia to start doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 2013, a year which represented the relative calm before the storm in terms of Philadelphia's growing gun violence epidemic. 2013's decade low homicide rate has been followed by a 45% increase in murders in the seven years since (Philadelphia PD 2020). Though gun violence was not at the forefront of my mind when I began graduate studies focused on the social contexts of urban education and adolescent boys' inner lives, my earlier experiences in Chicago had made me attuned to the ideas of grief and loss as underexplored subtexts of school life for young people growing up in poverty and in cities of extreme inequality.

While riding the city bus one summer day in 2016, I spotted the cover story of the local paper that a fellow rider was reading with the headline: “Another, Too Young.” I looked up the story when I got home, noting that it was about a shooting which took the life of a fifteen year-old and injured two other teens near a basketball court just a mile or two from my campus. A week later, I heard from a former Chicago student about the gun death of yet another young man who had been a senior my first year teaching. Through Facebook and Instagram, I watched the vigils and memorials that honored him, and read the anguished posts from his friends, peers, and former classmates (many of them my former students). How was grief impacting them, I began to ask myself? And how was it affecting their relationships, their aspirations, their ideas about themselves? The questions grew increasingly pointed and concrete: What are peer deaths doing to our young people? And what are they doing to their schools, their schooling, and their plans and dreams for the future?

Boys' Prep

The following fall, I began looking for an appropriate research site to begin my dissertation research. The head of a local non-profit serving young adult men reminded me of the Philadelphia basketball court shooting and offered to connect me to a teacher at the high school the victim had attended. That very same day, I heard about the same school from a colleague who was aware of my research interests and had just begun her own research study there. She connected me with the Principal, and within a week I was in his office. Dr. Stephens was earnestly interested in helping his grieving students, many of whom were still suffering deeply after the death of their friend that summer, and he

thought that if I could answer my research questions, I might be able to help. He invited me in.

Boys' Preparatory Charter School (hereafter Boys' Prep or BP) is part of a recent crop of single-sex schools for boys of color, a type of school that has been growing in popularity over the last two decades, and with supporters in both liberal and conservative education reform camps (Lindsay 2018). Whereas single-sex schooling for girls has long been an accepted intervention for improving girls' self-esteem and academic outcomes, changing gender-related education policies and increasing support for "school choice" have set the stage for the rapid spread of these "All-Male Academies" or "All-Black Male Schools" (Lindsay 2018; Williams 2016). The first of these schools opened in 1991 in Detroit, and as of 2016, more than 40 had opened or been proposed across the country. Early motivation for race- and gender-(re)segregated schools centered around providing Black boys "in crisis," and assumed to be fatherless, with male teachers and role models (Williams 2016) as well as removing them from "overly" feminized classrooms (Lindsay 2018). More recent marketing of these schools is only slightly less pathologizing, focusing instead on the need to "reverse abysmal graduation and college completion rates among boys in urban centers" (Urban Prep Academies 2012), and equally, some scholars argue, anti-feminist (Lindsay 2018).[1]

Boys' Prep positions itself as college preparatory, signaling this through the staffing of two full-time college counselors, time in the schedule for college preparation

[1] Urban Prep in inner-city Chicago, one of the earliest of these all-boys schools, has garnered much popular attention for its perfect record of getting every member of its Black male graduating class accepted to four-year colleges and universities. As with many charter schools, however, there are some crucial caveats to these numbers (Warren 2017).

activities, college banners decorating the hallways, as well as public rituals to acknowledge each senior's college acceptances. The school indicates in its mission statement a focus on developing among its students a strong character, personal responsibility, and emotional intelligence. It employs many of the material tropes of all-boys' private prep schools, including the school uniform which includes khakis, black shoes, a blazer, and a tie. Similar schools describe these practices as "institutionaliz[ing] respectability" (Blume Oeur 2018:43) and help to differentiate them from other charter and public schools serving similar student populations.

As a charter school, Boys' Prep is publicly funded but privately managed, operating mostly independently and outside of the regulation and oversight of the Philadelphia School District. Unlike some larger networks of charter schools with multiple locations (e.g., KIPP), Boys' Prep is a freestanding school with a single middle school and high school location. A Board of Trustees makes most school-wide decisions and supervises a CEO who directs the Principals of the two schools. The charter school movement, which has experienced an unprecedented surge in the last 15 years, is extremely polarizing – viewed by supporters as a pathway to innovation and more specialized and equitable schooling and by critics as uneven, largely unsuccessful, and irreparably damaging to public schooling (Berends 2015). "No excuses" urban charter schools – a category in which Boys' Prep does not neatly fit, but which has several overlapping characteristics – have become notorious for prioritizing student compliance to behavioral standards by "sweating the small stuff" and employing complex systems of punishment and reward, and for their emphasis on "academic achievement as a means to

an end: to set students on a path to college and the middle class" (Golann 2015; Golann and Torres 2018:7; Whitman 2008).

For families of color in Philadelphia who cannot afford private school, and whose sons have not been accepted into one of the handful of magnet high schools in the city, Boys' Prep stands out as a viable good educational option, especially when compared to the public schools in the area. These schools are often viewed by neighborhood residents as unsafe (metal detectors line their entrances and fights in the school building sometimes make local news) and they have increasingly struggled with enrollment.[2] In contrast, the Boys' Prep school building, which used to house a religious school, has an open entrance – one just needs to be buzzed in by the main office – and serious in-school violence is rare. At 450 students, the school is small enough that most students are known by name to a majority of adults in the building. Boys' Prep emphasizes strengths in preparation for college and life, academics, and a strong sense of brotherhood and adult-student relationships.

In its public presentations, Boys' Prep boasts 98% of its seniors are accepted to college and more than 85% persist at four-year colleges and universities – in contrast to the 10% of African American males city-wide who hold a college degree. Inside the building, as in other charter schools, these statistics become more complicated when you compare the number of seniors enjoying their bountiful college acceptances to the number of freshman who started four years earlier (almost half) or the achievement levels

[2] An entire floor of one large nearby public school sits unused because the student population has been dwindling in recent years and, as such, the school's funding has decreased and it cannot offer as many non-essential courses, clubs or activities, or other supplementary resources to students.

of charter school students before they enter school in comparison to their traditional public school peers (often higher) (Fuller 2014; Zimmer et al. 2008). Further, research in Philadelphia shows that the average academic gains of charter school students are statistically indistinguishable from their traditional public school peers (Zimmer et al. 2008).

Boys' Prep deals with many of the same challenges as traditional public schools. The school has had to make cuts in its arts offerings, does not have a gym or a true auditorium, and provides limited social, emotional, and health-related services to students. A single social worker serves all 450 students and a nurse splits her time between the high school, the middle school, and another nearby school. Despite the school's nearly all Black and male-identified student body, Boys' Prep does not appear to explicitly tailor its educational offerings or school culture to this population, a critique that has also been leveled at other single-sex schools for boys of color (Fergus, Noguera, and Martin 2014). For instance, several staff and visitors confided in me that they were surprised and dismayed to not see more Black faces on the school walls – i.e., a science classroom had portraits of famous scientists, most of whom were white – and that it did not feel like an "inherently African American institution" (Nasir 2011:106) even though the founder was Black, the current Principal was Black, and the student body was nearly all Black. Students too expressed disappointment at how few Black male teachers there were and confusion that they were being taught African American history by white people. Indeed, for all its efforts to improve the lives and minds of Black children, Boys' Prep is still, like most American schools – and particularly those which share some of the features of "no excuses" charter schools – an institution oriented around white middle

class norms and cultural practices (Bettie 2003; Golann and Torres 2018; Valenzuela 1999; Whitman 2008; Yosso 2005).

This Study

In fall 2016, I embarked on an ethnographic journey to examine the interrelations between violence, grief, and schooling for adolescent Black boys[3] at Boys' Prep. I wanted to understand how students were making sense of the loss of friends and peers, and how their experience of grief and grieving was both shaped by and shaped their interactions in school. I observed students and adults in classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, the teachers' lounge, the main office, and at major school events and activities. I interviewed dozens of students as well as the majority of school faculty and staff and a handful of parents. And, with their permission, I learned about students' lives in other ways by observing their activity on social media and accessing their schoolwork and official school records.

I arrived at the school a few months after the basketball court shooting that resulted in a freshman student's death. I focused my attention during the first year of research primarily on the students and adults most directly affected by that loss. During my second year at the school, 2017-2018, two other students – first a senior and then a sophomore – were also killed in gun violence.[4] It is a nightmarish coincidence, and one that I have never been able to fully process, that this catastrophic epidemic of the

[3] For an explanation of my use of the term "boy" to describe my research participants and the students at Boys' Prep, see Appendix D.

[4] In addition to the student deaths that shook the entire school, countless Boys' Prep students experienced the traumatic loss of friends, peers, and family members in other incidents of gun violence in the city as the city's homicide epidemic increased considerably during this period. See Figure 7.3 in Chapter 7.

premature deaths of students occurred during the two years that I happened to be in the building talking to kids and teachers about how they grappled with the effects gun death.[5]

In the dissertation, I analyze students' individual and collective responses to gun deaths particularly as they intersect with the institutional norms and expectations of a college preparatory high school. Specifically, the dissertation pursues the following research questions:

- How is the experience of violent peer loss among Black boys shaped by their social interactions? How do they grieve socially in school and with peers online, and how is their grief perceived and/or regulated by others?
- How does the ideology and mission of a single-sex school for low-income Black boys structure the way school adults interact with students, formally and informally, around loss? How do these interactions support (or constrain) students' coping practices?
- What emotional, relational, cultural, and institutional resources do boys draw on as they try to recover from the death of a friend to gun violence? How are boys' interpretations of violent loss reflected in ideas about their own and their peers' futures?

I bring together frameworks from sociology and education to answer these questions and examine the emotional layers of school life for Black boys at Boys' Prep.

Gun Violence in Philadelphia

Homicides in urban contexts have historically disproportionately affected young Black men, and remain the leading cause of death for Black male teenagers in the United

[5] For the first nine years since Boys' Prep's founding, no current students at the high school had died. The first student death to hit close to home was in January 2016, when a recent alumnus of Boys' Prep – who had been well-known and quite popular at the school – died by suicide. Though he did not use a firearm, his death was often brought up by both students and teachers amidst conversations about the gun deaths of students and what seemed to be an upswing in student deaths at Boys' Prep. Between summer 2016 and summer 2018, the deaths of three current students – combined with the deaths of a handful of other young people who had been affiliated with the school in other ways – represented an exponential increase in the direct impacts of violence on the Boys' Prep. This was a harsh and tragic break in "our long stretch of luck," as the CEO put it. The stretch of bad luck continued through the writing of this dissertation with the death of a senior student in October 2019, the nonfatal shooting of another senior in March 2019, followed a week later by the closure of the school due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

States (Child Trends 2015; Miniño 2010).[6] Notably, in Philadelphia, homicide accounts for nearly 60% of the deaths of all non-Hispanic Black males ages 15-34, according to a report from the Philadelphia Department of Health (2019). The same report also estimates that the premature deaths of Black men and boys due to homicide in a single year are responsible for nearly 10,000 collective years of life lost (see also Szymkowiak and Mallya 2015). Using other estimations, Philadelphia has 36,000 "missing Black men" due to early death and incarceration which has long-term implications for family formation and parenting (Wolfers, Leonhardt, and Quealy 2015).

The homicide rates for Black males are nearly 20 times higher than for white males in the same age group (Wintemute 2015).). In fact, the racial gap in life expectancy has been growing in recent years (Ansell 2017; Olshansky et al. 2012), pushed in part by the high rates of premature death in adolescence and young adulthood within African American populations (Fowler et al. 2017), as well as disparities in educational access and achievement and the health impacts of racism (Williams and Mohammed 2013).

The disparate exposure to fatal violence has clear geographic patterns: 81% of the nearly 13,000 firearm homicides in 2015 occurred in urban areas, and 20% in the country's 25 largest cities (Knopov, Siegel, and Pahn 2017). Further, violence "hot spots" in low-income communities of color mean that those living in particular urban neighborhoods might experience even greater proportions of violent victimization within their social networks (Aufrichtig et al. 2017; Beard et al. 2017; Everytown for Gun Safety

[6] The inequality of victimization from community violence is coupled, of course, with high incidences of police violence targeting Black men (among others), which have become increasingly high-profile in the past decade (Davis 2017; Hill 2017; Pegues 2017; Taylor 2016).

2016). The prevalence of violence in particular areas, Vargas (2016) argues, is also triggered by local politics and governance. Some researchers argue that more attention might be paid to improving policies to reduce urban gun violence if we properly quantified the "mass shooting type events" that happened regularly in these locations (Beard et al. 2019).[7]

Despite national trends of crime and violence reduction since the 1990s (Sharkey 2018), homicide rates in some cities including Philadelphia have been on the rise in recent years (Lozano 2017). In both 2018 and 2019, over 350 people were murdered in Philadelphia, the highest annual number since 2007 and higher than much larger cities like New York, Houston, and Los Angeles — between 17, 20, and 27% percent higher, respectively, than each of those three cities. This rise has been explained by two recent structural trends: "(1) expansion in illicit drug markets brought about by the heroin and synthetic opioid epidemic and (2) widely referenced 'Ferguson effects' resulting in de-policing, compromised police legitimacy, or both" (Rosenfeld et al. 2017:iii). Unfortunately, federally-funded research on firearm violence has been stifled by a 1996 congressional ban on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funding for research that advocated for gun control, leaving large gaps in our understanding of the complex causes of gun violence spikes and the full extent of its effects (Beard et al. 2019; Beard and Sims 2017; Cone et al. 2019; Rajan et al. 2018).

[7] Although daily gun violence in urban neighborhoods of color does not get as much public attention as "mass shootings" in schools, houses of worship, and entertainment venues, it is heartening to see that the rise in youth activism around gun-related legislation following the Parkland mass school shooting in February 2018 has attempted to be more inclusive of *all* young homicide victims, including those around whom this study is focused (Miller 2018).

The Other Victims

It is estimated that every homicide death leaves behind between three and ten "co-victims," "homicide survivors," or "survivor-victims" – but these estimates generally only refer to family members (Beeghley 2003; Spungen 1997). Yet, each young person killed leaves behind many circles of friends, peers, and classmates, and "a teen's death has a reverberating effect upon each group" (Balk, Zaengle, and Corr 2011:151). With such high proportions of Black males among homicide victims, it is likely that other young Black males also bear this "unequal burden of [peer] loss" (Bamwine et al. 2019; Smith 2015); however, childhood exposure to gun violence has not been adequately captured in scientific measures of healthy development and these "survivor friends" have been largely ignored in academic research (Rajan et al. 2019; Sklar and Hartley 1990).

Black boys are not only "exposed to the deaths of more friends and family members throughout life" than other groups (Umberson 2017; Umberson et al. 2017), but also that they are likely to feel a sense of threat to their own lives. This condition has, according to some, shaped a "modern-day black male subject [who] live[s] with the sense that [he] is at once bound for and yet strangely emanating out of death" (Ellis 2011:1). Said differently, some have argued that, for Black boys growing up in "hot spot" neighborhoods with few resources and increasing governmental neglect, their "developmental task is unique upon the American social landscape, namely, to accommodate himself to a world in which the possibility of his own violent death is considered a normative feature of experience" (Tolleson 1997:416). And new research finds that homicide survivorship is associated with significantly increased odds of suicide

attempt among youth as well as other forms of childhood adversity (Bamwine et al. 2019).

Indeed, in neighborhoods with high concentrations of violence, the young lives lost are not mere statistics but material features of everyday life for their surviving peers. The dead have a constant and lasting presence in the social milieu with their faces painted onto murals (Lohmon 2006); their names transformed into titles of basketball tournaments (Woodbine 2016); their "unofficial obituaries" on t-shirts and car decals (Cann 2014; Jimerson 2014:24); their years of life tattooed onto the flesh of friends and family (Cann 2014; Kirkland 2009); hashtags of their names shared over social media (Patton et al. 2015); and their stories played out in rap songs on the radio (Kubrin 2005). Dead young people also leave "an empty seat in class," often impacting an entire school community for an extended time (Ayers 2014; McNeil, Silliman, and Swihart 1991). And yet the specific short- and long-term social impacts of violent peer loss on adolescent Black boys in and out of school remains a largely understudied phenomenon.

This ethnographic dissertation project focuses on two years at Boys' Prep, a single-sex urban charter high school. Specifically, I spent time with and got to know several peer groups of Black male students as they coped with the loss of friends to gun violence. When a classmate is killed, every space in the school building – hallways, classrooms, lunch tables – may hold memories. Even when school itself does not offer explicit reminders of their loss, the premise and purpose of school may take on new meaning after loss. Young people are constantly told that education is the key to the future, that working hard in school and going to college will open up doors to opportunities and future mobility. But lives cut short may put those future possibilities

into question. And the social norms – or, "feeling rules"– dictated by the school and operating within their peer groups around expressions of grief may limit or constrain avenues for coping (Hochschild 2002, 1979).

This dissertation project investigates the way Black teenage boys at an all-boys' college preparatory high school, individually and with friends, experience the violent deaths of peers and their grief in its wake, as well as the mechanisms through which the school and its staff support them (or fail to) in the short- and long-term aftermath. By ethnographically documenting and analyzing everyday interactions among students and between students and school adults, this study explores how Black boys growing up in poverty (but pursuing social and economic mobility through schooling) experience violent peer loss as well as make decisions about how to move forward – and the potential consequences of this for the formation of divergent educational and life trajectories.

Sociological History of Black Men and Urban Life

The social sciences, and sociology in particular, have long pointed their analytic lens on the social conditions of the urban poor, and particularly Black men. Dozens of now-classic ethnographies of (inner) city life examine the specific experiences of Black men, young and old, on the street, in their homes, or at their places of work (Anderson 1999; Du Bois 1967; Duneier 1994; Edin and Nelson 2013; Liebow 1967; Venkatesh 2008). Even as scholars eventually moved away from the unfounded claims of genetic or biological inferiority, many still have engaged in a recycling of specific discourses that have served to normalize a particular, and often pathologized, narrative of Black males (Brown 2011; Howard 2014). In the 1930s through 1950s, scholarly texts told stories of

sexually promiscuous Black men, disappearing fathers, and delinquent boys. In the 1960s, the conversation shifted to emphasize the historical root causes of slavery as a reason that contemporary Black men were often unable to fulfill male roles and used destructive coping behaviors to overcompensate for that emasculation (Brown 2011). For some, this took the form of a "culture of poverty" argument that blamed Black men and their families for the adaptive cultural behaviors that perpetuated and sustained their marginalized position (Lewis 1966; Moynihan 1965). Other scholars in that period attempted to show that Black men actually held mainstream values and aspirations, just lacked the means to achieve them (Hannerz 1969; Liebow 1967).

By the 1980s, Black men and boys were being described as "in crisis" or, worse, as an "endangered species" at risk of extinction (Gibbs 1988). Some scholars continued within the culture vein arguing, for example, that Black men enacted a "cool pose" in response to insults to their manhood and as a tactic for survival in increasingly violent urban milieus (hooks 2003; Majors and Billson 1992). Other scholars moved decisively toward structural explanations for the entrenchment of poverty and all of its associated hardships and effects among Black men and other marginalized groups (Massey and Denton 2001; Wilson 1987). These studies emphasize the role that residential segregation and extreme racial isolation play in creating an "underclass" from which it is nearly impossible to move. While explicitly structural approaches were intended to counter 'culture of poverty' arguments, the "avoidance of culture discussions eliminated the ability to properly conceptualize, describe, and analyze Black cultural assets" and as result, limited exploration of the agency of Black people and Black communities (Hunter and Robinson 2016:295).

Studies of Black boys and men from the last two decades continue to wrestle with the relationship between structure, culture, and individual agency attempting to disentangle the complex ways that both circumstances and choices may contribute to Black males' disadvantaged social positions and outcomes (Noguera 2003b; Young 1999). For example, sociological work on young men in urban neighborhoods has identified the existence of multiple heterogeneous sets of values including those that are "mainstream" (Harding 2010) or "decent" (Anderson 1999), as well as the small minority of residents who might subscribe to more "street"-based philosophies under which "violent behavior and an obsessive concern with respect become rational strategies for survival" (Massey 2001:327). Despite their overwhelming minority status, the latter group wield the power to compel everyone else in the neighborhood to conform to their "code of the street" (Anderson 1999). While some youth are able to develop strategies to shift between conflicting cultural models, for many, the "mainstream" models are "diluted" or confused by the presence of these alternative street-based approaches that are less likely to lead to mainstream institutional success (Harding 2010). More recently, ideas about the "code of the street" have also been examined online to understand how potentially violent interactions are fueled or disrupted through social media (Lane 2018; Patton et al. 2014; Patton, Eschmann, and Butler 2013; Stuart 2020).

This street code for Black men in environments of economic precarity generally demands a "cool pose" which denies emotional vulnerability and promotes the suppression of emotion, "often [as] a reaction to larger systems that oppress and discriminate against [Black men's] race and gender status (Jackson 2018:1). Jackson (2018) points out that this dominant view of Black male emotionality, and equivalent

theories of the suppression of emotion by Black men and boys in white dominant institutional contexts, erases other more nuanced forms of emotional expression which are evident in "backstage" moments of many ethnographic studies of Black men. Black men and boys rely on each other for emotional support, express vulnerabilities to each other in private moments, and bond. So while emotions are "managed in the frontstage to evoke apathy and indifference," Jackson (2018:10) finds that they are "shared in the backstage to express gratitude and to relate to close friends and their neighborhood" despite the fact that very little of the research on working class Black men explicitly acknowledges the concept of emotion management.

At a time when more Black men are incarcerated or under state supervision than were enslaved before the Civil War (Alexander 2012), scholars have also rightly examined the role that our system of mass incarceration and the policing practices that maintain it "structure the daily lives of young men" in particular neighborhoods and teach them what manhood is about (Jones 2014:34; see also Goffman 2014; Rios 2011; Stuart 2011; Venkatesh 2008). Shabazz (2015) documents the way that the *geographies* of cities and prisons can aid the construction and maintenance of hegemonic forms of masculinity that value "dominance, control, and authority" (Jones 2014:51). Research has shown that Black boys growing up in strained financial situations are often given adult responsibilities earlier making them feel older and identify as men while still childlike in many ways (Burton 2007; Johnson and Mollborn 2009). In experimental studies where participants are told they are viewing pictures of "felony suspects," Black boys are perceived to be 4.5 years older than they are (Goff et al 2014). At the same time that they are being surveilled, ordered, and controlled through institutions, Black boys are also

facing expectations in various domains well beyond their true developmental stage (Dancy 2014; Ladson-Billings 2011; Lesko 1996). These processes of "adultification" create confusing and contradictory expectations during boys' actual transition to adulthood (Roy and Jones 2014; Stevenson 2004). And, perhaps more dangerously, they contribute to a world in which Black boys are not seen as "worthy of protection" and Black *boyhood* itself becomes increasingly "unimaginable" (Dumas and Nelson 2016:30).[8]

The Effects of Violence

Much sociological literature on Black men and boys in urban contexts has focused specifically on violence – both the perpetration of it and victimization by it. In racially isolated inner city neighborhoods with high levels of structural violence (Farmer 1996) in the form of racism, poverty, unemployment, mass incarceration, and a systematic disinvestment of public institutional resources and services, physical violence between young men especially can become (or at least feel like) a defining feature of social life and public space. In some cases this is because membership in gangs becomes a critical form of social support and requires the use of violence (Ralph 2014; Shabazz 2015; Venkatesh 2008). In other cases, the illegal drug trade functions as the only reliable source of income in a deflated economy and racially isolated neighborhood (Contreras 2012; Venkatesh 2009). More broadly, the public performance of masculinity in inner city contexts often requires a posture of preparedness to fight at any sign of disrespect or

[8] It is possible, though, to conceive of some positive effects of the patterns of hypercriminalization and adultification such as the development of political consciousness among youth (Rios 2011) which will be discussed more fully in the conclusion.

encroachment on personal territory (Anderson 1999; Shabazz 2015). In these neighborhoods, violence functions as an ecological, not just individual, process (Anderson 1999) and plays a role in "structuring social relationships, identity and hierarchy, use of space, perceptions, and cultural frameworks" (Harding 2010:3).

Studies of men and boys who have themselves been violently victimized document the negative social, psychological, and educational impact it can have on the life course, even more profoundly when it occurs during critical transitional periods like adolescence (Feldman 2020; Macmillan 2001). Qualitative investigations of young Black men injured by gunshots find that these injuries often lead to changes in their "webs of social relationships" (Lee 2012:255), their identity, and a "rerouting" of their aspirations (Ralph 2014). Sometimes these changes are positive in that once one has survived a gunshot, he has less to prove about his manhood (Ralph 2014), but often the initial glimmer of hope or motivation after a "wake up call" injury can fade over time (Rich 2011). And other research has shown that for Black men who experience intentional injuries, like gunshots or stabbings, the injury can result in an increasing distrust of others and a loss of social support (Jiang et al. 2018).

One ethnographic study that illuminates some of the mechanisms through which violence impacts young men's lives is Harding's (2010) *Living the Drama*. His study of 60 adolescent boys in three low-income neighborhoods in Boston shows how the prevalence of neighborhood violence *levels* the boys' desires for their future because safety and survival become the primary goal. Harding argues that:

> Negative role models do more than make the costs of failure clear. They also redefine what success and failure mean. When one's neighborhood peers are frequently involved in violence and crime, when they suffer the consequences,

> including arrest, incarceration, injury, and death, merely avoiding these activities and consequences becomes an achievement. A new calibration emerges based on neighborhood standards, *leveling expectations* to the local comparison group and thereby heavily influencing the frames that boys use to understand and evaluate their own actions. (57)

The practice of associating one's own aspirations with peers' outcomes may be even more pronounced among African Americans who have historically developed and relied on fictive kinship networks for survival (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 1994; Stack 1983). Fordham (1988:57) argues that the existence of fictive kinship practices within Black American communities creates a sense of *collective aspiration*, whereby individuals "associate their life chances and 'success' potential with those of their peers and other members of the community. It is understandable how cycles of violence can occur if those impacted experience a leveling of their individual or collective future possibilities.

With just a few notable exceptions (Harding 2010; Rios 2011), these studies of Black men and boys involved in street life generally ignore the place of school or schooling in their lives. Although it is true that in studies of deviance and violence, many research participants may not be currently enrolled in school, their past history with school can be an important piece of the context in which they develop their worldviews (Young 2004). And for those who *are* enrolled, shifting relationships with school after a violent incident, for example, can reveal crucial mechanisms for the effect of violence on young Black men's lives (Dance 2002; Rios 2011).

Schooling in Violent Contexts

Like the sociologists who study Black men on the street, sociologists of education also confront tensions between the possible structural and cultural explanations for their participants' experiences. Many sociologists who study Black boys in school spaces have

sought to unpack the sources and causes of the social reproduction of Black boys' position as experiencing some of the poorest academic outcomes and some of the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions across all student groups (Duncan 2002; Ferguson 2001; Howard 2014; Noguera 2003b, 2009; Schott Foundation 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014).[9]

In urban contexts throughout the country, Black boys from low-income families are likely to attend schools that are under-resourced in myriad ways, including the increasing replacement of counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses with police officers (Whitaker et al. 2019). Historical legacies of residential segregation and persistent poverty, structural inequalities and racism baked into school systems, and stubborn implicit biases held by adults who lead schools and classrooms can turn schools serving Black and other racially minoritized students into sites of "abuse" and "suffering" (Dumas 2014; McKenzie 2009; Zirkel et al. 2011) – even when there are the "best intentions" (Lewis and Diamond 2015) – and saddle all of us with an "educational debt" owed to these students (Ladson-Billings 2006). Teachers themselves are often infantilized by the public, policy makers, and academics and under-supported by their own schools and school systems making any efforts to transform schools from within even more challenging (Payne 2008). Individual caring teachers, who understand the structural basis of their students' challenges, may not feel safe or supported in "practicing transformative humanizing pedagogies" in school environments that are hyper-focused

[9] For Black boys in public schools, the national high school graduation rate is 59%; the national rate of school suspension is 15% (compared to 5% for white boys); and the national academic proficiency rates, as measured by the 8th grade NAEP, is 12% in reading and 13% in math (Schott Foundation 2015).

on testing or prone to blaming families for students' under-achievement (Lynn et al. 2010:317).

Within these complex and troubled school contexts, ethnographic studies show that Black boys are more likely than their counterparts to be surveilled, silenced, or seen as "bad" (Ferguson 2001; Kirkland 2013; Pascoe 2011). These disproportionately poor outcomes come about in situations both when the boys themselves work hard to fulfill the school's expectations (MacLeod 2008) and when they develop oppositional or resistant identities to flout school authority (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Noguera 2009). Moreover, boys who are being underserved in schools or who are in need in other ways who disengage in classrooms are at risk of being perceived as disinterested, defiant, or even dangerous. "Misreadings" of Black boys by white teachers – and the disproportionality of the disciplinary actions that result – are partly explained by "deficit perspectives…inherit[ed]" by white teachers from the media and daily life in this country (Bryan 2017:336; Sealey-Ruiz and Greene 2015). Teachers of color are not immune to developing these stereotypes and biases as well, and these practices are seldom interrupted in or by teacher education programs (Sealey-Ruiz and Greene 2015).

Scholarship on urban schooling often points to the tenuous nature of many Black boys' relationships with school and the heterogeneity of cultural beliefs at play as they navigate their own identities within it (Carter 2005; Conchas and Noguera 2004). Some ethnographies show the incursion of "street" codes, postures, and identities into school life (Dance 2002; Flores-González 2002; Harding 2010; Rios 2011) or more generally the ways that educational contexts can sometimes exacerbate already rigid definitions of masculinity. It may be that now Black boys who do well in school are no longer be

accused of "acting White" as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) once argued, but now have their manhood questioned as they are accused of acting gay or feminine (Howard 2014; Kimmel and Mahler 2003).[10]

There are other dangers for Black boys who, perhaps because they feel vulnerable in the face of trauma or failure, perform the forms of Black masculinity that gain them respect outside of school (Cassidy and Stevenson 2005). In school, teachers may misinterpret (and penalize) performances of Black masculinity, such as enacting the "cool pose" (Majors and Billson 1992) or the postures required by the "code of the street" (Anderson 1999). For example, in her ethnographic portrait of "street-savvy" high school students, Dance (2002:7) proposes that the "mainstream biases" of school settings can transform the "tough fronts" students bring with them from inner city streets from "temporary, survivalistic attitudes into firm political convictions." Dance's research shows that students' performances-turned-politics combined with some teachers' lack of understanding create challenging conditions for academic success.

Rios's (2011) study of the criminalization of young Black and Latino males similarly reveals the compounding effect that institutional misunderstandings have when students experience out-of-school traumas and carry the "debt of violence" back into school with them (Huerta 2018). For example, after Slick, a fourteen-year-old in Rios'

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[10] To be clear, even these explicit strategies of resistance generally do not come from a place of *wanting* to fail (Harris 2011). As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it so poignantly in his memoir, "Our folks understood that there was a war upon us and that school was a weapon that outdid any Glock….It worked on me like an invisible weight, altered my laughter, posture, my approach to girls. Fuck what you have heard or what you have seen in your son. He may lie about homework and laugh when the teacher calls home. He may curse his teacher, propose arson for the whole public system. But inside is the same sense that was in me. None of us ever want to fail. None of us want to be unworthy, to not measure up…No matter what the professional talkers tell you, I have never met a black boy who wanted to fail" (Coates 2009:169–70, 180).

study, watches his best friend die on the streets of Oakland, his "teachers treated him differently…, as if he were responsible for the shooting" (6). Although Slick "pretend[ed] to show no trauma" (4), Rios suggests that he was grieving and in fear for his own life so chose not to come to school. A few weeks later, he was expelled from school for missing too many days. Rather than supporting students as they are experiencing traumatic forms of loss, school adults may misinterpret behaviors and punish those who are grieving on the basis of racialized assumptions or stereotypes, particularly those surrounding certain performances of racialized masculinity.

In more recent work, Rios (2017) investigates further the role of school as an institution of social control in students' lives. He argues that the heavily surveilled lives of young people, and boys of color in particular, require them to "shift their practices, actions, and attitudes across short time spans (e.g., a few hours) and spaces (e.g., between school and street)" (9). Although teachers may have good intentions, they often "fail…to recognize [students'] multiple dimensions and multiple selves" (10), turning young people into "human targets" for discipline and criminalization, rather than for support and nurturance. In other words, when experiences of violence and loss outside of school "level" a young person's horizons (Harding 2010), the school and its staff may themselves play a role in aggravating (or potentially mitigating) those effects.

Beyond these examples, the majority of literature exploring the impact of street events, particularly violence, on school outcomes is quantitative, offering us valuable macro level insight into correlations and possible causal pathways. For example, sophisticated quasi-experimental analyses have demonstrated the negative impact that local community violence – even if not directly experienced or witnessed – can have on

measures of children's short-term cognitive performance: Exposure to recent violent crime on a child's block can lower elementary and high school vocabulary and reading scores (Sharkey 2010), reducing pass rates for Black students by as much as 3% (Sharkey et al. 2014; see also Caudillo and Torche 2014).[11] Even preschoolers' attention, impulse control, and pre-academic skills are negatively impacted by local violence (Sharkey et al. 2012). One study shows that the effects of local traumatic violent events are even greater in schools serving economically disadvantaged students (Gershenson and Tekin 2015).

Neighborhood effects research has demonstrated that living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, which often include higher levels of violence, can also increase the risk of dropping out of school (Crowder and South 2003) and can reduce college-going aspirations (Stewart, Stewart, and Simons 2007); *prolonged* exposure to neighborhood disadvantage has a major negative impact on high school graduation (Wodtke, Harding, and Elwert 2011). Further, all of these findings are even more pronounced among African American teenagers, and they can spread in their impact to school peers who live in different neighborhoods (Burdick-Will 2018). While these studies offer compelling evidence of the short and sometimes long term impacts of neighborhood violence on school-related outcomes, they do not offer much insight into the specific *mechanism* of the effects – including the role of adults in school (Huerta 2018) and the links between

[11] Research on the impacts of the unexpected, though not specifically violent, death of a loved one on a nationally representative sample of adolescents finds that "experiencing sudden loss was associated with lower academic achievement, lower ability to concentrate and learn, less enjoyment of school, lower school belongingness, and lower beliefs that teachers treat youth fairly" (Oosterhoff, Kaplow, and Layne 2018:372).

students' emotional experiences and their academic outcomes (Valiente, Swanson, and Eisenberg 2012).

Experiencing Peer Loss

Just as experiencing violent injury can reframe one's sense of self and relations, so too can the loss of a loved one "disrupt identity, relationships, and social roles" (Jakoby 2012:685). We do not just lose the person, but we lose the "self that was constructed through interactions with the deceased" (686). For example, the death of a young person who was the social glue in a peer group might result in the temporary or permanent loss of closeness in other friendships or the need for a reshuffling of social roles (Deck and Folta 1989). Loss can also inspire new feelings about the self, and trigger a desire to "reorganize one's identity" (Neimeyer, Baldwin, and Gillies 2006:718), especially during the complicated period of adolescence (Steinberg and Morris 2001; Crosnoe and Johnson 2011). Indeed, the developmental and identity tasks of adolescence make it a "tender time for any major crises" (Erikson 1994; Williams and Merten 2009:68). Though the death of a peer is considered a non-normative experience for young people (Balk et al. 2011), several studies find that between 30% and 90% of adolescents have lost at least one friend to accidental death, suicide, or homicide (McNeil et al. 1991; Schachter 1992; Vaswani 2014).

Although relatively few studies have directly addressed adolescent experiences with peer loss, those that do suggest a complex and variable process of grief and healing in these contexts. An interview-based study with African American teen girls who had lost a friend to homicide maps the "hidden loss" girls carry and the coping strategies they employ (Johnson 2010b, 2010a, 2014); the author finds that losses disrupt girls' social

networks and sense of belonging, but that girls sometimes show positive growth as they heal. A case study in a single small rural Midwestern high school explored the experiences of the student body after the death of a star senior athlete to leukemia (McNeil et al. 1991). Results from a questionnaire showed that nearly the entirely student body was affected by the death, that students employed both active and passive coping strategies, and that many peers carried intense feelings about their loss for more than 18 months. Retrospective interviews with college students on the death of a friend in high school showed that peer loss was more impactful than the loss of a grandparent or older family member, and that the feelings of grief lasted years; further, most of these students found little support for the youth from their parents or schools as they coped with their loss (O'Brien, Goodenow, and Espin 1991).

Some studies explore and advocate for task-oriented group interventions or other forms of group therapy (Malone 2007, 2012; Salloum, Avery, and McClain 2001), although there is often stigma among Black males around seeking out these services (Lindsey, Joe, and Nebbitt 2010; Lindsey and Marcell 2012; Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005). Other scholars propose death education courses in schools (Schachter 1992). In a study of sibling loss, Balk (1983) showed how adolescents found explanations for premature death and support for their grief in their religious beliefs, while another study proposed that religious youth relied primarily on specific aspects of their religion, such as songs or prayers, rather than turning to their overall faith for comfort (O'Brien et al. 1991).

Smith's (2015) retrospective interview study of the loss biographies of young Black men in Baltimore shows that peer loss was a significant developmental turning

point for participants, some of whom had experienced as many as ten homicide losses by the age of twenty. Violent deaths lead to *traumatic stress*, but perpetually violent neighborhood contexts create a situation where there is no "post" (as in PTSD), and the losses of multiple peers, friends, and family members continue to accumulate (Andersen et al. 2013; Smith 2015; Smith and Patton 2016). Bordere (2009) explored early adolescent Black boys in two different mourning ritual contexts in New Orleans – "second line" processions that are celebratory events following a death and "regular" or traditional funerals. She argues that because Black people are often less likely to seek out mental health services (and/or have more limited access to those services) after a loss, assessing the grief of Black boys may be more easily done through ritual practices rather than clinical settings. Similarly, Patton and colleagues (2017) go online to find that Twitter has become a space for gang-involved teenagers to cope with the deaths of friends and make meaning of their resulting trauma.

As O'Brien and colleagues (1991:439) write, "what begins as coping with the loss of a friend can become the facing of the reality of personal death." The loss of peers among young people can prompt fatalistic thinking and diminished expectations or aspirations for the future (Bluck et al. 2008; Ens and Bond 2007; Florian and Mikulincer 1997; Smith 2015). The typical "sense of invincibility" that adolescents experience is called into question by the unexpected death of a same-age peer (Johnson 2010b:367). These feelings have been found to be most common among Black male youth (Warner and Swisher 2015), and are predicted by neighborhood poverty levels (Swisher and Warner 2013). Anderson's (1999:135) study of young Black men in Philadelphia reinforces the idea that "the high death rate among their peers keeps many [young people]

from expecting to live beyond the age twenty-five [and they] have made peace with their death" (see also Harding 2010, Brezina et al. 2008; Smith 2015; Tolleson 1997). Despite the fact that scholars have been wondering for decades how, for example, "frequent attendance at peers' funerals [might] affect adolescent males' sense of a future" (Bell and Jenkins 1993:53), we still know very little about the specific sources and consequences of fatalistic thinking, and what processes or relationships might mediate this effect. Violence and loss can trigger the rethinking and restructuring of peer relationships among adolescents, but peer relationships and the broader social climate of a school can also alleviate or aggravate the impacts of fatalistic thinking.

The Social Regulation of Grief

Grieving is experienced "in the face of involuntary loss," the most "irretrievable" of which is the death of a loved one or friend (Jakoby 2012:682). Grief is not only a "normal" individual response to loss, with the potential for "mental, physical and social manifestations" (Charmaz and Milligan 2006:518), as many psychologists and clinicians would posit (Horwitz and Wakefield 2012), but it is also a "social emotion" worthy of sociological investigation (Jakoby 2012). Many sociologists argue that grief – or at least the ways it is publicly expressed – is socially constructed (Berns 2011; Fowlkes 1990; Goodrum 2008; Harris 2010; Jakoby 2012; Lofland 1985; Martin 2013). For Lofland (1985:181), grief is an emotion "however much based in biological capacities, which touches directly on the mutual interdependence of selves and societies, of actors and others, of me and you." She argues, therefore, that because social rules and social roles dictate so much of what we have come to know as grieving, we cannot even grasp the full variability of what people experience after a loss.

Sociological research on grief suggests that there are multiple social forces that promote compliance with the social norms around grieving, and that conforming to those norms constitutes a large part of what makes bereavement difficult (Harris 2010) and "awkward" (Goodrum 2008). Compared to previous centuries, modern life in Western societies has compartmentalized death and dying, turning it into a business and banishing grief to the margins of everyday life (Aries 1981; Cann 2014). As a result, the bereaved often must take conscious steps to minimize the burden their grief places on others (Goodrum 2008). Some mourners also experience the policing of their grief displays by friends or family members (Walter 2000), while others may find that they do not even have a socially legitimated right to grieve (Doka 1989; Fowlkes 1990). More generally, there is an increasingly strong societal expectation that people focus on the "positive outcomes" of loss or rush to "find closure" after a death (Berns 2011; Klass 2013).

However, other theories of bereavement suggest that many people now pursue "continuing bonds" with deceased loved ones rather than closure (Klass and Steffen 2017; Mitchell et al. 2012; Neimeyer et al. 2006:2012; Walter et al. 2012). Various "forms of alternative memorialization are emerging because of, and concurrent with, the disenfranchisement of mourning" (Cann 2014:13). These include public temporary memorials at the physical site of a death, temporary material memorials like t-shirts and car decals, permanent bodily memorials like tattoos, and internet based memorials (Bordere 2009; Cann 2014; Jimerson 2014; Walter et al. 2012).

While the psychological experience of grief for most people, "though difficult, is tolerable and abates with time" (Stroebe, Schut, and Stroebe 2007:1963), the social expectations around who can grieve, what grief looks like, and for how long it can last

create added challenges for those who have experienced significant loss. Black adolescent boys sit at the intersection of multiple social identities which subject their bereavement experience to particular social rules and restrictions. First, as young people, their emotional lives are generally given less weight by adults; many people consider adolescents to have underdeveloped or still-developing emotions and therefore may downplay their emotional pain (Balk et al. 2011; Ellis 1989). Others view children as inherently resilient and therefore requiring of less attention during times of loss (Lenhardt 1997).

By virtue of their race, Black boys also experience added social challenges with loss. Although Black Americans are largely understudied in the grief and bereavement literature (Granek and Peleg-Sagy 2015), we do know that losses impact marginalized people more (Kersting et al. 2011; Newson et al. 2011) and can function as a source of "cumulative disadvantage" and racial inequality (Umberson et al. 2014). The institutional response to Black death can further aggravate these inequalities, particularly when the death is the result of violence. Black families who have lost a child to homicide are less likely than white families to receive notification of the death from the police in an empathic or emotionally supportive way (Martin 2013). Young Black victims of murder are often assumed to have been participating in illegal activities, stigmatizing their families and friends in their most vulnerable moments (Martin 2010; Spungen 1997) and delegitimizing their emotional pain (Lawson 2014; Piazza-Bonin et al. 2015).[12] When the

[12] Research in medical contexts shows that there is significant racial bias in the perception of pain, i.e. Black people may be assumed to feel less pain and/or are less likely to be treated with pain medication (Goyal et al. 2015; Singhal, Tien, and Hsia 2016; Trawalter, Hoffman, and Waytz 2012).

life that was lost is devalued because of racialized stereotypes, it can make "grieving itself feel invalid" (Cacho 2007:183). The disenfranchisement of grief is exacerbated by social and structural inequalities (Bindley et al. 2019).

Cultural norms connected to race and/or ethnicity also play a role in structuring grief responses. For example, Rosenblatt and Wallace (2005) find that "being strong in grief" is an expectation among many African Americans after losing a loved one. This can mean not showing one's pain or avoiding triggering someone else's pain by discussing a loss. Being strong can also involve not seeking help (Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005); however, the help itself – what some have called "bereavement technologies," such as counseling or other support services – is unequally distributed such that many people of color, particularly those living in poverty, do not have access to it (Allen 2007; Martin 2005).

Further, the age-based and racialized constraints described above are also gendered. Being male presents added social restrictions and less flexibility around the productive experience and expression of grief after loss (Kenney 2003; Zinner 2000). Given dominant ideas of masculinity and traditional gender socialization of boys (Connell 2000; Kimmel 2009) – as well as the added expectations of toughness and virility for Black boys (Stevenson 2003; Way 2013) – expressing vulnerability by confessing that a loss has been impactful or seeking help can have social costs (Creighton et al. 2013, 2016; Newson et al. 2011). Male grievers who prefer affective or expressive modes, Doka and Martin (2010:91) argue, often find that their "intense feelings of grief are more than a mere inconvenience; they represent a threat to the self" and to their very idea of masculinity. To "mask, control, or justify" their emotions and expressions of

grief, some men engage in risk-taking behaviors including the (over)use of drugs or alcohol (Creighton et al. 2016:54; Doka and Martin 2010).

The social perception of the relationship between a griever and the deceased – in this case friendship – can also function as a source of social silencing (Liu, Forbat, and Anderson 2019; Sklar and Hartley 1990). Deck and Folta (1989) have argued that friends are "high-risk" grievers because there is often little societal or institutional acknowledgement around their loss (87). Decision-making around mourning rituals is often reserved for the family. Schools and universities rarely recognize the death of a friend as a reason for being absent. Unlike the way the family of the deceased is treated, "no such concern is registered in the case of friendship groups. There is neither an assumption of crisis nor an expectation of the need for reorganization" (Deck and Folta 1989:84). The "survivor-friends" are a "hidden population" (Sklar and Hartley 1990).

Finally, when a death is the result of violence, the risks of complications to grief and negative long-term impacts on loved ones are higher than for other kinds of death (Goodrum 2008; Martin 2013; Murphy et al. 2003). In homicide, the facts surrounding a death "do not speak for themselves"; instead, every involved person "must construct an account of their own relation to the victim that legitimates that role in light of practical logistics concerning the investigation, the victim's funeral, and any subsequent legal proceedings" (Martin 2013:19). This can create an added burden for the families of homicide victims and other co-victims (Goodrum 2008; Martin 2010; Walter 2000). Further, the friends of homicide victims may face assumptions that they too are involved in behaviors that put them at risk of violence and limit the support offered to them as they process and grieve their loss (Rios 2011).

Overall, the literature suggests that adolescent Black males from economically insecure backgrounds who have lost a peer to violence are potentially subject to numerous compounding expectations and obstructions that may challenge their healing process. Further, if this group is subjected to more frequent losses, it may be that the accumulation of loss may make it difficult to heal from each one (Anda et al. 2006; Grinage 2019; Smith 2015). School-based psychotherapy groups have been shown to be helpful to restoring adolescent wellbeing in the aftermath of a homicide (Balk et al. 2011; Malone 2007, 2012; Salloum et al. 2001), but little research has explored the social aspects of loss and response, or the way everyday school-based social interactions might shape how students interpret, respond, and recover from peer loss. Though prior research has generally neglected these questions or this specific population, we know that the stakes are high since there are dangerous long-term consequences for men who spend their lifetimes repressing their feelings or otherwise trying to prove their masculinity (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Umberson et al. 2003). In general, there is much to be learned from an ethnographic exploration of the social aspects of grieving among adolescent Black boys and the everyday spaces in which they spend time, interact, and, therefore, grieve their lost friends.

Feeling Rules, Emotion Work, and Disenfranchised Grief

This project is guided by the theory of feeling rules and the emotion work required to follow them. In her groundbreaking book, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (2002:7 fn) outlined a theory of emotional labor[13] which posited that many professionals

[13] Hochschild uses the term "emotional labor" to refer to the management of emotions in the workplace or for a wage and "emotion work" to cover all other contexts of emotion management.

are required by their jobs to control the "publicly observable facial and bodily display" of their emotions. She demonstrates this through a study of flight attendants, who are paid to perform pleasantness, tolerate abuse from customers, and "really smile" (4), as well as bill collectors, who must control their emotional display in ways that "*deflate* the customer's status" (139, emphasis in original). Other scholars have expanded on Hochschild's conception of emotional labor to consider the way other groups of people must manage their emotions (i.e., perform emotion work) in contexts beyond the workplace (Cooper 2014; Cox 2016; Rao 2017).

One of the key elements in the theorization of emotion work is *feeling rules*, which serve as "guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation" both on the job and in other social situations (Hochschild 1979:566). Acting sad at the funeral of a loved one or shocked and happy when one is thrown a surprise birthday party are examples of moments when the performed feelings are in accordance with the expectations or rules of the situation. Yet there may be times when feelings do not fit – as in being relieved by a breakup or overcome with sadness at the news of a friend's good fortune – and one might need to *act* to avoid a social faux pas. This is necessary because breaking the feeling rules of a particular situation can have social consequences. But it is "through social interaction [that] we learn how others expect us to behave and also how others expect us to feel" (Goodrum 2008:423), and in most cases we abide by these social rules.[14]

[14] There are additional subtilities here that are beyond the scope of this analysis. For example, Hochschild differentiates between feeling rules and display rules. Relatedly, she describes the difference between deep and surface acting in the process of responding to feeling rules.

Sociologists have used the theoretical framework of feeling rules to consider the ways that people's responses to loss are shaped by social norms and policed by others, sometimes to their detriment. For example, family members might tell young children who have witnessed or experienced violence to "forget about" what happened and discourage them from talking about their related feelings (Ozer and Weinstein 2004); this, in turn, will shape what emotions those children come to believe are acceptable to express, or perhaps even to feel. Adult family members who experience the murder of a child can also have their experiences of grief shaped through social interaction. Martin (2005, 2013) finds that the police offer differential levels of emotional support to Black and white grieving families, which serves to delegitimize the grief of Black families. Similarly, Goodrum's (2008) research suggests that friends of the bereaved often feel uncomfortable responding to expressions of grief and try to silence them, change the subject, or suggest that they move on. This puts an added burden on those who are grieving to respond to the discomfort of the people who are supposed to be offering support.

Our frames and feeling rules around grief can limit the way individuals and groups are able to cope with a loss long-term as well. Berns (2011) has explored the historical development of the concept of "closure" which has become "a new emotion for explaining what we need after trauma and loss and how we should respond" (3). Berns shows how the quest for closure has become commercialized, impacting the way the funeral industry runs (and produces profit) and playing out in our popular culture, even when closure is not actually what people want or believe is possible. She argues that "the

closure frame limits the possibilities for how we think about grief and fails to capture the experience of many who face death or some other loss" (161).

Within clinical and academic communities, there has been considerable and ongoing debate about what should be officially classified as "normal" grief compared to "complicated grief" or other manifestations of grief that are "high risk" or "disordered" and therefore require professional attention (Doka 2017; Jakoby 2012; Stroebe et al. 2007). These distinctions are not natural, but developed by people and subject to change – as evidenced by ever evolving definitions in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM); they are both informed by and then themselves shape societal feeling rules about grief and the pathologizing of particular grieving behaviors (Granek and Peleg-Sagy 2017; Kersting et al. 2011).

Feeling rules not only prescribe the length of time that someone can grieve and when they should find "closure" and "get over it," but also sometimes the very people who are allowed to grieve in the first place. Sometimes when feeling rules restrict the allowable social expression of grief because of particular characteristics of the griever or circumstances related to the death, a person's grief can become disenfranchised. "Disenfranchised grief" is the experience of suffering a loss but having "little or no opportunity to mourn publicly [because one does] not have a socially recognized right, role, or capacity to grieve" (Doka 1989:3). Grief can become disenfranchised when the griever is not seen as having full competence to grieve, when the relationship between the griever and deceased is questionable, or when the loss itself is ambiguous or seen as morally suspect. Disenfranchised grief creates what Doka (1989:7) describes as a "paradox" in that "the very nature of disenfranchised grief creates additional problems for

grief, while removing or minimizing any sources of support." The lack of social sanctioning for deep emotions can result in myriad challenges for the griever.

Emotion management is the practice through which people "cope" with the feeling rules of a given situation (Hochschild 1979:551), or with the disenfranchisement of particular emotional responses. Although feeling rules are often unspoken, rule reminders of various types are used to help people remember and comply with the feeling rules of the situation. Feeling rules and related rule reminders not only vary by context, but can function differently for different groups of people because "feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership" (Hochschild 1979:566). In other words, experiencing "misfitting feelings" can signal a "discrepancy between our values and the prevailing values" which, Shields (2005:8) argues is not a neutral, but rather a political, event. Feeling rules, and the resulting required emotion work, are often racialized, gendered, and classed such that they function differently for different groups (Harlow 2003; Kang 2003; Pierce 1996; Wingfield 2007, 2012). In other words, feeling rules can reflect larger societal ideologies, and therefore their inequalities.

In schools, emotions are central to many interactions and educational processes, as well as sites of social control (Boler 1999). Each institution might have its own "emotional culture…held together by a network of socialization practices that are influenced by political, economic, social, and other educational factors" (Zembylas 2006:255). Often within these educational environments adults serve as "emotional socializers [and] gatekeepers," redirecting students' emotional displays to fit institutional norms (Cox 2016; Gilmore 1985). For Black boys in particular, school can be a space where racialized and gendered rules of interaction and emotion bump up against other

behavioral expectations in problematic ways. Teachers may police Black boys' behaviors or emotional outbursts differently than other groups (Dance 2002; Ferguson 2001).

The feeling rules for Black boy- and manhood, of course, extend beyond the school context into public life in inner city neighborhoods. As discussed previously, Majors and Billson (1992) argue that Black males enact a "cool pose" to maintain dignity in the face of oppression and Anderson's (1999) investigation of young Black men in public spaces reveals the existence of an unspoken "code of the street" which requires a posture of preparedness to fight at any sign of disrespect or encroachment on personal territory (see also Shabazz 2015).

Studies of emotion management among middle class or upwardly mobile Black men reveal the particularities of the Black male experience and the unique set of intersecting gendered and racialized feeling rules they face in a mainstream (and often majority white) educational context. Like other studies in the labor market (Wingfield 2007, 2012), Wilkins' (2012:35) argues that middle class Black college men respond to the "emotional dilemmas" of conflicting expectations for emotional display by engaging in emotional restraint. She calls this strategy "moderate blackness" because it "manages the individual problems black men face on college campuses but does not challenge the basis for the different emotional rules that constrain them in the first place. At the same time, it limits their ability to see or address other forms of race-based treatment that might constrain their future mobility" (61). In contrast, Jackson and Wingfield (2013) find that senior members of a campus organization for Black men use displays of anger strategically and "backstage" to discourage other Black men from behaving in ways that might reinforce negative stereotypes and to promote brotherhood and professionalism.

Similarly, another study documents the experiences of Black college men who "learned to express their rage through feminist activism and in the safety of group activities" (White and Peretz 2010:418). Whereas the restricted emotional expression of the men in Wilkins' (2012) study mirrors their constrained political consciousness, the men in the other two studies display anger strategically in the interest of "fight[ing] injustice" (White and Peretz 2010:418).

Emotion work requires not just a prescribed performance of emotion, but inevitably a control of the felt emotions themselves which can have long-term effects on a person's identity and emotional life – especially if there is an unequal power relationship between those prescribing the emotional displays and those fulfilling them (e.g., employer and employee or school institution and student). Over time, Hochschild (2002) argues, ongoing emotion work can result in a detachment from the self: "it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel" (21). When the self becomes estranged from the role (as worker or student), it may come at the expense of one or the other (Wharton 1999), both of which could be harmful for young people in pursuing long-term goals. This begs the question, then, of whether ongoing submission to the feeling rules around, not only day-to-day Black masculine norms, but also the ones associated with the (relatively frequent) experience of loss and grief might have lasting impacts on the emotional lives of young Black men and boys in school and beyond. Sociologists have just begun to examine this question quantitatively to understand the ways in which the unique stresses of relational losses, and the inequality of their distribution across racial groups, contributes to health disadvantages over the life course for Black Americans (Umberson 2017). This study takes a qualitative approach to

the more specific case of Black teen boys and their loss of friends to investigate the potential role of institutional and peer group feeling rules in mediating or aggravating the negative impacts of that loss.

Significance

In the United States, structural inequities keep racial and gender achievement gaps entrenched, depriving Black male youth (as well as other groups) of the full range of opportunities for social and economic advancement. In this study, I investigate the role of a school explicitly designed to serve Black boys from the inner city in shaping how they respond to and recover from the deaths of peers and friends that too often punctuate their adolescent lives. The research contributes to critical conversations concerning educational inequity – its underlying causes and long-term consequences – by shedding light on the understudied role of violence and loss in adolescent Black boys' school lives. How does the violence that impacts Boys' Prep students' daily lives shape their educational trajectories? How does the school, through its teachers, administrators, and policies, support them in coping with the racialized traumas of gun violence that hit close to home so much more frequently than their white or wealthier peers? And how, ultimately, do boys experience their friends' deaths long-term as they develop plans for the future and (re)conceptualize their sense of self?

These questions are crucially important in the present moment in which public attention to the bodily threats facing Black boys and men compounds decades of research on their disproportionately low academic achievement and attainment rates.[15]

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[15] Questions of the unequal distribution of trauma and loss (Umberson et al. 2017) will likely become even more critical as we move to the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic and schools plan for reopening and

Understanding the processes through which Black boys make meaning of and overcome (or are overcome by) experiences of violent peer loss – and the role a new brand of educational intervention might play in supporting those processes – may contribute critical insights to an enlightened effort to alleviate educational injustice and its crippling burdens on vulnerable youth. One may also hope that a more acute appreciation of the traumas of everyday gun violence on teenage social networks and schools will further empower the voices of frontline activists who are working tirelessly to extirpate the sources of violence and its toxic impacts on urban communities and Black youth.

This dissertation is as much about living, learning, and loving as it is about death and grief. Although my analysis centers around three incidents of gun death and their aftermath, the stories I follow of Boys' Prep students, and their teachers and school leaders, reveal creative strategies for coping, practices of love and care, and commitments and recommitments to learning and planning for the future. The losses described here — both the literal losses of life, but also the departures of childhood and innocence that come with that for victims' friends — are deeply troubling and tragic. Yet, there are at the same time, strands of hope and many stories of love and brotherhood that cannot and should not be ignored. As I discuss in the conclusion, there are also opportunities to support students in developing critical and political consciousness and make space for them to become agents of their desires for a better future.

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supporting students, who may have lost loved ones to the virus, both academically and emotionally.

Preview of Chapters

The next chapter, *Methodology,* explains the methodological approach that I have taken to this ethnography, focusing on specific methods of data collection and analysis. Here I also discuss the process of gaining access and my first days at Boys' Prep; how I recruited and selected participants; how students and adults at the school viewed and interacted with me in my role as researcher; and the limitations of the study. I also describe some of the more difficult moments of fieldwork and what they illuminate about the ethical and empirical challenges of this type of research. Further details about key participants can be found in Appendix A; a more precise documentation of my data collection methods and timeline can be found in Appendix B; an explanation of my approach to naming (or not naming) participants in Appendix C; and more personal reflections about my methods are included in Appendix E.

The ethnographic portion of the dissertation follows in three parts, each of which is structured around the death of a Boys' Prep student between 2016 and 2018. Part I, *The Death of Tyhir*, is primarily descriptive and is intended to introduce the principal characters, daily life at school, and the broader Philadelphia context which shapes the boys' lives in and out of school life. Also illuminated here are the key themes around the boys' emotional expression, social media use, friendships, and teacher-student relationships, all of which will be more thoroughly interpreted in subsequent sections.

The first chapter of Part I, *A Monday Night in July*, begins with the fatal shooting of fifteen year-old Tyhir, who had just completed his freshman year at Boys' Prep. I show the real-time trajectory, beginning in the first hours after the shooting, as his friends and school staff hear the news, process the loss, and endeavor to move forward. The

chapter introduces readers to many of Tyhir's friends and some of the adults at Boys' Prep who will figure in throughout the analysis as they all make their way through the remainder of summer – attending memorial events, communicating their grief through social media, and finding some solace in summer school – and prepare themselves to return to school in the fall.[16]

The second chapter, *When Grief Goes to School: A Baseline Year*, provides an ethnographic account of my first year of research at Boys' Prep. Through this and the previous chapter, readers are oriented to the school's founding principles, culture, and the demographics of students and staff. I also discuss how Boys' Prep fits within the landscape of schooling locally and nationally and the pressures school leaders face to prioritize quantifiable academic outcomes in the context of an educational "crisis" for Black boys. I describe daily school life, including the norms and expectations that shape students' and adults' interactions with each other. Notably, Boys' Prep leaders aim to impart a view of masculinity that is more expansive, perhaps even softer, than (stereo)typical Black masculine norms; but students receive mixed messages and their patterns of emotional expression mostly emphasize the control and suppression of emotions, even while grieving. Despite this, throughout the year, Tyhir's friends memorialize him through material and embodied markers, ritual events, and online displays, which preview the stages of grief to come.

The final chapter of Part I, *A New School Year Begins*, launches us into the beginning of the following school year, 2017-2018, which is full of both the promise of a

[16] The narrative of this chapter is constructed through stories shared with me after the fact since I did not enter the Boys' Prep community until the fall of 2016.

fresh start *and* the challenges of a novice principal, changes to the core administrative team, and an infusion of ambitious new disciplinary policies. The chapter follows the start of the new year for several students, concluding as the routine of the school year is jolted and the students re-traumatized by the gun death of a second student – and one of my research participants – senior Jahsun.

Part II, *The Death of Jahsun,* takes on a more analytical tone, as I chronicle the months that followed Jahsun's death and offer a three stage analysis of schoolwide grieving. Chapter Four, *The Easy Hard: Collective Grieving After Shared Loss*, starts with the aftermath of Jahsun's murder over the Thanksgiving holiday. Here I concentrate on the school's immediate logistical and administrative plans and the adult-level decision-making about how to support students' acute emotional needs as they all prepare to return to school on Monday in the wake of their loss. I track students' responses within their peer groups on and offline and the collective mourning rituals happening once all are back in school. Students diverged in their needs, but almost all seemed to benefit from the suspension of the normal behavioral expectations and restrictions, the surplus tenderness and warmth throughout the building, and the additional counseling support services made available. I have called this period the "easy hard"[17] because the enormity of the disorientation and grief is alleviated by its communal nature.

Chapter Five, *The Hard Hard: Enforced Grief Timelines and Disciplinary and Relational Tensions,* introduces the second stage of grief at Boy's Prep which begins the very next day. Now school leaders and teachers declare a return to normal life by

[17] This emic phrase comes from an offhand comment made by one administrator on the day school resumed after Jahsun's death.

removing many of the emotional and added professional supports and attempting to restore academic and behavioral expectations as well as disciplinary punishments. In the chapter, I investigate the cryptic tensions and overt conflicts that begin to surface both between still-grieving students and adults, and among adults who share divergent opinions about how to treat the friends of victims. As the weeks and months after Jahsun's death passed, some teachers became less patient with grieving students, perceiving some as grieving "too much" or for "too long" and questioning others' emotional sincerity altogether. A small minority of students joined in on this too, exhibiting territorialism about who had the right to grieve their friend. Another group of teachers, resisting the top-down directives signaling an arbitrary timeline for appropriate grief, offered emotional support or academic relief to students in the privacy of their own classrooms or through their own one-on-one relationships with students. This ultimately resulted in a winter trimester marked by increasing divisions between teachers and chaos among students.

Chapter Six, *The Hidden Hard: Private Grief, New Forms of Relationship, and Looking Ahead,* explores the grieving rituals that continued, often out of view of adults, among students on and offline for months after Jahsun's death. As life at Boys' Prep returned to relative normalcy, students' continued grieving was pushed out of the building and into private and peer-driven spaces – particularly social media. The winter and early spring of 2018 became a period of hidden grief, during which boys continue to be occupied emotionally by the material experiences of mourning in their lives both in and out of school. I document the spatial, embodied, and digital memorials with which boys interacted regularly, the newly significant dates on the calendar after a death, and

the coping practices they drew on when the grief was overwhelming. Both Jahsun's and Tyhir's friends grappled with feelings of both fatalism and numbness as they continued to lose friends and wonder about their own futures. At the same time, many boys transformed their grief (at least temporarily) into achievement motivation or an interest in helping their peers and communities. Yet, schoolwide efforts to draw connections between students' deaths and a national conversation about gun violence were unsuccessful. Finally, the chapter explores how, in the longer term, the deaths of classmates improved the sense of brotherhood across Boys' Prep, promoting new, mutually-beneficial fictive kinship relationships between the boys and their deceased friends' families.

Part III, *The Death of Bill*, moves through the final months of sustained fieldwork, as well as an epilogue to some of the life stories I have focused on. In the spring of 2018, the string of tragedy for the children of Boys' Prep continued with another fatal shooting in the street. The section deals with the aftermath of his death, the third at the school in as many years. In Chapter 7, *The Next Hard: A Repeated Cycle, the Accumulation of Loss, and Academic Decline,* I document the circumstances of sophomore Bill's murder during spring break. I observe the school and students' responses over the course of the following months, which becomes, in effect, a test of the three stage analysis previously outlined. Indeed, the school moves through a truncated version of the easy hard, hard hard, and hidden hard stages, though in subtly different ways. The chapter also synthesizes the primary arguments about the covert grief rituals that boys engage in individually, within their peer groups, and through their use of social media. I focus my analysis here on boys who were impacted by multiple losses, documenting the way those

students, as well as the school institution as a whole, experienced this accumulation of loss, including how they tried to work against its normalization. Several of Jahsun's friends also experienced an academic decline during the latter part of their senior year as they processed their experience of loss, which I outline. The chapter concludes by showing the ways death remained "in the air" even during major end-of-school-year milestones for Tyhir's, Jahsun's, and Bill's friends alike.

The eighth chapter, *The Aftermath of the Year and Cleaning the Slate,* reports on the reflections of school leaders on the unique and immense challenges of the school year, and the impossible decisions they confronted in preparing for the next one. In the final ethnographic chapter, *Epilogue: Long-Term Trajectories and The Stages of Institutional Grief*, I offer updates on key research participants in the years following the conclusion of my research. Sadly, there has been no end to the losses the Boys' Prep community has faced, including the too-early death of another student in October 2019. As the school and its students continue to grieve, their grief itself is evolving.

In the concluding chapter of the dissertation, *What if Grief Became Grievance?*, I theorize what it would look like for Boys' Prep, and urban schools more generally, to support students in transforming grief into grievance. Using the grief-fueled political activism of the Parkland school shooting survivors as a model, I outline how a school like Boys' Prep could teach its students to draw connections between their experiences and larger injustices, facilitate in them a stronger sense of agency, and, through that, produce new avenues for hope and healing. I draw on research from both literature and the social sciences about what it means to become aggrieved, as well as from critical education scholars who focus on the development of young people's critical consciousness, to

suggest the beginnings of a different approach to responding to the grief of adolescent Black boys.

Also included are six appendices. The first appendix (A) includes charts of my key student and adult participants with additional details about each. In the second appendix (B), I share two charts outline the specifics of my data collection approaches and timing. In the third appendix (C), I describe my approach to naming – why most participants have pseudonyms, but some do not. In the fourth (D), on language, I explain my decision to use the word "boy" to describe my research participants (ages 14-19) in most cases. In Appendix (E), I offer additional details about my methods and specifically my approach to developing relationships with my participants, handling ethical dilemmas, leaving the field, and navigating my own experiences of grief. And, finally, in Appendix F, I share additional charts related to students long term academic trajectories as they are discussed in Chapter 7.

METHODOLOGY

The Boys' Prep cafeteria was among my favorite and most fruitful spaces to conduct ethnographic observations. During my two years of study at the school, the large basement room – which also doubled as an auditorium for formal school gatherings – became a touchstone for me. For 45 minutes a day, the red hard plastic lunch tables offered students freedom to talk, play, and move their bodies mostly shielded them from the excessive adult supervision that followed them elsewhere in the building. For me it was the place to catch up with students, hear their unfiltered reflections on what was going on at school, and generally to sense the mood of the day. During those occasions when the moment required a different perspective or I needed a breather myself, I could escape either to the teachers' lounge (a small room off the corner of the cafeteria with a basic kitchen, a couch, and a table) or to the mezzanine level that looked out over the room of red tables.

In many respects, the cafeteria functioned as a microcosm of all that was happening across the school. There were disciplinary interactions with school staff, there were expressions of intense emotion, there were bouts of unadulterated silliness, there were earnest discussions of schoolwork and future plans, and, quite often, there were allusions to shared grief.

The way references to loss and grief were embedded into everyday moments, even joyful ones, was illustrated by my first visit to the school cafeteria during my very earliest days of fieldwork at Boys' Prep. After officially recruiting a group of five friends (Herc, Latrell, Jonquett, Kaliq, and Hazeem) to be part of my study, I asked if I could join

them the following day for lunch. They agreed and the next day as I nervously approached their table, Herc was pouring Coca Cola from a 2-liter bottle into Styrofoam soup cups for each of them. He had acquired the bottle from a pizza party the day before after which apparently someone had said they could "take anything." "So this is part of anything, right?" he asked me, rhetorically, with a big grin. As he was pouring the last cup, Latrell walked up to the table from the lunch line. Still standing, he grabbed the cup designated for him. The rest picked up theirs too and clinked them together giddily. As Latrell bent over to sip his coke from his cup-bowl, the bulk of it missed his mouth and spilled onto the floor next to the table. They all burst out laughing at him. After a few seconds of good humored snickering and pointing, someone made a gesture toward cleaning up the mess. Herc nodded off the gesture and added, as if it just occurred to him, "for the dead homies." They all repeated loudly: "for the dead homies."

I spent many lunch periods with this group – generally about two per week. They were all sophomores, save for Jonquett who, though actually the oldest of the group, was repeating the 9th grade. Over the course of the year, I gradually came to know their lunchtime habits: complaining about the food, throwing out the vegetables (or leaving that one partition on the Styrofoam plate with corn or green beans untouched), scrounging for change to buy cookies, making basketball contests by throwing trash into the trash can from far away, initiating satirical rap battles, Facetiming with girlfriends (usually with the phone on the table or their lap so their face wasn't visible in the shot — and all they could see on the screen was the ceiling and fluorescent lights of the room the other person was in), playing 8-ball with friends on their phones, or just scrolling

aimlessly through IG. Sometimes they used the lunch period to scramble to finish homework, but mostly they played Uno.

After several months of spending lunch with this crew, I still sometimes wondered if they found my company a fun change of pace or annoying. Out of courtesy, I would usually still ask one of them if it was okay for me join when I approached their lunch table. One day in May, after I posed the question to him, Herc beckoned me to sit down, "C'mon, you don't have to ask anymore. You know the drill, just pop a squat. We not polite here like that." Even so, I could never predict when the boys would decide to deal me into their Uno game and when they would play without me as I sat, mostly quietly, observing. On days I was dealt in, I played the way they played — where half the fun was seeing if you could get away with cheating by slipping a winning card up your sleeve in preparation for the second game or sliding the necessary "skip" or "pick two" under the table to another player so you could collectively stop someone else from getting out. During these games of Uno, I sometimes get so into the fun of it that I would momentarily forget that I was twice their age and had met them under the circumstances of tragedy.

Sadly, that lively group and lunch table no longer existed the following year. Both Latrell and Jonquett had transferred to other schools which had fewer graduation requirements. Halfway through the year, Hazeem also left Boys' Prep in favor of online courses taken from home. Kaliq and Herc had different lunch periods and their friendship did not seem to be as strong without the social glue of the group. My focus changed the second year as well, as I became more integrated into the many aspects of classroom life

and as the school responded on so many levels to the violent incidents that were impacting the school community so intimately.

Arriving at Boys' Prep

I entered the grey stone building that houses Boys' Preparatory Charter High School for the first time in October 2016. After a brief email exchange, I was there to meet with the principal, Dr. Stephens. Dr. Stephens, a light-skinned Black man, had an imposing presence at well over 6 feet tall, but a sweet demeanor that negated his size as soon as he began talking. We sat in his office and talked about my career trajectory, my research interests, and our shared connections that led me to the school. Then he offered a brief history of the school, which was in its eleventh year at the time, and gave me a tour of the building.

Walking through Boys' Prep during that first visit, I perceived a warmth and friendliness throughout the building, and a sense that people knew each other and both teachers and students were comfortable joking with each other. I also observed that, although the student body was all-male and almost entirely Black or African American,[18] the teaching staff looked similar to a typical school – that is, primarily white women. In fact, that year, the school employed about 50 teachers and support staff, 25% of whom were of color and 44% of whom were men. There were six Black men working in the building: the principal, two student support officers, the computer teacher, a special education aide, and the janitor.

[18] Boys' Prep did not provide me with records of students' ethnic backgrounds. By my own calculations, only a small minority of students, perhaps 10%, were the children of or were themselves immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, or elsewhere. Most students came from families who were long-time Philadelphia residents.

Beyond the demographics, the other most visibly unique feature at Boys' Prep were the students' uniforms. They wore khaki dress pants, blue oxford dress shirts, navy blazers, and ties – some outfits impeccably clean and put together, others more worn out or less neatly arranged. During the passing period between classes, Dr. Stephens stood in the hallway observing students rushing from all directions to their next class. He seemed to know every student by name, greeting some with a friendly hello or a question about a shared interest (like the basketball game the night before). But more often than not, Dr. Stephens' comments to students walking past came in the form of corrections to their uniforms: "take out your earring"; "why do you still have headphones in?"; "where is your ID?" (which students should be wearing on a lanyard around their necks); "tuck in shirt"; "button your top button"; "straighten your tie"; "where are your correct shoes, belt, or black socks?" The Principal confessed that the attention to the uniform was a bit of a "power play."

Indeed, the Boys' Prep school uniform – the site of so much attention and discussion on a day-to-day basis – felt like a metaphor for the implicit tension in the school between adultification and paternalism (Whitman 2008). On the one hand, students were expected to dress and act professionally and to be preparing themselves for college; on the other hand, many students found the excessive supervision and monitoring of their bodies and whereabouts (including things like where and when they could eat, whether they could leave class to use the restroom) belittling. This created a kind of simmering tension, an ongoing battle between adults and students, present in so many schools. I noticed this even in the difference between the cleanliness of hallways where students were often supervised, and the proliferation of trash and food wrappers

left in the stairwells which were usually empty of adults who were allowed to travel between floors in the elevator.

Before I left that first visit, Dr. Stephens brainstormed a few teachers and school staff members who he believed would be interested in helping me get orientated to the school and connect with students. The following week, I was back for two more meetings – one with the school social worker and another with one of the college counselors, who was also serving as an advisor to a newly-formed informal peer counseling club. Everyone I met was warm, welcoming, and expressed not just support of my project but genuine interest in learning through my work how they could better care for the Boys' Prep students coping with loss and grief. Within a few short weeks, we had worked out the logistical details for me to conduct ethnographic research at the school and I was able to submit my project plans for final approval from the Institutional Review Board.

With guidance from the team of adults I first met, I spent my initial six weeks at Boys' Prep simply hanging out around the building, observing in classrooms, and chatting informally with anyone, student or adult, who was willing to talk to me. I was also invited by a senior to listen in during the informal peer counseling sessions of a student group that met regularly in an empty classroom during lunch. The group called itself *Freedom to Speak* (FTS) and became a centerpiece of my early research as a small group of students used the space to share openly with each other about their hopes, fears, frustrations, and get advice from the classmates they often called their "brothers." Another student also recommended that I observe in the senior Honors Philosophy class since the class gave students space to share openly their views about identity, masculinity, and their ideas about society, human nature, and the future. The teacher, Ms. Cain,

welcomed me into the class and after I observed a few class periods, she let me know I was free to come and go from class as I liked without giving her advanced notice.

I was lucky in that my role at the school was solely as a researcher. I had no formal, pedagogical, or disciplinary obligations and was rarely asked to fill in for an adult staff member or to report to any administrators on my comings and goings from the school. I occupied a somewhat liminal space between student and teacher: for example, I had a key which gave me access to the building and to classrooms and offices, but I had no office or classroom of my own and I stored my belongings in a metal locker with a combination lock alongside the students' lockers. Many teachers allowed me to visit their classrooms without advanced notice; I often sat in the back so as not to distract the students and in order to see as much as possible, but there were a few classes in which I was a regular participant and sometimes helped students out with the assignments when they were working independently. I had an understanding with both staff and students that I would not enforce school rules, punish students, or report on misbehaviors; yet, sometimes I accidentally found myself chastising students for roughhousing or encouraging a student who was cutting class to consider returning. Over time, I became the de facto adult supervisor for the lunchtime group, Freedom to Speak (FTS), since the college counselor was often tied up in meetings and unable to attend the group sessions. I would unlock the classroom door for the group and was often the only adult in the room; yet, if I could not make it on a given day, the meetings would still go on without me.

Recruiting Initial Participants

Alongside my general approach to integrating into school life and getting to know an array of students, I was most interested in connecting with the boys who had been

most directly impacted by peer loss. With the help of a few select teachers, the school social worker assembled a list of 19 students who were, in their view, most affected by the death of a freshman student, Tyhir, the previous summer. Before winter break, I arranged to meet briefly in groups of two or three with all of them. In these meetings, which the social worker facilitated in her office, I had a chance to introduce myself, and to explain the purposes and approach of my research and what it might entail for them, if they chose to participate. I was heartened that, with the exception of one student who declined to participate and two who wanted to think it over, the remainder expressed immediate interest in taking part. By the end of the week of meetings, my contact sheet had 18 names and phone numbers, which I used to text each of them over the weekend to follow-up.

After winter break, I met, this time *without* the social worker, with the eight students who had replied most enthusiastically to my follow-up messages. During these meetings, I laid out the research process in greater detail. I handed them a selection of published ethnographies to give them an idea of what an inquiry process such as this one might result it. It was also a way to explain the pseudonyms I requested each of them begin thinking about, as well as the reason for audio-recording. At this time, I also reviewed in great detail the consent documents I was giving them – theirs and their parents'.

During these meetings, some students expressed excitement about the attention they would get being part of this project or eventually being a character in a book. Other students seemed eager for any opportunity that might shake up their typical day-to-day school life and perhaps get exempted from class once in a while. Some students were

anxious about whether they would have to change their behavior to participate. For example, Herc, a sophomore who brought along two of his friends to our first meeting, asked, "When you shadow us, like, I curse a lot. Is that okay?" I nodded, "It's fine. I've heard it all before." He added, "And I talk about girls in a disrespectful way sometimes." I said, "I don't want you to change how you would normally act just because I'm around." Jonquett and Latrell, who were sitting next to him, mocked him by imitating what he had just said. Herc continued, "like I'm not stupid, but sometimes I act stupid. Sometimes I don't know what's going on." The others laughed at him. "Sometimes I'm retarded."

In the weeks that followed, as the signed forms trickled back to me, I began setting up initial interviews with each of them, while also reconnecting with more of the boys with whom I had originally met. Herc, Latrell, and Jonquett were among the first three boys I interviewed, along with other sophomores, Hazeem and Kaliq, all who had been close with Tyhir the school year before. In January, I began regular observation at the lunch table that all five of them shared (described at the opening of this chapter); this group of five quickly became my first focal participants.

After I attended three events connected to Tyhir's birthday in early February, I reconnected with several students from the initial conversations in the social worker's office and met additional boys not included on the first list. The more students I got to know, the more open the initially hesitant boys became to the idea of speaking with me. For instance, about three months into my fieldwork, one student vouched for me to another student saying, "She's cool people. You should talk to her." Another, when I met him for the first time, said that he had seen me hanging out with his friend, Ezekiel, and

"any friend of Zeek's is cool – he's the in, the gatekeeper." Students who fully grasped what my research was focused on would also text me with information about gun violence events that might have impacted Boys' Prep students or would go out of their way to introduce me to peers who they believed would be good interviewees for me.

Generally I found that when I put myself in situations that teachers would never be in (like sitting in the cafeteria during lunch or using a locker to store my belongings), other students started to realize that I was not a teacher and that they could, for example, curse around me or discuss their efforts to evade disciplinary policies. While it is likely that there was a sampling bias in terms of who was most willing to talk to me initially, I think it was at least partially overcome with time as my list of willing participants continued to expand. I was eventually able to onboard nearly all the boys from the early meetings with the social worker, and additional students were referred to me through friends and teachers. By the end of the first year of research, I estimate that I had built close relationships with about 35 students.

The Second Year of Research

When I began the second school year at Boys' Prep, 2017-2018, I envisioned expanding the thematic reach of my project and trying to get to know new kinds of Boys' Prep students. I was noticing that students' grief about losing Tyhir was receding into the background. It was still very present in students' thoughts (which they shared with me in one-on-one interviews) and it was still part of their digital lives in posts on social media, but their experience of loss was no longer part of their day-to-day school life in such a way that I felt could sustain another year of investigation. For these reasons, during the summer of 2017, I began to reimagine my research questions to expand my

conceptualization of "loss." I wondered how the multiple kinds and dimensions of loss in the boys' lives intersected with each other. I thought about moments when they experienced a loss of dignity or face, like in a fight or a sports game; events that led to a loss of social status as well as the loss of time, like being held back and required to repeat a grade of school; and I wondered about the loss of loved ones to fates other than death, like incarceration.

I started the school year with revised research questions and the goal of getting to know new groups of students who could help me answer them. There was a new principal, a new dean, and a new approach to school discipline so there was much to observe and unpack. I was excited to try to understand how Tyhir's death might have long-term implications on his friends' experience of school, and also to put the grief and loss surrounding it into the context of a more wholistic understanding of loss. However, in November 2017, over the Thanksgiving holiday, a senior student and one of my interviewees from the year before, Jahsun, was murdered. My ideas for a reshaping my research focus became moot, and my very role and identity at the school shifted abruptly. I quickly rerouted back to my original research focus and made concerted efforts to integrate myself into the social circles of which Jahsun had been a part.

In the weeks following Jahsun's death, I periodically followed his daily class schedule and spent more time observing in the specific classrooms and other school spaces where he had spent the most time. A list of his closest friends was drawn up by a teacher and shared in faculty meetings so other school adults would know which students they should keep their eyes on or who might be missing class. I also drew on this as a resource for identifying students whom I might want to connect with and observe more

regularly. Rather than having official meetings with them about my research, in the days and weeks following Jahsun's death, I began introducing myself to them one-on-one or in small, naturally occurring group settings informally. If the initial introduction went well, I would follow up the next time I saw them with more details about the research process and my consent documents for them to review. I began with the students I already knew from observing in their classes or encounters in the cafeteria, and then slowly worked my way to the perimeters of the social circle. After things settled down a little bit following winter break, most of the boys in this group agreed to be interviewed and I began spending more time with them throughout the school days.

During the winter and spring, I also generally became more focused on the senior class, who were collectively impacted by the loss of their classmate at a critical moment in their college transition process. This meant that I made sure to observe in senior classes and during study hall periods, which were mostly spent in the cafeteria with students partially doing homework and partially just hanging out unsupervised. Before and after school, many seniors congregated on the third floor by Jahsun's locker, which was decorated and dedicated to him, so I also spent significant time there.

In April of that year, Boys' Prep was rocked by the death of another student: sophomore Bill. Once again, I spent the first week or so after in triage mode. It was all hands on deck at the school, and as a caring adult who did not have many formal responsibilities, I was able to be around checking in on students who were particularly hard hit, offering comfort, or passing messages throughout the building. I had not known Bill and hardly any of his friends. Rather than shift gears again, so close to the end of the school year, and try to integrate myself into a new peer group at a vulnerable moment, I

decided to focus my research attention this time on the adults in the building who were trying to manage, for the second time in one year, the combination of their own grief, their students' grief, and their professional responsibilities. I also continued to track the feelings and experiences of Tyhir's friends (now mostly juniors), Jahsun's friends (mostly seniors), and the other students I had already come to know as they made sense of this new loss. In the next section I describe, in more detail, the specific methodological strategies I employed to learn about what was going on at Boys' Prep both before and in the aftermath of these tragedies.

Data Collection Methods

Meaning-making around loss in school happens through everyday actions and conversations among and between students and school adults – and ethnographic methods are uniquely suited for studying such day-to-day social interactions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). To explore the immediate and longer-term responses of both students and school staff (with an emphasis on the former) to the sudden deaths of young people, I relied on a combination of ethnographic and other qualitative methods over a two-year period. My primary data collection methods were participant observation and field notes, interviews, and social media observations. Secondary methods included surveys of students and teachers as well as various documents, artifacts, and school records. I outline each in more detail below and include, in Appendix B, a chart summarizing all collected data and a timeline of my participant interviews.

Participant Observation and Fieldnotes. Participant observation in a range of structured and unstructured school spaces – classrooms, cafeteria, hallways, teachers' lounge, clubs and activities, schoolwide assemblies and events – allowed me to witness

processes of meaning-making and emotion work unfolding within the day-to-day schooling context. I paid attention to how and in what contexts discussions of deceased friends came up among students; how and when emotional disclosures occurred and how they were received by peers and adults; the direct and indirect ways that school adults responded to references of loss or discussed bereavement behaviors; moments when race or gender were implicitly or explicitly invoked in regards to expected behaviors or the policing of behaviors, particularly around emotions; and how and when students sought, or school adults offered, emotional support. I simultaneously sought out particular spaces where relevant students or conversations would be and allowed for the possibility of observing random and unanticipated interactions across the school by wandering the hallways or hanging out in the chairs by the main office. While in the field, I made jottings on my cell phone or in a small notebook, later writing up the day's events into detailed fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

During the first year or research, I visited Boys' Prep one to three days per week; in year two, I regularly came more often especially during the period following both Jahsun's and Bill's death when I was at school nearly every day and often for weekend events. My visits lasted between three and nine hours, depending on what was going on and whether I had interviews scheduled. Observations focused on focal participants, as well as patterns of interaction in school more generally. Overall, I found that observing both the "routine" and the "extraordinary" gave me the fullest picture of the way feeling rules shape students' and adults' experience of loss (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:37). I tried to attend all major school events (i.e. at the beginning and end of the year, assemblies, social activities, memorial events) in order to see how the institutional leaders

publicly represented their vision for the school, and how students came together around particular issues. It was often during these ritualized moments that the institutional feeling rules, at least in their ideal form, were presented.

In terms of routine events, I regularly observed a senior Philosophy class and the informal lunchtime student group, FTS; both of these spaces offered ample opportunities for students to share freely about their ideas about the world, their inner thoughts, and the future. When possible, I observed meetings between students and adults about academic progress, disciplinary infractions, or college preparation since those were moments when discussions of the future were especially pressing. I tried to spend most of the lunch periods in the cafeteria, since, as I have alluded to, the cafeteria offered students a relatively unsupervised space to socialize in their peer groups. During the first year, I spent most lunch periods with the group of five sophomores I described at the start of this chapter; by year two, I had gained comfort and familiarity with several more groups of students (and they with me) such that there were a handful of lunch tables that I could freely join without awkwardness. These observations helped me see the feeling rules that emerged within peer groups and the ways students might police each other's emotional displays. Sometimes, I also sat in the teachers' lounge during lunch, which gave me the chance to catch up with teachers on how particular students were doing in their classes or, for example, get the details about a fight or the suspension of a student I knew that might have occurred on a day when I was not at school. Whenever possible, I spent at least a few minutes of every period wandering the hallways or hanging out by the main office or the college office; these moments tended to be the ways that I got the most unexpected information. My specific observation strategies – including where, when, and whom I

observed –shifted over time as particular students or teachers emerged as points of focus or as I learned more about people's habits and institutional routines (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Ravitch and Carl 2016).

Interviews. In addition to ethnographic observations, I also conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews (Schensul and LeCompte 2013) with 65 Boys' Prep students to understand how they made meaning of their loss and schooling experiences. Semi-structured interviews allow for access to the emotional dimensions of a young person's narrative which may not be on display in other settings (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Rubin 1992; Vaughan 1990; Weiss 1995). In most cases, in advance of the interview, I would ask students to complete a pre-interview questionnaire to share basic demographic information as well as details about their family background, schooling history, out-of-school activities, and other topics. Within the interview itself, to facilitate conversation about sensitive topics, I sometimes found it useful to offer nonverbal prompts or short activities as part of the interview (Josselson 2013). These varied depending on the particular student and the main focus of our conversation, but some of these activities included: a pre-interview request to bring in 3-5 favorite photographs of important life moments and then narrate them; a set of checklists so that participants could nonverbally indicate which memorial events/activities they participated in or what kinds of violence or loss they had experienced; instructions to draw a life map of major events or major losses (Smith 2015); or a set of cards with various personal qualities (i.e., "a good friend," "tough," "creative") with which they could reflect on which qualities were most valued by particular people/groups with whom they interact (i.e., their family, school, friends).

The interviews covered topics like how they felt about school, whether they had close relationships with classmates and/or teachers, their first experience of loss, how many friends/peers they had lost, who they talked to about their loss, what grieving activities they participated in, how they deal with intense emotions, how/whether they think about their own death, what messages they get about what it means to be a man, and what they have planned or hope for in the future. At the conclusion of the interviews, many boys expressed that we had talked about topics or experiences they rarely discussed with others. Some thought this was "weird"; others were surprised that they actually found it therapeutic, helpful, or "relieving." Some requested that we meet again or do interviews on a regular basis so that we could continue discussing these topics.[19]

Indeed, with a smaller purposeful sample of student participants (n=12; see more details about sampling strategies below), I interviewed them multiple times throughout the study to explore emergent topics as well as how interpretations of certain events might change over time (Harding 2010; Young 2004). As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:35) remind us, "attitudes and activities frequently vary over time in ways that are highly significant for social theory." Therefore, these follow-up interviews were often less structured and focused on major events that had happened since our last conversation, such as a fight at home, a suspension, a new girlfriend, or a recent loss. Like the one-time student interviews described above, these conversations took place during a student's study hall or lunch period usually in a small room adjacent to the school's main entrance, which was generally unused, and lasted between 40 and 75

[19] In a separate paper, I explore the challenges and complications alongside the possibilities of research interviews that also may have therapeutic effects on adolescent boys.

minutes. I aimed to conduct these follow-up interviews every 4-6 weeks, but the hecticness of the second school year and the students' busy schedules, often meant that the interviews were less frequent. However, I was in regular touch with these participants over text and in casual conversations in person at the school.[20]

I also interviewed teachers, school administrators, other school staff (n=25), as well as select parents (n=6), in order to understand the broader context of students' lives and the decision-making processes of school adults. Initially, when I first arrived at the school, I set up one-on-one interviews with a handful of teachers and other faculty (i.e. social worker, college counselor) whom I felt could help me understand the social landscape of Boys' Prep and offer context for the specific group of students (Tyhir's friends) whom I was initially getting to know. As my research neared its conclusion two years later, I invited any teacher or staff member to join a series of focus groups that I held at the end of the year. These five focus groups, which lasted about an hour and a half each, included 18 teachers and staff total – including two I had interviewed a year and a half earlier. They represented a range of demographic categories, subjects/grade levels taught, and experience at the school and the conversations were rich and reflective. The participants built off each other's ideas and sometimes disagreed with each other, demonstrating one of the valuable characteristics of group interviews (Ravitch and Carl 2016). For school administrators (such as the CEO, Principal, Dean, Social Worker, and disciplinary staff), I opted for one-on-one conversations in the hopes that they would be

[20] Three of my original focal participants left Boys' Prep at the end of my first year or in the first few months of the second year, making regular interviews with them more difficult. I supplemented in-person interviews with regular check-ins over text, though certainly the boys who left the school became less central to my analysis over time.

more willing to speak freely and share their own questions or vulnerabilities about the administrative choices that were made throughout the year.

Finally, two sets of mothers – three highly-involved PTA mothers, and the mothers of Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill – participated in separate group interviews during the spring and summer of 2018. I also met individually with each of the mothers of the three victims at least once and communicated regularly with them via text, phone, and email especially as I was writing up this final manuscript.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.[21] When sharing quotations from interviews in this manuscript, I have taken the "compromise" approach between completely preserving the speech exactly as it was said and standardizing it. I follow Weiss' (1995:193, 198) lead in "reorganizing quotations for coherence," leaving out certain words or sentences "to achieve a more compact statement," or replacing words in brackets for clarity.

Social Media. Young peoples' social lives, even the social processing of loss and grief, increasingly also take place online; many scholars argue that it has become impossible to fully understand a teenager's life without also observing their activities and interactions on social networking sites (boyd 2008; Lane 2016, 2018; Mitchell et al. 2012; Desmond U. Patton et al. 2017; Stevens et al. 2017; Walter et al. 2012). This is perhaps even more true for Black teenagers who are the most active demographic group

[21] About two thirds of my interviews were transcribed by a professional, confidential service, Rev.com. The remaining third were transcribed by undergraduate research assistants, and one high school research assistant, whom I hired. The group interview with Tyhir's, Jahsun's, and Bill's mothers, as well as a handful of student interviews during the final month of my research, were also video-taped as part of a related documentary project (see section titled Participatory Documentary Film).

on social media: 33% say they use Instagram "almost constantly" (AP-NORC 2017). These data certainly bore out at Boys' Prep. Nearly every student owned a smart phone and many incessantly posted and commented on social media throughout – and about – their school day. Given the importance of online spaces in their lives and social interactions, social media data collected from a sample of Boys' Prep students (n=75), including the students I interviewed and my focal participants, provided significant insight towards answering my research questions.

As part of the informed consent process (described below), I invited willing students to share their social media screen names with me so that I could "friend" them on various platforms. I decided not to create a separate research account for myself because I felt that, given how much I would be learning about their most personal thoughts and experiences, it was only fair that they get to know me too and I did not believe there were any components of my virtual self that would surprise them or counter the way I was representing myself in person (Reich 2015). I collected data by scrolling through my social media accounts daily and taking screenshots of relevant posts from participants (Boellstorff 2012).[22] My participants were most active on Instagram and Snapchat (Facebook and Twitter were only used by a handful of them). I eventually decided to focus my social media observations primarily on Instagram which includes options to post images with captions that can become part of a user's curated profile page as well as "stories" which can be viewed for 24 hours only before they disappear. The

[22] All screenshots shared in this dissertation have been deidentified. Undergraduate research assistants helped me in sorting and coding the screenshots and anonymizing them by blurring images and replacing screennames and other identifying details with pseudonyms.

majority of students' "stories" were text- rather than image-based meaning that the platform centered both text *and* image allowing me to see a fuller range of information shared (Pittman and Reich 2016). I would view and record both of these types of posts daily, but I decided early on that I would not "like" or comment publicly on images. However, if a student posted a story about how he was feeling, I might respond to it in a direct message with a comment or question to learn more about the context of the posting and to demonstrate my engagement with his life.

In Appendix C, I explain more about how I anonymized the social media posts that have been reproduced in this manuscript. When I present quotes from social media posts in text, I follow similar anonymizing guidelines. To provide the most accurate picture of what is posted online, I have included all emojis in quoted social media text and I present the text exactly as written, with shorthand, slang, and non-Standard American English; however, I have corrected some minor typos for readability purposes. Shorthand or slang that may not be recognizable to readers is followed by a "translation" in brackets.

Surveys. In the spring of 2017, the first year of research, I conducted a short survey to understand the quantity and types of experiences with death among the senior class (Class of 2017) as well as the adults at Boys' Prep. There is precedent for using surveys within a high school or college context to understand the coping strategies employed and support sought and/or received after a student death (Andersen et al. 2013; McNeil et al. 1991). As Schensul and LeCompte (2013:244–45) explain it, one of the goals of an ethnographic survey is to "determine the degree to which ideas, information, and results that emerged during the discovery process from in-depth investigation with a

limited and selective sample can be generalized to the whole population." In this case, I sought to understand how widespread the experience of peer loss was within this school, and whether there were patterns to the approaches to support. Additionally, from the Boys' Prep adults I wanted to understand whether they had experienced loss as a young person themselves or previously experienced the death of a student. The specific questions developed for the surveys emerged from my qualitative investigation to date at the time.

In the student version of the survey, students were asked to quantify the "significant" losses they had experienced and share details about the ages of the deceased, their relationship to them, and the cause of death. Other questions required students to document the types of people they discussed their loss with and the emotions they associated with their loss. The student survey was piloted with a group of seniors and juniors who offered feedback on the language of some questions and the overall approach. The revised version of the survey was administered on paper in the five required senior English classes with an 87% response rate. I was personally present in each class to explain the context and purpose of the survey, make sure students understood that it was optional, and to observe whether any students appeared adversely impacted or unprepared to continue their school day after reflecting on their experiences of death.

The adult version of the survey was more open-ended, asking teachers and other school staff to reflect on their experiences with loss when they were a young person and their experiences with the deaths of young people in their roles in schools. Adults were also asked to reflect on the quantity and types of conversations they had with students

about death. I received feedback on an early version of the staff survey from a few teacher confidants, and then the final staff survey was administered through SurveyMonkey and delivered to school staff through an email from the Principal; 25 faculty and administrators chose to participate (50% response rate).

Documents and Artifacts. I further triangulated my data sources by collecting students' school records, academic work, and other artifacts related to the school and student life (i.e., newspaper clippings, websites, brochures, class assignment sheets, etc.). For those students who consented to it, I also accessed their grades, attendance, and discipline records. Using these, I could track long-term patterns in academic achievement and behavior (as documented by school staff) as well as use these documents as prompts within the interview context in order to see how students narrated their own school trajectory. Finally, I created and collected various visual materials – including photographs and short videos – as well as audio recordings from classes, events, and informal interactions. Sometimes these multimodal artifacts were created "for my eyes only, a kind of [visual/auditory] field note taking," to help me remember and re-access moments from the field; but other times they may became artifacts to be shared within this dissertation or in professional presentations (Jackson 2004:39).

Participatory Film Project. As I planned for the conclusion of my concentrated period of fieldwork in the spring of 2018, I began to develop an idea with a group of students to collaboratively create a documentary film that could serve as both a tribute to their deceased friends and a record of the way neighborhood gun violence devastates a school community. The students were frustrated that gun violence events like the school shooting in Parkland, Florida in February 2018 received so much national attention while

their everyday losses were merely fleeting local headlines, if that. My background as a nonfiction filmmaker made it possible for me to support them in this endeavor. A pair of seniors, as part of their required senior internship for the month of May, selected several of their peers to interview on camera and I helped them construct an interview protocol and plan the film shoots. We also filmed several school-based anti-gun violence marches and rallies as well as memorial events for teenage victims. During the summer of 2018, I facilitated a conversation, filmed by a student, between the three mothers of the Boys' Prep students who were killed. Throughout the 2018-2019 schools year, I met periodically with a small team of current and graduated students to develop a vision for a short documentary film using this footage. In the summer of 2019, I received funding to pay the young people for the final phases of work on the film, as well as hire a local independent film company to edit the project. The film was completed in April 2020.

Consent

For all students whom I interviewed or with whom I spent considerable time observing in person and online, I took them through a thorough informed consent process, approved by the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. This process generally began with a one-on-one conversation where I described the project and what their role would be, went over the student assent/consent forms and parental consent forms for those under 18, and answered their questions.[23] From there, students could take their time filling out the forms and seeking their parents' permission.

[23] I received a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health which, in theory, protects me from having to hand over my research materials or testify in court if any illegal activity I witness or hear about becomes a legal matter. Information about this protection was included on my consent documents and shared in my conversations with students.

Sometimes I would text students to remind them which days I would be in school so they could return the forms to me. Once they returned the signed forms, I made a copy for them to give back to them. During the whole research period, only one parent of an interested student refused to have her child participate. On the contrary, after I attended a parent group meeting, a handful of parents reached out to me asking if their son could participate.

With respect to the student body at large, consent for my observations around school was collected through a passive informed consent process separately with parents (a letter sent home with student progress reports) and students (an introductory speech from me at the beginning-of-the-year assembly). In the classrooms where I observed regularly, I also gave a similar speech and passed out consent/assent forms so that students could let me know if they were comfortable with me taking notes about them in class, if they would allow me to follow them on social media for research purposes, and if they were interested in being interviewed. In total, one student asked that I not take notes about him when I observed in his classrooms and five parents replied to the letter sent home to decline their passive consent for my school observations of their son.

I approached consent from faculty similarly: at the first faculty meeting of the year, I introduced myself and my project and explained to teachers/staff that they could let me know if they were not willing to participate; no one did. At the time of these introductions, I did not plan for the adults at Boys' Prep to be central characters in my analysis; however, as real-time events happened over the course of the two years, the conversations between teachers and decision-making of the administration began to figure more prominently in my research. When possible, I tried to explain this to the

adults whom I was observing most closely and have shared my analysis with many of them before publication. All teachers and administrators I interviewed gave written consent for their interviews to be audio-recorded and used for my research.

Sampling Strategies and Focal Students

My student sample was selected through a combination of strategies: reputational sampling (recommendations from school adults), purposeful or criterion-based sampling (selected because of specific experiences with loss), extreme case selection (students who are higher/lower achieving or who have extreme experiences of loss/no loss), and snowball sampling (recommendations or referrals from other students) (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). The sample included students who were close with both Tyhir and Jahsun, the two Boys' Prep students who were killed right before and about halfway through my research, respectively, as well as those who had experienced other peer losses during adolescence and those who had not experienced any significant losses.

My focal students came from two distinct peer groups connected to Tyhir and Jahsun, although there was some overlap between them, and relationships shifted over time. The purpose of this selection was not to have a random, nor even necessarily representative sample, but to track the experiences of loss over time with a group of boys whose family, school, and prior loss backgrounds represented a range and variation of experiences. The interconnectedness of many of these students within school-based friendship networks also allowed me to follow changes over time in terms of relational dynamics and peer emotional support.

Other student interviewees beyond these friendship circles came to me through the sampling strategies described above as well as snowball sampling and convenience

sampling. During the 2016-2017 school year, the students I interviewed and observed outside of the list of Tyhir's friends, came from connections developed with students in classes I was regularly observing, the Freedom to Speak (FTS) group, and referrals from other students (snowball sampling). At the start of the 2017-2018 school year, I introduced myself to each grade at their welcome assembly and explained a bit about what I was doing and how they could choose to interact with me or not depending on their preference. This "official" introduction, as well as my extended time at the school, seemed to create an increased comfort such that more and more students began to approach me to inquire further about what I was doing and/or ask to be interviewed – or, in some cases, they asked if we could "just talk" because they were having a difficult day. Some students whom I intended to interview only once would follow up with me afterwards to ask when we would be meeting again for a second interview.[24]

One challenge in sampling is the tendency to focus on participants whom I might find "most congenial or politically sympathetic" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:72). Indeed, I often found myself fighting the urge to spend the most time with the students and teachers whose company I simply enjoyed the most – or who seemed most at ease and content around me. I made an intentional effort to seek out the students who did not immediately bond with me or who were less pleasant to talk to – a strategy which also helped me identify potentially discrepant cases (Maxwell 2013:127) since students who were not as amiable or comfortable with me may also have had different experiences with

[24] In a separate paper, I am exploring the complications of conducting emotional and often vulnerable interviews with young people who may not have an abundance of adults in their lives who have the time to listen to them compassionately. Several students reported that our interview had a therapeutic effect for them and a handful expressed a desire to continue meeting regularly, as if I were a therapist or counselor.

emotional expression or support – but I recognize that my limited success here may be a limitation of the work.

Identity and Positionality as a Researcher

As a white woman in my early 30s from an upper middle class and elite educational background, I do not share much in common with the Black teenage boys in my study. Certainly, my social position shapes my "scientific gaze" (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008:18) creating complex power dynamics and potential ethical pitfalls that had to be constantly negotiated throughout the research, analysis, and writing. For one, white researchers – and perhaps all researchers to some degree – are prone to under-theorizing racism as an explanation for observations in the field (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2008; Warren 2000) due to the colorblindness we have been socialized into (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Frankenberg 1993). There is also a long and somewhat troubled history of white ethnographers studying the "everydayness of low income African American people," making arguments that would not be surprising to those being studied, and then sharing this 'new knowledge' (and perhaps receiving praise for it) with a "distant audience" (Young 2008:197, 196).[25] Some scholars contend that responsible research requires that the researcher and the researched "match" on various identity characteristics like race,

[25] There are plenty of good reasons for people of color, particularly poor or working class people, to be suspicious of a white ethnographer coming into their community from an elite university. I was most nervous about this in my interactions with parents since I imagined they might be even more aware of the history of exploitative research than their teenage sons. Interestingly, I found the opposite to be the case. Almost all of the parents I interacted with were pleased to hear that I studied at the University of Pennsylvania because they had an image of it being a good school and therefore, they told me, assumed that I was being trained to do high quality work that might result in findings that could be helpful for their sons or the school in the future. Tyhir's mother, the first parent I interacted with, also felt a special connection with me since she was employed by the University's hospital system. Our shared institutional connection also made it possible for us to meet on campus during her workday, and we have bumped into each other in the neighborhood a handful of times over the years.

class, and gender; while others have argued that this may not always be advantageous, that these identities are not static but constantly negotiated, and that ethnographers often occupy simultaneous outsider and insider status along different dimensions no matter what their race, class, or gender (Bhopal 2001; Emerson et al. 2011; Papadopoulos and Lees 2002).

In my case, at Boys' Prep, I was a partial insider based on my prior experience and role as a teacher in a somewhat similar school context. Unlike white and other non-Black ethnographers who have studied Black men and boys in public or family life (Bourgois 2003; Desmond 2017; Duneier, Hasan, and Carter 2000; Edin and Nelson 2013; Goffman 2014; Harding 2010; Liebow 1967; Stack 1983; Venkatesh 2008), positioning myself in an institutional context – and particularly the context of an American high school – meant that my presence rarely felt like a white intrusion into a Black space. Being a young, white woman in the Boys' Prep school building was not an anomaly by any means. Nearly half of Boys' Prep teachers were white women in their 20s, 30s, or 40s. Indeed, among the students I spent time with, all of them identified at least one white female teacher among their list of favorites. And, indeed, despite my primary research focus on the students, I felt a sort of kinship with many of the teachers because I had strong memories of being in their position and deep admiration that many of them had stuck with it longer than I had.

In my interactions with students, I experienced far more moments of outsiderness. There were cultural references students made or race- or gender-specific experiences they shared that I could not fully comprehend. In these moments, if it was appropriate, I asked lots of questions, sometimes in joking or self-deprecating ways; but often, if it was not

central to my research questions or the conversation at hand, I let things go in the moment and made a note to ask about it later or see if I could figure out what I was missing on my own. Despite these challenges and the larger power imbalances present in the work, I believe as Philippe Bourgois (204-205) writes that "ultimately…the research was feasible because all humans everywhere respond well to respectful interaction. We all appreciate having our life stories taken seriously. The urge to convey meaning transcends the barriers of institutionalized social inequality." I believe that more than my outward social identities, the boys responded most strongly to my interest in learning about their lives and the attention I gave them.

Interestingly, more than race or gender, it seemed to be my perceived age that stood out as the identity marker which students were most interested in or curious about. Though I started the research at age 30, most students assumed I was somewhere between 19 and 24, and many believed I was a college student despite my attempts to explain graduate school and doctoral study. When I would tell them my actual age, several boys expressed disbelief, some asking to see my driver's license for proof. Others could not comprehend that I could be nearly the same age as their parent.

My decisions about how to present myself physically and stylistically reflected a desire to capitalize on the age ambiguity in a way that might differentiate me from the teachers and make me seem approachable, but avoid suggesting that I was a peer (and therefore a potential romantic partner). I aimed to present something similar to what has been described as a "least-adult" and "least-gendered" identity (Mandell 1988; Pascoe 2011). Unlike Pascoe (2011), I am a straight, feminine-presenting woman, and I did not intentionally play down my own femininity; however, I rarely wore dresses or heels

(except to the school's graduation, prom, and other special events). Beyond this, my clothing priorities when I began fieldwork were to dress comfortably (the school had a lot of stairs and I would periodically sit on the floor in classrooms or hallways with students); wear clothes that would hide my sweat (I conducted many interviews in a tiny, windowless, and often sweltering hot room); and not dress so casually that I would feel or appear out of synch with the students who were required to wear blazers and ties.

I mostly wore simple, solid colored t-shirts or blouses with black jeans or dark colored slacks – an outfit that was not so different from what I might wear to class or a day of studying in a coffee shop. To this uniform I also generally added funky earrings and/or colorful sneakers to add a bit of personality. About three months into my fieldwork, I wore a pair of high-top Vans I had just gotten – they were teal and hot pink and on the extreme end of my color palette boldness. From the second I walked in the door wearing those shoes, I started getting comments on them. Students I did not know came up to me in the hallway to compliment me or ask me about the shoes. Apparently, they looked just like a line of sneakers that Vans had made with a popular rapper, Tyler the Creator, two or three years earlier. This fashion choice unexpectedly created avenues for further conversation with students I might have otherwise not spoken to.

Overall, I found that the spaces of greatest identity difference between my participants and me actually allowed me to probe deeper than I otherwise might since the boys did not assume we had certain shared experiences they could reference in shorthand. Black researchers who interview Black youth have also observed this phenomenon (Carter 2008; Tyson 2003), as have both male and female scholars who study adolescent boys (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Pascoe 2011). When boys would offer only the Cliffs Notes of

an experience followed by "you know what I mean?" I would often respond, "no, tell me more" because I could not personally relate to their experience.[26]

In addition, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:74) propose that female researchers may be aided by "common cultural stereotypes" in gaining the trust and openness of participants. I certainly found that many students and adults came to see me as an unthreatening and trustworthy confidante. A handful of students let me know that I had become one of the few, if not the only, adult whom they shared certain experiences, thoughts, or feelings with. Several students would text or call me outside of school hours if they had a problem, or send a note of thanks if I had been helpful to them earlier that day.

Of course, this integration did not happen right away. In my first few school visits, and when I would meet a new student, some boys expressed curiosity (sometimes wariness) about what it meant to be a researcher and why I had chosen this research focus. In one early interaction, I got a probing question from Yaja, a junior at the time, who asked me why I had picked *this* school. His question held skepticism and a little suspicion as to why I was interested in coming to a place where all the students were Black boys. I answered honestly and he was appeased, though he kept me at arm's length for a few weeks. After an impromptu hour-long conversation stretched out on the floor of the hallway one afternoon, Yaja told me I had passed his proverbial test. He texted me

[26] There were several moments when I was aware that, perhaps in an effort to push back against my identification with the teachers, I took the "side" of the students with whom I shared far less in common (Becker 1967). I have tried to be conscious of this in the write-up as much, if not more, than I was in the field.

that evening, "you earned your black card. The community recognizes you. Your new name is Norquiesha," a revision of my name to sound stereotypically Black.

Certainly, my identity as a relatively young woman played a role in my research relationships with my teenage male participants, particularly those who were heterosexual. To some of them, particularly in a school with no girls their own age, I may have seemed just old enough to be a mysterious "older (but attainable) woman" who was also not their teacher. Here and there during data collection, a student would make a comment about my appearance. I would gently, often playfully, dissuade any sexual or romantic advances; I did not want to mislead any student into thinking he had a chance for a different kind of relationship, but I also did not want to make him feel uncomfortable or embarrassed in ways that might hinder our continued research relationship. Generally, rather than address the underlying question of whether I was or could be romantically interested in him, I would try to divert the conversation to something self-deprecating about my age – like, even though he might think I was close to his age, in reality I was *so* old, as old as his parents. In one case, I learned that I was, in fact, the exact same age as a student's mother, so I latched on to that idea whenever it seemed necessary. (CJ Pascoe [2011], in her ethnographic research with adolescent boys in a high school, describes a similar approach to rejecting sexual advances while maintaining strong research relationships.) Finding the balance between acting like a mother or a teacher and acting like a friend was, at times, quite complicated given the gendered dynamics.

Over time, as more students recognized me and understood me to be a regular presence in the school, some would ask why I did not just get a job there so I could be

there every day. Towards the end of the first year, when word spread among students that Boys' Prep was looking for a new principal, one student suggested that I apply for the job, saying "you would be respected." At the same time, other students, particularly those with whom I did not interact directly, continued to be confused about my role and purpose in the building. They would ask if I was a reporter, a counselor, or a student teacher.

Shifts in Researcher Role Over Time

My incorporation as a full-fledged member of the school community happened after Jahsun's death in November of my second year of research. The morning after we all learned of his death, Dr. Stephens, the former Principal now CEO, sent me a text message asking if I would be able to come into school throughout that week to be available to students who might want to talk. At faculty meetings during that week, the Principal reminded teachers that I was around and suggested that if students needed to leave class because they were upset, I was one of the people to whom they could go for support. During that first week back after Jahsun's death, I became a de facto grief counselor – a role for which I am neither trained nor qualified in any technical sense. This was the first time since I began my research that I was personally and explicitly called on to play a formal role at the school and "help" students, and points to the gap in resources at Boys' Prep to serve students' social and emotional needs.

My relationship with many adults in the building also evolved during that period as we now had a shared experience of losing a young person we adored and saw so much promise in. A few days after Jahsun's death, I was riding with Mr. Pratt, the head school disciplinarian, in his car during his afternoon safety checks in the neighborhood and he

turned to me, “You've been through three tragedies with us.” I looked confused, and then we talked it through and realized that Jahsun’s death was actually the first I had really been around for, but Mr. Pratt said it felt like I had also known Tyhir and another former student who had died by suicide the year before. Towards the end of the week, Ms. Cain, a teacher whose class I had been spending many periods in, texted me to say: “I hope you’re doing well- it occurred to me at some point that you’ve essentially been asked to serve as a grief counselor this week, and I think that’s asking a whole lot of you!” It seemed that some teachers recognized the role I was playing in some students’ lives and appreciated that – and this brought me deeper into the community because we were all going through it together.

Among teachers and other adults I had not previously been particularly close with, I also felt a change. During the week following Jahsun’s death, moments arose where it was prudent to exchange phone numbers with several teachers whom I had barely talked to before. At the faculty holiday party a few weeks later, I felt a noticeable change in the warmth many teachers expressed toward me and I felt like many were making concerted attempts to include me in their community. For the rest of the school year, many teachers started to notice which students were my focus and would intentionally seek me out to share stories about those students.[27] Adults would sometimes reach out to me for advice on how to handle a particular situation related to a memorial object in the building or a specific student. And the Principal once introduced

[27] Most of the time, when something notable happened with a student (whether a tense or consequential disciplinary interaction or a funny moment), I would hear about from at least two, if not three or four, different people.

me to a group of students, encouraging them to talk to me about their grief because it was what I researched and I knew "the science behind it." I tried to correct the record and explain that I studied grief from a *sociological* perspective and not as a trained therapist or psychologist, but in moments of need, many students and adults latched on to the idea that even if I had not come to the school specifically to help students with their grief, I could play that role.

In the spring, when Boys' Prep was rocked by a second students' death, all of these experiences were amplified. At times I felt hyper-visible and almost uncomfortable that I had come to the school to study the aftermath of these tragic events, and then they kept happening while I was there. A few days after Bill died, when students and teachers gathered in the cafeteria to find solace together, one teacher came over to the table I was sitting at and offered sympathetically, "this is more than you ever wanted for your research, right?" And a week later, after the funeral, when I joined a group of teachers for lunch in the neighborhood, another said, "your thesis is going to be a whole book." And at the end of the year, I joined the school faculty in their procession and special seating area at graduation – whereas the year before I had sat in the audience alongside students' families. It would be fair to say that the loss events of the year moved me further along the spectrum from "stranger" to "friend" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:89) with both students and school adults. I share more details about my approach to reciprocity in relationships with participants, moments when I felt a conflict between my various roles, decisions about when to intervene, and the complexity of leaving the field in the Appendix E.

Analytic Strategies

I approached data analysis as an ongoing and iterative process. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:159) emphasize the importance of a "dialectical interaction between data collection and data analysis." Following their lead, I treated the analysis of my data not as "a distinct stage of research [but instead as a process that] begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through the process of writing reports, articles, and books" (158). Thus, my original research design and analytic plans were informed by and revised based on preliminary findings (Maxwell 2013). However, the bulk of my systematic data analysis happened after formally leaving the field.

I used the qualitative coding software NVivo to organize and preliminarily code all my data. I periodically updated an index of all data organized by type (e.g., fieldnotes, interview audio, interview transcripts, photographs), date, and participants involved so that I could more easily move between data sources to track themes or individuals. Throughout the data collection process, and then in a more concentrated way after I left the field, I engaged in open coding leading to more focused coding strategies (Corbin and Strauss 2014; Emerson et al. 2011). First, I read every fieldnote and interview in chronological order on NVivo, creating inductive codes as I went as well as tagging sections of fieldnotes with the names of relevant participants. Then, I printed the data assigned to each code and read and recoded each of those documents. Throughout this process, I engaged in reflective and analytic memo writing and discussed my emerging findings with colleagues, advisors, and friends to begin to gauge what was most surprising, interesting, or new. Professional deadlines for grant and fellowship proposals

or conference presentations provided opportunities for me *try out* preliminary arguments to see how well they held and what questions they generated.

I received invaluable help from research assistants on some of the more tedious tasks related to my data. In addition to participating in some of the interview transcription, undergraduate (and one high school) research assistants helped me transfer students' school records,[28] which were given to me as individual PDF files, into an editable chart so that we could calculate GPAs, quantify the number of absences and disciplinary infractions of different types, and track changes in each of these over time. Research assistants also helped me sort thousands of social media screenshots, which were initially organized chronologically, into folders by person so that I could view each participants' repertoire of posts together *and* thematically. Another undergraduate assistant used Photoshop to anonymize all social media data by blurring faces and identifying features and altering the names and screennames in each post (see Appendix C for more information about this).

I read, reread, and listened to audio recordings of my data in order to really "*know*" it (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:162). I "immersed" myself in the data in a range of ways (Ravitch and Carl 2016:245): I developed matrices to identify patterns across codes and view important quotes or events for each focal participant (Miles et al. 2013). As the needs emerged, I created friendship network maps and timelines of events and other visual aids to help me better understand and make sense of my two years of data. And I simply sat with the data for a long time. As for many ethnographers, much of

[28] All research assistants were fully briefed on issues of confidentiality and signed agreements to align their work with my promises of confidentiality to the students, adults, and school.

the analysis happened through writing (Emerson et al. 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Miles et al. 2013).

Responding to Validity Threats

Even with a sound research design and analytic plan, there are many potential threats to validity in qualitative research. In the case of this project, the most likely source of invalid findings would be if I misunderstand participants' experiences, either because of my own assumptions or biases or because participants mislead me, intentionally or not. These processes could allow me to attach unwarranted meaning or even causal qualities to particular events or interactions.

In his seminal text on qualitative methods, Maxwell (2013) outlines some of the key strategies for responding to threats to validity in research. The most central approach to my research in this regard is intensive, long-term engagement in the field site allowing for the collection of "rich data" (126). Maxwell argues that "repeated observations and interviews, as well as the sustained presence of the researcher in the setting studied, can help rule out spurious associations and premature theories" (126). Indeed, over time I have discovered that certain things I learned from participants early on in my research were not entirely true, and it was only after several more months of knowing them that I was able to get a fuller, more accurate picture as I explain more below. Further, by spending extended time in one site, I was more likely to meet and observe those who might not fit the patterns I was otherwise seeing. In other words, I was aided in my efforts to find discrepant or negative cases by long-term engagement at Boys' Prep (Maxwell 2013). Additionally, by being as transparent as possible with both gatekeepers and participants about my intentions, it was easy for me to consistent in the way I

presented myself which created the best opportunities to build trusting and honest relationships with participants over time.

Another way to avoid accepting premature explanations or answers to my research questions is triangulation. In this study, I triangulated my data in at least two ways: 1) by speaking with multiple types of people (students, teachers, parents, administrators) for "perspectival triangulation," and 2) by collecting data from participants in a variety of ways (interviews, observations, social media, schoolwork and assignments, school records, surveys, and other artifacts) for "data triangulation" (Ravitch and Carl 2016). Researcher or "investigator triangulation" is another approach to ensuring the trustworthiness of findings (Ravitch and Carl 2016). Although the dissertation project requires that I be a solo researcher, I have had a consistent group of "critical friends," who are both academics and non-academics, with whom I have been able to discuss the project, my data, my methodological dilemmas, and even periodically share writing with. Dialogic engagement with others, particularly those who fit into different identity categories than I and/or who share more identities (such as race or gender) with my participants, helps ensure that my own background and biases play less of a role in the interpretation of my data and the writing up of my findings (Ravitch and Carl 2016). Finally, I have sought "respondent validation" (also known as "member checks") from select participants by sharing with them short pieces of my writing or relevant conference presentations to seek their reactions and feedback to my interpretations of particular events or pieces of data (Ravitch and Carl 2016).

Research Design Limitations

There are two major limitations to this study based on its design: the lack of a comparative context and my own blind spots and boundaries of data collection. In regard to the first limitation, Maxwell (2013) argues that comparison can offer one of the best defenses against threats to validity. Although I do believe there is much to be learned about race, gender, class, and/or school context by comparing the experiences of the boys in my current study to another group who vary within one of these categories (and I believe this would a worthy area of future research), I believe this study can still make a significant and important contribution to the educational and sociological literature without a comparison group. What I lose by not being able to compare the experience of Boys' Prep students to other groups facing loss, I gain by having the extended time at Boys' Prep with which to fully immerse myself in school life and get acquainted with students who embody a *full range* of Black boyhoods. The students I interviewed come from a variety of neighborhoods, family, and class backgrounds;[29] they represent at least three religious groups; they run the full spectrum from Honor Roll student to grade repeater, and from students who have never interacted with the school discipline system to those who have been suspended multiple times or even expelled. In other words, there are many comparisons to be made *within* the sample of my study – if insight is yielded through comparison – even though my participants share many of the same basic characteristics of race, gender, age, and all attend the same school.

[29] Students at the Boys' Prep and in my sample were almost all African American. To my knowledge, only one student in my sample, Denzel, had parents who were immigrants from Africa.

Another, and perhaps more important, limitation to the study is a consequence of my decision to keep the research bounded to the school context. Questions about how boys grieve and how they make sense of the violent deaths of friends can and should be answered through an examination of their out-of-school time, including their family life, their social interactions with neighborhood peers and/or romantic partners, their time spent alone, their sports teams and other activities. Unfortunately, one researcher and one study cannot do it all, and again these would be valuable areas for future research. My singular focus on boys' relationships and interactions in and with school was mitigated significantly by my observations of their public lives on social media. While my personal ethnographic observations were based almost solely in the Boys' Prep school building and school-sponsored activities, Instagram and other online platforms offered a window into the boys' inner thoughts as well as their experiences outside of school.

Finally, I must acknowledge my own personal blind spots – or areas that I have come to realize I do not always see clearly or fully. The most notable of these is religion. I am aware that religion and spirituality are not central to my own personal analysis and interpretation of the world, and therefore I had to intentionally remind myself to consider these dimensions throughout the research. The religious contexts that I do have ingrained in me come from being raised Jewish (but secular and agnostic) and therefore do not give me much foundational personal knowledge about the experiences of the boys in my study who primarily identify as Christian and Muslim. The two times in recent years that I personally questioned whether I should seek out more religious/spiritual experiences or affiliations in my own life were at the funerals of teenagers, so I do recognize that whether or not the participants in my study would identify themselves as deeply religious

in general, the moments through which I have gotten to know them are ones that may have especially activated any religious feelings or expressions for them.

Positionality Limitations

The second limitation to this project was and is my own identity and positionality in relation to the boys who were the primary focus of my study, and the potential parameters that may have created to what I could learn. Overall, I think that my constant and continued presence at the school allowed for any students' initial skepticism or suspicion of me to be overcome. Early dishonesties or incomplete stories were corrected over time with continued engagement. For example, one student told me in our first interview soon after I arrived at the school that he did not smoke marijuana; a few months later, he confessed to me that he did smoke regularly and that he probably lied because he "didn't really know" me. Similarly, one teacher told me about a year into my research that she had initially kept me "at arm's length" because she knew I was spending time with a group of students who did not like her and she assumed they were telling me bad things about her. Over time, she realized that I could be trusted to see the full picture and that there was no harm in her letting me in.

There were times when I believe that my identity as a white woman may have yielded nearly as much advantage as it did disadvantage. Certainly, there are reasons to believe that boys will disclose different things to me than they might to a male researcher (Sallee and Harris 2011), or that they might be more comfortable or open with me if I shared their racial identity. It is also likely that there are some statements or behaviors I will not understand, or misunderstand, because I do not share particular racialized, gendered, or classed experiences with them. However, as I mention above, it is

potentially just as likely that I am able to access other aspects of the boys' experiences precisely *because* we are speaking across some layers of difference. Further, positionality is not only about a researcher's race, gender, class, age, etc. in relation to the participants, just as reflexivity is not "simply flashing one's social categories" (Jackson 2004:38). As Jackson (2004) argues, engaging in "rigorous reflexivity" is a practice of being vulnerable and transparent, which I was committed to engaging in throughout the research, analysis, and writing process.

PART I | The Death of Tyhir

CHAPTER 1 | A Monday Night in July

I'm so young but I have so much pain.
Keith, freshman

Throughout the month of July 2016, a summer basketball league for teenagers in Philadelphia sponsored a set of games. Founded 15 years earlier by a neighborhood activist, the league was immensely popular with local teenagers. Like many neighborhoods in the racially- and class-segregated city of Philadelphia, this one is predominantly Black, with a median annual household income of $32,000 and a crime index twice the national average.

Every weekday evening, teenage boys would crowd the concrete court which is nestled along a major avenue just as it meets a snaking body of water separating the residential area of the Randall Park neighborhood from a hilly cemetery. Always the games were played with enormous intensity and often featured stand-out stars on every team. On this particular Monday night in the middle of July roughly a hundred teens gathered to watch the games, some milling in small groups along the perimeter while others sat on two small sets of bleachers. The players pulled their brightly colored jerseys up from their necks to wipe the sweat off their faces as they played; fans and friends cheered and trash-talked from the sidelines.

The week before, a spirited finale to a close game erupted in a fight between two rival teams, but this night's games ended without incident and around 10 p.m. the boys scattered in all directions heading home. But as one group of kids rounded the corner of

the main avenue, they were met by another teenager, evidently still incensed over the previous week's game, and armed with a semi-automatic handgun. Reporters later described it as an "ambush": the shooter unloaded his weapon and three boys were struck. Two of them sustained minor injuries, but the third, Tyhir, was hit in the face and would die within a few hours at a nearby hospital.

Tyhir was fifteen. He had just completed his freshman year at Boys' Preparatory Charter High School, an all-boys school located less than a mile from the corner on which he was shot. A single-sex school with a strict uniform and college preparatory courses, Boys' Prep was not the kind of school Tyhir or, for that matter, most of his friends would have chosen to attend without parental insistence, but once there they found each other, forming a close bond around their shared interests: rap battles in the cafeteria, "bidding on" (that is, playfully mocking) teachers, cramming for tests, shooting hoops on the weekends, and flirting with girls at other schools. Tyhir was one of those charismatic kids whose many eclectic qualities attracted a wide range of friends, from academically high-achieving honors students to class clowns and troublemakers. He was, according to his friends, loyal, silly, a ladies' man, a talented athlete, and a supremely focused budding rapper. At the time of his death, he was beginning to enjoy some local success, rapping at parties and filming music videos with friends and local young producers.

On that July evening, the basketball league organizers and referees were packing up the scoreboard when the gunshots rang out. Even before they could comprehend why all their kids were running for cover around them, the news of the shooting was traveling from teenager to teenager, over phone lines, in texts, and on social media posts.

Tyhir's "play cousin" Jimmy, 17, who would meet up with Tyhir every morning before school to get breakfast at the corner store, had been at the game, but left early to take his younger brothers home. "I saw the sparks and flashes," he told me, but he had no idea what had happened until he started getting phone calls from his other friends. Leaving his brothers at home, Jimmy headed directly to the hospital where Tyhir was being taken.

Matthew, 15, Tyhir's best friend, was just coming home from football practice when he received the news: "I got a call saying he got shot and stuff. And I was crazy, like, I just went crazy. I started calling everybody, tell them, 'Do this, do this, do that,' 'cause I was just...angry." Matthew barely stepped foot in the door before begging his mom to drive him to the hospital. When he got there, he later explained, "we couldn't see him or nothing…We all waited outside. Everybody was there…Nobody's really saying nothing."

One of the people Matthew called was his teacher, Ms. Bloom, who eventually joined him at the hospital with her close friend and fellow teacher, Ms. Kim. Both women were in their early twenties; Ms. Bloom is white and Ms. Kim Korean-American. They had started at the school together the year before through the Teach for America program, which was the route for about a quarter of their colleagues at Boys' Prep, and Tyhir had been their student in a math class they co-taught – Ms. Bloom as the primary teacher, and Ms. Kim as the special education support. Perhaps because of their youth, their down-to-earthness, and their caring demeanor, both Ms. Bloom and Ms. Kim had quickly become many students' favorite teachers and they regularly went above and beyond a traditional teacher role to give students rides, offer support and encouragement via text message, and

attend students' sports games or performances outside of school. In fact, just a few weeks before, Tyhir had invited them to watch him perform at a local party; after some thought, the teachers declined the invitation worrying that it would be seen as inappropriate or odd for two grown women to attend a rap performance populated by teenagers.

That night, Ms. Bloom drove through darkened Philadelphia streets in a fog, unable to really fathom what had happened until she and Ms. Kim arrived at the hospital and recognized some of their students in the large crowd that had gathered in the parking lot of the hospital. Everyone was milling about waiting for more news from those were able to be inside. Ms. Kim recalled the time spent waiting with Ms. Bloom:

> *We're sitting on the steps with one of our students that we both taught together, too. He just had his head down on the steps. We're just rubbing his back and sitting with him and being present and that's when about five, ten minutes, really shortly after we got there, we saw a man come out and he was like, "He's gone. He didn't make it."*

Ms. Kim remembered specifically that the two boys she knew who were waiting at the hospital, Jimmy and Matthew, broke down in tears when this news came. Both had been holding their emotions in, expressing worry, but no visible sadness or distress until this moment. Long will Ms. Kim remember seeing Jimmy twisting the shirt he had been holding in his hands while letting out a harrowing howl.

For those who were not at the hospital, the news that Tyhir did not pull through was communicated by phone and text within minutes. Kaliq, 15, Tyhir's close friend, was already on his way to the hospital when he got the bitter news: "I won't say I was crying 'cause I really don't cry. I don't know. But I was hurt. 'Cause it felt like it was yesterday when we was together. And then knowing how fast somebody can be taken away, so I was real hurt."

For another friend, Jonquett, 16, who shared a lunch table with Tyhir every day at school their freshman year, the news evoked a range of immediate emotions, including rage and thoughts of seeking revenge: “I wanted to cry at that point, but I just couldn’t. Then I wanted to do a whole lot. I wanted to find out who it was. I wanted to do something to them. I was hurt, I was hurt when I found out.”

Denzel, 15, a basketball teammate, who missed that night’s game for a work shift, was already in bed when he received a call. First he felt disbelief, which quickly gave way to a vague sense of guilt: “I was thinking, ‘This can't be true. They must be playing a game or something,’ because when Tyhir was alive we usually joke. We usually joke a lot.” When Denzel realized it was not a joke, he wondered if he could have prevented it: “I should have been there [at the basketball court] because if I was there we would have probably walked the other way because I lived the other way…After the game we usually walk my way, but I think if I was there I could have, I don’t know, I think I could have did something.”

Sybrii, 14, had known Tyhir since they were kids, but since he was a year younger he had not yet started high school. Instead, he attended the Boys’ Prep middle school and had been anticipating joining Tyhir at the high school in the fall. Earlier that evening, Sybrii had been hanging out with Tyhir and others at the basketball courts, but his mom, whom he described as overprotective, insisted that he come home early. Which is why he was not at the games when they ended or when the gun shots rang out, but was home instead: “And they told me he was dead, and like I just broke down in the house and I started crying. My mom was like what you crying for, and I was like my friend just died,

one of my closest friends I ever had." For Sybrii, unlike so many of the others, his tears flowed freely as he processed the news.

It was already the wee hours of the morning when the friends and family still gathered at the hospital began to make their way home. As boys hugged each other goodbye, they said, "Be safe, bro. Love you. Call me when you get home." It was not uncommon to hear the refrain "be safe" called out as a farewell among young men in this context, but the addition of "love you" and the request that friends check in when they made it home safely seemed particular to this moment – both the heightened sense of threat and bodily insecurity, and the greater care for one another in the aftermath of a trauma. Ms. Bloom offered rides to both Jimmy and Matthew, as well as Ms. Kim, and dropped them each at their homes before taking herself home. During the ride, Jimmy changed the background and lock-screen image on his phone to a picture of Tyhir.

The Next Day at Summer School

Though it was July, the day following Tyhir's murder was actually a school day for many of Tyhir's friends, as it would have been for Tyhir himself. Each summer, about a third of Boys' Prep students need to retake at least one class they failed during the year in order to be promoted to the next grade the following fall. Summer school is viewed by students as an annoyance and a hassle, but it does not draw a lot of stigma since so many students find themselves there. Though Boys' Prep publicly prided itself in being a college preparatory high school, boasting their college acceptance rates of 98% on their website and employing many of the material tropes of elite prep schools (most notably, the required uniform), the facts of day-to-day academic achievement in the school do not bear this out. In a given trimester, only about 25 percent of students earn a GPA of over

3.0 without any course grades below a C. And about five to ten percent of the freshman class must repeat the year.

Tyhir himself, though well-liked by students and teachers alike, was not an exceptional student by the school's or any academic standards. During his freshman year, he had struggled to keep his grades high enough to be allowed to play for the school basketball and football teams (student-athletes were required to maintain a B- average or higher to participate in games). His friends were heterogenous in this respect. Matthew, Denzel, and Sybrii were honor roll students who were able to maintain strong GPAs without heroic efforts. Jimmy, Kaliq, and Jonquett, on the other hand, had similar academic records to Tyhir; Jonquett, in fact, would be repeating the ninth grade when school restarted in the fall.

When Tuesday morning came, the job for school administrators and summer school staff was made a great deal harder by the events of the night before. The Boys' Prep social worker, Ms. Rivera, was out of the building that week – on vacation in another state – and unavailable to students. The school only had the resources for one full time staff member devoted to students' social and emotional well-being. Though Ms. Rivera was adept at finding low-cost resources for students from organizations throughout the city, she was not trained as a counselor herself. Quick on his feet, the principal, Dr. Stephens, was able to arrange for counselors from a city non-profit organization to come to Boys' Prep that afternoon and be available to any students free of charge – but very few students took advantage. Instead, they preferred to rely on peers and teachers with whom they already had close relationships for emotional support.

For some students, the school was the best place they could think of to spend a most difficult day.[30] Boys' Prep is housed in a refurbished church school building located in Randall Park, a neighborhood whose population is 93% Black/African American with a median annual household income of $29,000 - 32,000, a number that has gone down by a couple percentage points since the 2008 recession began (Lubrano 2018). 30-35% of residents live below the federal poverty line of $21,000 annual income for a family of three. About 8.5% of the 30,000 residents of Randall Park have a college degree, and the neighborhood has a crime index that is twice the national average, though it is not one of the city's neighborhoods *most* notorious for violence.

Since its founding in 2007, Boys' Prep had come to be seen by many as a bright spot in the troubled public educational landscape of Philadelphia and very good educational option for Randall Park families as well as those living further away. The school is part of a growing movement of public single-sex educational programs designed specifically to serve low-income boys of color and to counter the persistent educational inequalities and perceived "crisis" facing this group (Brown 2011; Howard 2013; Noguera 2009). These schools aim to forge asset-based frameworks of Blackness and masculinity to build "resilient brotherhoods" and guide their students toward college and economic mobility (Fergus et al. 2014).[31] For most parents who send their sons to Boys'

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[30] There were a few exceptions to this, like Hakim who described leaving school early that day because it was "too hard" to be there. He opted instead to spend the rest of the day hanging out with his uncle.

[31] Research focusing on the effectiveness of these single-sex schools for boys of color in improving student outcomes, however, has been mixed, if not disappointing. Fergus and colleagues (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of seven of these schools across the country. They found that, while school leaders were well-intentioned in their dedication to building resilience, college orientation, self-esteem, and brotherly bonds among their students, many of them failed to conceptualize – and therefore, operationalize – the specific role of race and gender in the struggles or successes of students. In other words, if categories of race and gender mark the group being singled out for schooling interventions because of particular

Prep, the draw is the school's focus on college preparation, the potential for social mobility implied by the dress code and other behavioral standards, and the school's positive reputation in the city as a caring and safe institution. Some parents especially appreciated the school's small size which they felt created opportunities for students to be supported in a more individualized way. As one mother put it, "Boys' Prep has been a saving grace because they're willing to work with [my son] and they're not disparaging him and throwing him away." While most students come from the surrounding areas, some commute as long as an hour from other mostly low-income neighborhoods in the city to attend.

Although he was not enrolled in the summer school, Matthew, who lived about half a mile from Boys' Prep, chose to come to school the morning after Tyhir's death to be with his friends. Ms. Kim remembered her office becoming "the space for the kids to mourn in…It was just a bunch of us crammed in my office just listening to Tyhir's music and looking at his music videos again and things like that." She described a specific interaction with one student who turned to her in the midst of their reminiscing and said, "I'm sad, but I guess I don't really know how to show how sad I am because this is normal." Another friend of Tyhir, Tyshiem, 15, described the hallways beyond Ms.

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challenges they face that are deeper or different from other groups, then it is vital that school leaders have clear ideas about the role of those categories in both the challenges and the intervention. While a growing number of studies (Nelson 2016; Oeur 2017; Warren 2016, 2017) point to intentional ways these schools foster cultures of support that differentiate themselves from other urban schools serving Black boys, Fergus and colleagues (2014) argue that both scholars and school leaders still know very little about the ways race and gender shape the school lives of students at these schools, and worry that "the [single-sex] programs now being designed will not only fail to solve the problem, but may even inadvertently make it worse" (3). Other studies point to the way single-sex schools for Black boys fall into the educational trap of relying on punishment to teach "respectable" behavior (Blume Oeur 2018; Nagarajan 2018; Oeur 2017). Further, Williams (2014:92) finds that "the effort to frame the single-sex education as a social justice issue has failed to persuade many feminists and other civil rights advocates" that this is a positive educational direction.

Kim's office as "silent…nobody was talking or nothing. I was like, 'This is crazy.' I just couldn't believe it. I was sad."

For those students who had even stronger reactions of grief, the human level resources of the school were able to respond effectively. Kaliq, for example, described himself as having "anger problems" and getting into fights throughout his early adolescence – and at its most extreme, getting into trouble with the law for using a brick to beat up another teenager – which got him sent by a judge to therapy. Although working with a therapist helped him a great deal, Kaliq reported that the death of his friend negated some of that progress: "Getting therapy last year gave me control of my anger. Losing Tyhir made me less careful about other people's feelings." In other words, although he now did not "snap" as often as he used to, he suddenly found himself caring less when he would hear about another act of violence: "I'm not going to care because who was caring when Tyhir got killed and stuff like that? That's how I look at things."

For Kaliq, these uncaring feelings manifested in a desire to harm whoever was responsible for his friend's death. He said of his first reaction to the news about Tyhir: "I'm just like, 'I'm ready to go.' I want to go. I was really sad. I wanted to drop someone." At summer school that week, Ms. Bloom overheard him on the phone discussing possible plans for retaliation, and confronted him about it. As Kaliq explained it:

> *Yeah, [teachers] was trying to talk to me. I wasn't trying to hear nothing what nobody had to say. Because it didn't mean nothing to me at that minute. I ain't really care what nobody had to say. Bloom, she kept me in the class, like she blocked the door so I won't leave. I wasn't even trying to hear what she had to say. She was telling me, "it won't mean nothing. It's not going to bring him back," and all that. I still wasn't trying to hear that. I still was going to make somebody pay.*

With continued prodding from Ms. Bloom, the intensity of Kaliq's anger and determination to do something with it, eventually subsided and Kaliq retreated from his plan.

Jonquett also remembered having abstract thoughts of revenge the day after the shooting. Ms. Bloom described his demeaner in summer school the day after Tyhir's death:

> *He puts up a wall, clenched fist, straight face. He just gets mad. And then he kind of kept saying, like, "I gotta do something." And I was just like, "What sense does that make? Like, how do you feel right now? Do you want to make someone else's friend feel that way? Or someone else's mom feel that way?...What's gonna happen? Then they come back and retaliate on you, or you get caught and you go to jail? There's no good outcome."*

After a lot of back and forth, this line of thinking convinced Jonquett and he said that the conversation with Ms. Bloom "stopped me from doing it, [she] talked me out of it." The presence and proactiveness of this gifted young teacher may very well have played a role in preventing ongoing violence within this group.

Even for those students with less extreme or retaliatory-focused reactions, the engaged responses of Boys' Prep teachers – and Ms. Bloom in particular – played an important role in helping students through the earliest stages of their grief. At the school that week, another boy, Keith, 14, was in shock. Knowing that he and Tyhir were friends, Ms. Bloom kept a close eye on him, repeatedly inquiring with a gentle hand on his shoulder, "how do you feel?" As Keith remembered it, "I just kept saying 'Okay,' and she was like, 'Stop saying okay because I know you're not.'" For him, this one singularly sensitive teacher's insistence that he allow himself to experience a fuller range of

reactions was an unexpected, but welcome, first step towards learning how to open up about his grief.

Online Grieving

The glimpse we get of grieving teenagers as they reckon with gun death in the school setting is one observational window on their experience. Quite another is the explosive and expressive posts on social media that, in the case, of Tyhir, surfaced immediately and continued for weeks and months. On Instagram and other social networking sites, the friendship circle posted scores of heartfelt and agonizing tributes to their friend, often featuring a photograph of Tyhir accompanied by a message written directly to him. "They really took you away from us man this shit killing me can't stop thinking about you 😢😇🙏 #riptyhir," wrote Jonquett in a post the day after the shooting (Figure 1.1). Denzel dedicated his future basketball games to his murdered teammate (Figure 1.2). For those students on the periphery of Tyhir's circle, who may not have been privy to the phone calls and group texts which spread the news, such posts richly encapsulating the shock and grief of the loss were actually the way they learned of Tyhir's death. The phenomenon that unexpected bad news might await anytime they open up their social media applications is one that many teenagers in these social networks face, as documented by prior research (Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish 2013; Stevens et al. 2017).

Figure 1.1 Jonquett's Instagram post. Diptych images of Tyhir with caption posted on the day of his death.
Figure 1.2 Denzel's Instagram post. Image of Tyhir with extended caption posted on the day of his death.

Even beyond these immediate posts, Tyhir's friends found ways to give his absence presence in their digital lives. His name, and the hashtags associated with it, became a part of their online identities. Many added a reference Tyhir in the "bio" of their Instagram page, which listed their handle or screen name, sometimes their actual name, a profile photograph, and usually a couple additional lines of "biographical" text. For some, the "bio" page functioned like a roll call of deceased friends and family members, with each person recognized by his or her own hashtag, usually including a phrase like "RIP" (or a variation like "Rest Up," "Rest Easy," or "Fly High") or "LL" (meaning Long Live) followed by the name, nickname, or initials of the deceased. These lists tracked and quantified losses and were added to over time. Since the Instagram

"bios" are generally quite short, a list of four to eight names and hashtags might take up well over half of the space. Acknowledgement of loss and the honoring of late loved ones thus became a part of the way some boys narrated their own identities to peers online.

More generally, through their posts on social media, boys often narrated their emotional state and present concerns. Much of the current research suggests that most social media users present a more positive picture of their lives online than is their reality (Qiu et al. 2012; Vermeulen, Vandebosch, and Heirman 2018; Waterloo et al. 2018). Social networking sites create opportunities for people to curate their self-presentation and practice "impression management" in terms of what they disclose about themselves and their internal thoughts and emotional states (Kross and Chandhok 2020; Qiu et al. 2012), a particularly complex process for adolescents who navigate constantly-evolving norms both online and in face-to-face interactions as well as multiple audiences that collapse in online spaces (boyd 2008; Ito et al. 2014; Lane 2016, 2018; Marwick and boyd 2010, 2014). Research from Stuart (2020) has found that this "context collapse" and the desegregation of audiences has high stakes implications for gang-involved youth who may put themselves at risk of violence if they are unable to carry their "code of the street"-compliant public personas – that is, their performances of masculine toughness and readiness to fight that are needed to protect their safety on the street – into their online interactions as well. At the same time, "aggressive posturing" on social media can make youth who are being surveilled by law enforcement susceptible to misinterpretation and punishment (Stuart 2020:204). Though there is debate among scholars about the causal relationship between social media threats and real life violence (Desmond U Patton et al. 2017; Stuart 2020), most agree that urban minoritized youth whose lives

intersect with violent street cultures have incentive to engage in particular practices of impression management online.

Among the boys at Boys' Prep, I found that their image-based posts (often self-portraits, not selfies) and captions demonstrated a careful curation of a self-image. They shared song lyrics, deep meditations, descriptions of themselves, or explanations for certain behaviors alongside photographs that were posed in such a way to seem candid. For example, Khalil posted a picture with his back to the camera showing off a t-shirt with an interesting design with the caption, "Trenches broke my heart and I never got it stitched up 💔" (Figure 1.3); Keith referred to himself as the "thurlest boul u know 💯" as he looked into the camera (Figure 1.4); and Hazeem explained to his followers that he "never let my pride get in the way of my hustle" alongside a photograph of him casually leaning against a pole looking back at the camera (Figure 1.5). Boys would sometimes use the ephemeral stories feature to advertise that they had a new post up and request "likes." If a picture did not get enough of a response, or if they later decided it did not fit the image they wanted to convey, they would delete it from their page. Most of the boys had less than ten posts permanently on their page.[32]

[32] For reference, I consider myself about average among my peer group in terms of amount of social media activity. My personal Instagram page has been active since 2013 and has nearly 800 posts which I never delete.

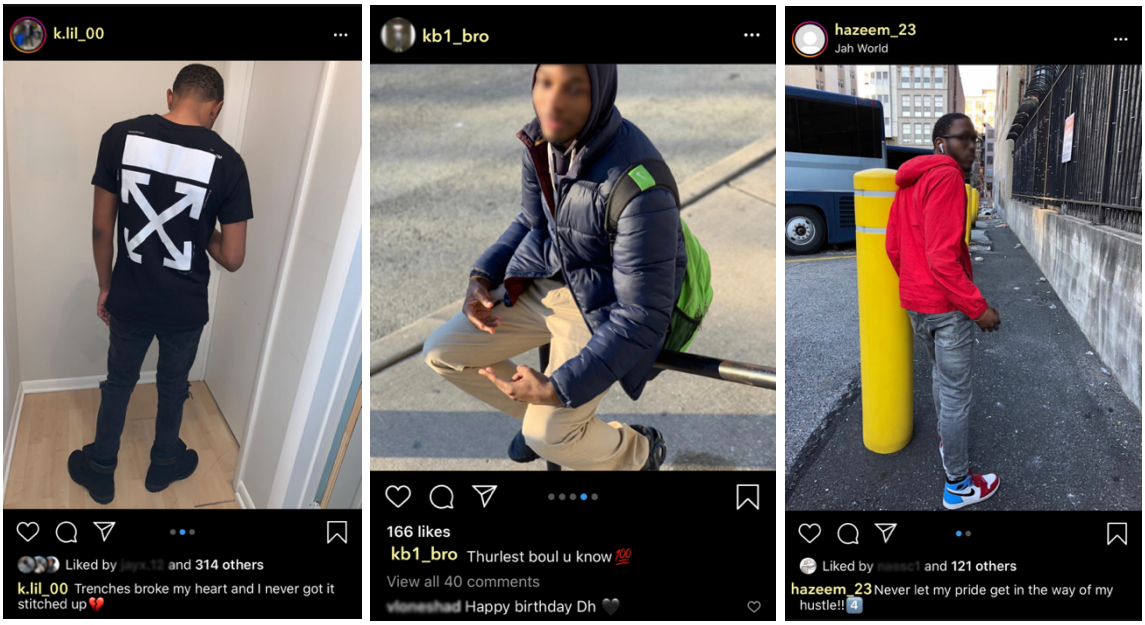

Figure 1.3 Khalil's Instagram post. Image of his back with a designed t-shirt, with a caption.
Figure 1.4 Keith's Instagram post on his birthday. Image of himself sitting on a handrail, most likely in front of the school, with a caption.
Figure 1.5 Hazeem's Instagram post. Image of himself leaning against a pole with a caption. The location marker places him in "Jah World."

In contrast, in the less permanent Instagram stories, which frequently centered around text rather than image, boys presented a more vulnerable self. Whereas alongside his picture Keith presented himself as "thurl," in a 24 hour only text-based story, he shared, "I'm so young but I have so much pain" (Figure 1.6). Hazeem, confident in his "hustle" in one image, another day posted that he uses prayer ("make dua") – he is a devout Muslim – to imagine "making it out of the hood some day" (Figure 1.7). Another student, Walter, similarly used the story feature of Instagram to express the worry that he might not live past 18 (Figure 1.8). Sometimes the boys also used Instagram to describe their fuller emotional repertoires and instruct their peers on how to interpret specific behaviors. For example, senior Samir posted "I don't show no emotions. Can't let you

know me 😊❤️❄️❄️" followed a few days later by another, "Sometimes I just get overwhelmed and just need a hug to calm me down 🤟🏾💝."

Figure 1.6 Keith's Instagram story. Text commentary on his experience of pain at a young age.
Figure 1.7 Hazeem's Instagram story. Text commentary on his hopes to leave the neighborhood in the future.
Figure 1.8 Walter's Instagram story. Text commentary on fears about living to be eighteen years old.

Interestingly, despite social media's "positivity bias" and the additional pressures Black boys may face to perform toughness online, online spaces also created novel opportunities for constructive emotional disclosure and vulnerability. This aligns with a smaller body of literature suggesting that some youth, notably those struggling with mental health concerns, experience freedom online "to express themselves in ways they may not be able to in other environments" (Elmquist and McLaughlin 2018:505). Other studies show that people may share their emotions online when they want to receive

feedback or affirmation (Vermeulen et al. 2018), and thus social media can serve as a source of connection for young people growing up in contexts of "neighborhood disorder" (Stevens et al. 2017) and can help alleviate their loneliness (Pittman and Reich 2016).

Mourning and Memorial Rituals

Around 5 p.m. on Tuesday, the day after the shooting, several of Tyhir's childhood friends – those he had known from his Randall Park block growing up, many of whom were also pursuing music careers in the same local rap circles – organized an informal vigil near the location of the shooting. With arms wrapped around each other, they played Tyhir's latest songs from their cell phones and rapped along to the music. Tyhir's friends said he was just beginning to get "hood famous," a fact some blamed his death on. A few hours later, many of those same boys, along with dozens of Tyhir's Boys' Prep friends joined his family at the basketball court where he had played his final game the evening before to release blue and white balloons in his memory. The balloon release ritual, typical in many urban African American communities on both birth and death anniversaries, "symboliz[es] the ascension and final resting place" of the person being memorialized (Carter 2019:184). Unable to hold back her tears, Tyhir's mom wept as she spoke to the crowd of hundreds begging them to set aside the usual trepidations about "snitching" and share with police any information they had about the shooter who was still at large. She also did interviews with several local camera crews that had gathered to report on the scene. Later in the week, a group of Tyhir's friends from school went over to his mom's house to spend time with her and help out. They chipped in and bought a

cake, and someone ordered pizzas and they stayed into the evening, some of them even sleeping over.

The funeral, held the following weekend, was the culmination of all these gatherings and provided the most public opportunity yet for Tyhir's friends to share in their grief together, express their emotions about the loss, and offer and receive emotional support from each other. The neighborhood church was packed for the funeral, with dozens of people having to stand in the back. And it was unbearably hot that day so, between the heat and the sadness, some people nearly passed out. Social rules about crying in particular seemed to take center stage in the boys' narrations of the funeral. For instance, Sybrii explained that he would generally resist tears when "it's not that deep," but when it was in relation to someone he considered "one of the truest brothers I ever had," like Tyhir, he let it out: "At the funeral, I did cry in front of a lot of people. …I didn't care about what people think about me crying at the funeral because, like, one of our closest friend and brothers just died."

However, for others, the loosened boundaries around emotional expression at this type of organized ritual produced internal conflict around what emotion to display or how to do so. Hazeem, 15, another regular at Tyhir's Boys' Prep lunch table during their freshman year, was not supposed to attend the Christian funeral because of his Muslim faith, but that morning he convinced his mother to allow him to go. He explained, "It was crazy because it wasn't a regular funeral – we just saw the person…That whole day, it was sad. I was seeing people from the school there was crying." He said some of his friends were nervous to go up to the open casket; Tyhir had been shot in the face so, despite the funeral home's best efforts, his face was still swollen and, according to some,

"almost unrecognizable." Even so, Hazeem accompanied his nervous friends to the casket, ultimately seeing his deceased friend's body three separate times, all while feeling conflicted about his faith since the Muslim death rituals require a very different orientation to the dead body. Hazeem's internal conflict came out in the form of confusion about whether or not he was crying: "I thought I was crying…My chest got tight," but then, he explained, he realized that no tears were coming out.

Jonquett also expressed a complicated relationship with the act of crying at the funeral. He told me in an interview,

> *I never had a problem with showing my emotions, I just never cry. I don't know why. [There are times when] I wish I could, but I just don't. At Tyhir's funeral, didn't cry. That was like my mans. Everybody else was around me crying, and I'm just…I was like, they think I don't care about him and all that. And if I don't show emotions, and all that, then how would that look on me?*

In the public ritual event of the funeral, Jonquett felt self-conscious that others would think he did not care about his friend's death because he found himself unable to shed tears.

The End of the Summer

After the flurry of organized mourning rituals became less frequent, summer still continued for Boys' Prep students and teachers. Summer school went on as planned, though certainly with a different feeling than before for some participants. For example, Ms. Kim shared with me that she "actually avoided the third floor for a chunk of the summer because the classroom that we taught him in was the third floor" and she had trouble focusing on her teaching for the duration of summer school.

There were a handful of other friends of Tyhir who did not learn of his death right away missing many of those immediate gatherings. Since Tyrese, 15, was on a trip with

his grandmother without access to a phone, he did not get the news of his friend's death until a few days later, and then he was unable to process what had happened with any of his friends until his return: "I didn't believe it at first. You wouldn't expect nothing like that. You see stuff on TV and stuff, but you don't never expect it to happen to somebody you know. I was in shock [and] I couldn't talk to nobody."

Herc, 15, had played with Tyhir on the Boys' Prep freshmen basketball team, shared a lunch table with him every day of the school year, and joined in on the goofing around that often got some members of their friend group in low-level disciplinary trouble at school. In an effort to reset and perhaps rethink his approach to school, as well as to escape the harsh realities of Philadelphia's often violent summers, Herc had spent the month of July camping in the woods with an Outward Bound program. The program required him to give up his phone to focus on the outdoors and he had been excited to do so. A few weeks after the shooting, all the immediate gatherings, and the funeral, Herc finished his program and prepared to head back to Philadelphia:

> *And then before I took my flight home, before we got to the airport, they said, 'Your mom on the phone.' And then she said my friend passed. I said, 'who?' Once she said Tyhir, that's when I just thought of him [and] then I just like broke down. Then…when they gave my phone back after the airport, I'm looking on my timeline, all that, my messages and then everybody, everybody's telling me, but, like, I didn't have my phone so [I saw them all at once].*

Herc described struggling to take in all the news at once and felt confused returning to the new reality without Tyhir, but also without the chance to grieve on the same timeline as his friends. He said that during the trip, he had been "thinking about, like, trying to change and all that, but then it was like once I find out about the news, everything just, everything I learned on that trip just went out my head." He was also coming home to

other big personal changes including a move to a new neighborhood where he did not know as many people and therefore was not always comfortable being outside.

Towards the end of the summer, the school helped to organize an anti-violence march that many of Tyhir's friends and family participated in; Herc was able to join for that. They had a banner for the school, and handwritten signs, and several big poster boards with photographs of Tyhir. About 20 students and teachers joined Tyhir's mother to march through the streets of the Randall Park neighborhood yelling out chants for peace. Soon after that, a mural with Tyhir's face and birth and death dates was painted in center court of the basketball court where the summer league took place, now known by many in the neighborhood as "Tyhir's court." When the mural was complete, several Boys' prep students and teachers attended a dedication ceremony. Herc was one of the few students who volunteered to speak. He shared some favorite memories of Tyhir and then closed with: "You just have some friends whose smile can comfort you and let you know that everything will be okay. Tyhir was one of them for me."

CHAPTER 2 | When Grief Goes to School: A Baseline Year

You aren't really excused unless you're crying or can talk about it.
Xavier, senior

As at all American high schools, the start of a new school year at Boys' Prep is typically charged with energy and excitement. The hallways are alive and bustling, as boys jostle with each other – mostly playfully – and sing and sneak peeks at their cell phones which are generally supposed to be out of sight. It is not uncommon to hear adults call out, "tuck in your shirt – all the way around" or "button your top button" as students saunter through the hallways to their new classes, their uniforms somehow having gotten completely unfixed since the last time they were told to fix them. During class periods, one is just as likely to see a student and teacher huddled on the floor working through a math problem as a hushed hallway reprimand for misbehavior by a teacher or administrator.

Boys' Preparatory Charter High School serves approximately 450 students (grades 9-12[33]), 99% of whom are Black/African American.[34] As a charter school, its students are selected by lottery and the school typically receives applications from three times the number of students it can admit into each year's freshman class. Although school leaders have not been required to keep accurate records of students' financial

[33] Boys' Prep also has a middle school, located about a mile from the high school. Approximately one third of the ninth grade class come from the middle school.
[34] Throughout this text, I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably (Ladson-Billings 2011) except where I know that students specifically identify as one or the other.

situations, Boys' Prep administrators estimate that somewhere between 60 and 80% of the student body would qualify for free/reduced lunch (they offer free breakfast and lunch to all students) — though several teachers estimate that recent changes to the school's admissions process have probably increased this number.

In the cafeteria, in a typical year, the fast-growing, always-hungry boys at the school wolf down their all-too-small lunch portions in a matter of minutes, while leaving a side of corn or string beans untouched on the partitioned Styrofoam plate. As some students dutifully pull out their school-issued laptops to do homework, others stream music into their headphones or obsessively play 8-ball on their phones. Among Tyhir's circle of friends, there would always be someone with a deck of Uno cards handy transforming lunch periods into exuberant card games, interspersed with calls to girlfriends or scrolling through Instagram or keeping up with Snapchat streaks.

The first days of this new school year were much like any other. Perhaps because this was the very first occurrence of gun death in the school's ten year history, or perhaps because it happened during the summer, six weeks before school began, the administration and teachers intentionally sought to launch the 2016-2017 year as if nothing had happened. As Ms. Rivera, the school social worker, put it, "the kids had time on their own to grieve and process it. Not that it didn't affect them during the school year, but they had time on their own with their family and their friends outside of school."

Even so, a modest attempt was made to recognize that a schoolmate had passed. Squeezed into a kick-off assembly, after the logistical discussions of uniforms, school clubs, and Saturday School, was an official tribute to Tyhir. As his picture was projected

on the screen, the Principal shared some brief remembrances and offered words of consolation to his friends.

But while the school endeavored to move on, this could not happen for Tyhir's friends. To appreciate their experience, it is important to understand that the loss of Tyhir occurred, for most of his friends, in the context of a repeated hemorrhaging, year in and year out, of peers for a host of complex reasons. Among them is the well-described phenomenon of student mobility (Rumberger 2015; Sparks 2016) which, in the case of Tyhir's friends, steadily eroded the Boys' Prep friendship circle that they formed freshman year. Among the many reasons for high turnover rates at Boys' Prep is the single-gender character of the school. Over time many students reluctantly come to appreciate the unique forms of friendship that emerge among boys when female students are not present, but every year considerable numbers persuade their parents to transfer them to co-ed schools. To these voluntary defectors are added the many others who are "counseled out" of the school (Nir 2011; Torre 2013). Some are asked to leave for failing a grade, perhaps even more than once. Others are encouraged to transfer to a school that can better handle a special learning need. Finally, a group of students each year are expelled for disciplinary issues.[35] As a result, the typical freshman class of 150 students may dwindle to half that number by graduation. In the case of Tyhir's circle of friends, these typical reasons for students' early departure from the school were compounded not

[35] In 2017, the official reasons for students' withdrawal from the high school roster were listed as: 52% left to attend "another local option," 28% moved "out of area," 16% were "undercredited," and 4% left for "discipline[ary]" reasons. Between all of these routes out, Boys' Prep averaged an attrition rate of 4-9% every year, meaning between 45 and 70 students in the high school would leave during each school year or during the summer.

only by the loss of Tyhir, but by the decision of two families after the shooting to find what they believed would be a safer location (both city and school) for their sons, leaving Tyhir's friends at Boys' Prep with two classmate absences and even more bereft.

The experience of Herc is a case in point. Like Tyhir, Herc encircled himself with friends who adored him for his charisma and sweetness. As his sophomore year began, the departure of two friends on top of the death of Tyhir made him feel like "the energy just wasn't there, the whole 10th grade year, beginning. I wasn't in the right state of mind for a while." His lunch table, which the year before had been overflowing with more people than could fit, now had just five regulars – Jonquett, Latrell, Kaliq, Hazeem, alongside Herc. A second table nearby became the regular spot for some of the other boys in this extended friend circle: Matthew, Denzel, Tyrese, and Caleer, and a handful of others. The full effect of Herc's multiple losses – the diminished size of his extended school-based friend groups and the change in their "energy" – will become clear before the year is over.

As other boys described it, memories of Tyhir associated with physical spaces in the school building made the new school year harder. Dimere, 15, who had been part of Tyhir's tight freshman crew, recalled being back at school in the first few days of sophomore year:

> *I remember I was at my locker and I turned to go, like "Yo, Ty." 'Cause his locker was right next to mines on the third floor – and then it just, like, it hit me and…I ain't talk for the rest of the day. I mean I talk to Ms. Bloom but…I didn't tell her the reason why, I just told her I wasn't having a good day. I didn't talk nobody [else] the rest of the day.*

Though they might not have shared it in the moment, moving through the school building and seeing where Tyhir's locker had been or his usual seat in a classroom or the cafeteria made his absence palpable on a daily basis for his friends.

Controlled Grief

As boys' grief intersected with the institutional life of the school, it began to take on a more covert quality. For several of the boys, losing Tyhir was not their first experience of the loss of a friend, and some had developed strategies for dealing with grief or managing difficult emotions. In our interviews, they shared their approaches to managing emotion and specifically that they often preferred to keep their grief inside and avoid expressing it in public. Further, they often made explicit efforts to push thoughts of their friend from their mind to prevent feelings of extreme sadness. Almost all the boys I spoke to alluded to constant labor to escape or control their sadness by avoiding the reminders of their friend or redirecting their own thoughts. Sybrii, a few months after Tyhir's death, confessed that "if I don't think about him dying then I don't get hurt," and therefore he would do his best to avoid those thoughts. Similarly, Latrell, 15, shared that he would think about Tyhir "probably at least four or five times a day," but tried to focus his thoughts on "all of the good times we've had together." When I asked how those memories made him feel, he responded: "If I started to think too long, I start to get emotional, so I just start to think about something else." Latrell had developed strategies to keep the happy memories of his friend that popped into his head multiple times a day from making him "get emotional."

Some of the boys spoke about the specific challenges of redirecting their grief when they were in school. In the fall, Keith told me that Tyhir's death was "still on my

mind and I try to move on but it's kind of hard." In school specifically, he explained that he would try "not to think about it. That's why I just try to surround myself with people that I know that will make me laugh and stuff because I know if I don't do those things, I'm going to think about it. I'mma just be sad all over again." Overall, the boys were skilled at developing and implementing strategies of "cognitive avoidance" to protect themselves from complex and sometimes overwhelming feelings of grief (Smith and Patton 2016).[36] As Hochschild (1979: 561) explains it, "control [or] suppression [of] an undesired feeling which is initially present" is one of the core emotion work tasks.

Kaliq attributed his emotional control and stoicism to a change over time after a particularly traumatic loss he experienced years ago. When Kaliq was just a toddler, his grandfather was killed when his construction worksite exploded, an incident Kaliq believes shifted his future responses to the deaths of loved ones:

> *To be honest, I don't get emotional no more. Last time I got emotional was like 2003. That's when my Pop-pop died…I was the saddest man on earth. I don't think nobody could say nothing to me without me snapping or nothing. Then last year, my grandmom died, and it was just like … I wasn't okay with it, but I was like, "things happen." I couldn't cry, nothing like none of that. I don't really get emotional no more.*

Like many of the other boys, Kaliq described his lack of emotionality or strategies of emotional control in very individual terms. In other words, they did not connect their own views of emotion to typical standards of masculinity or social rules, but rather to specific events in their own lives or their individual temperament. When I would ask the boys if they ever remembered getting messages from others that guided their approach to sharing

[36] In the survey I conducted with BP seniors that year, more than a third of students who had experienced at least one significant loss reported feel "neutral" or "no emotion" about the event.

or expressing emotion, each was adamant that he was "just like that on [his] own," it was just who he was "as a person," or he was just "that kind of individual."

In a more extreme example, Irell, 17, acknowledged that his highly individualized approach to pushing away his grief feelings might have long-term effects that would be detrimental to him:

> *All those little emotions that you don't wanna face, I just choose not to face. Put 'em in a little box, lock them away, and try my best to turn a blind eye to them…I'm just delaying the inevitable…If I allow myself to start grieving now, I don't know when it's gonna stop. I don't have emotional control so it's just gonna result in bad choices, bad actions, bad consequences. So I will push it off until--I'd like to say until I develop emotional control but I don't know if that is ever going to happen…What I expect to happen is somewhere around 35-45, a midlife crisis will hit, and utter chaos will break loose…Everything will just fall apart then and we'll pick the pieces up as they come. Probably doesn't sound like the best idea but then that's when you have to know yourself.*

Irell argued that he "knows himself" and therefore chose to exert agency over his emotional life even though he had little control over the situations that presented him with these emotions. He was prepared to face a "midlife crisis" and "utter chaos" down the road because he did not think he currently had the emotional tools or "control" to cope with the full extent of his grief. Rather than seek out social supports, he believed that the best way for him to avoid "bad choices, bad actions, and bad consequences" was to lock away his feelings in a figurative box and wait for a "tipping point" years down the road (Lindsey and Marcell 2012).

Irell's musings here reflect larger patterns in the way many of the boys I met at Boys' Prep described their emotional lives. Emotional control was key, as was handling their feelings on their own even though, when asked, most told me they would not have a problem seeking professional help or talking to a friend or trusted adult if they really

needed it. Boys would use the language of "control" to talk about how they managed their sadness or their tears, as well as how they were sometimes unable to control their anger – or learned to control their anger over time. On the rare occasions when they could not control their sadness or grief, the boys described "breaking down." Discussions of whether or not they felt "emotional" often revolved around the act of crying – whether they cried, whether they never cried, whether they tried to cry but were unable to, whether they tried not to cry but did anyway. After a particularly devastating event, several boys might report to their friends or to me proudly that they did not cry or break down, or that it only happened once or twice.

In contrast to their descriptions of sadness as a fleeting emotion they could reroute or exclude from their thoughts and conversations through deliberate efforts, the boys often discussed anger as both a problem and a part of them, a piece of their intrinsic identity. Their anger was less controllable and more perplexing. For instance, Hazeem expressed confusion about the periodic intensity of his anger: "I wake up and I just be mad. I don't know why." Matthew similarly wondered why his feelings of anger might just emerge seemingly out of nowhere: "When I get angry, it's just a switch…I go from chilling and then it's mad, and then I can go right back to chilling right after I'm mad, so it's like, I don't know. I always wondered where the anger coming from because I snap so easily." Hakim took this one step further explaining that he also "gets angry quick [but] gotta fight that." Several of the boys referred to their anger as a "problem" or "issue," not simply a temporary emotion. In some cases, they seemed to be repeating a

diagnosis[37] someone had attached to them and several mentioned that they had been "sent to" therapy or an anger management program by a parent, a person at their school, or a judge.

Sometimes – and particularly in relation to uncontrollable anger – the boys talked about their emotional habits or temperaments as genetically passed or socially learned from their father. This came up in more than half of my conversations with boys about anger. Several described their anger as something they "inherited" from their father. For instance, Sybrii told me that his dad "has anger issues. That's where I get it from." Similarly, Hazeem explained that "I just be mad sometimes. My mom…was saying that it was in my genes because my dad, there's something wrong with him." He continued by explaining that his mom often gets angry too, but she knows how to "control" it in contrast to his father.

In general, I found that the boys' emotional vocabulary was usually limited to the concepts I have referenced so far: sadness, crying, breaking down, anger, and emotional control. When they tried to describe a feeling or emotional experience outside of or more nuanced than these categories, the word they would often arrive at was "weird." Weird was an all-purpose word when something felt uncomfortable or not quite right. Boys used the word to describe many of the moments and feelings after losing a friend: being in the classroom he used to be in, being in other classrooms that are quieter than usual, noticing that other students are using the seat or locker that used to belong to him. The word

[37] Two students specifically mentioned being told they were "bipolar," but the context seemed less like a formal diagnosis and more like a lay person's observation of extreme emotional swings. One student said he had been diagnosed with PTSD. And there were about 10 boys who talked about feeling depressed or having depression, most in an offhand non-clinical way.

seemed to encompass a combination of strangeness and sadness, but was also used to describe generally negative but unspecific feelings toward a place, person, or experience. Without a nuanced repertoire of emotional language, boys' "ability to describe and experience an emotion [might] be constrained" (Ritchie and Barker 2006).

Sharing Grief with Friends

In addition to the inner emotional processes the boys were working through as they observed their own emotional patterns and responses to the death of their friend, they also needed to negotiate interactions with peers and curate the feelings they expressed publicly. As Keith alluded to above, efforts to avoid dwelling on the loss – or at least the sad parts of the loss – were often aided by friends. Friends could "cheer up" someone on the verge of feeling too sad through laughter; peer groups could also create a collective silence around shared feelings of grief. Jimmy, for example, explained that he and his friends "don't talk about [Tyhir's death]. We keep our ears off of it. Ain't nothing but stress – why you want to suffer all the stress?" Denzel echoed this sentiment and offered a window into why:

> *We don't talk about it. No, we don't. We just don't mention it. We know that Tyhir is gone but we just don't ever talk about it between us. …It be times where we just see each other. When I see our friends, I can see that they're feeling some type of way, but I won't just bring it up or nothing because it's all good vibes around us, so I don't want to bring nothing negative up to bring us down….We know that if we talk about it that's just going to bring us down. That's just going to make us all feel sad. That's not what we're trying to do….We don't like being sad. Our own thing is to be hype, we're hype. …No matter what, we're going to be there for each other so ain't no need to just keep talking about it because what happened in the past is in the past. Even though that was our friend we just can't talk about it.*

Denzel indicated that there was a shared understanding among his friends – all friends of Tyhir – that their mutual loss was off limits for conversation. Specifically, he expressed

concern that if he were to bring it up in conversation, it would make others feel sad. The knowledge that they were all there for each other and supportive was enough comfort for him, and was evident without outward emotional sharing.

Similarly, Latrell told me that his group of friends would talk about Tyhir only when remembering something funny that he did or listening to his music. Some boys implied that they could not remember having a single conversation with their friends about Tyhir's *death*. Instead, there was an unspoken rule that they kept time with friends "hype" or "good vibes" only. This generally matches what I observed as well. I sat at lunch with one group of close friends – Latrell, Herc, Jonquett, Hazeem, and Kaliq – at least once a week for nearly an entire school year. This was the same table where Tyhir had sat with them the year before. Even though they knew that their shared loss was most of my reason for joining them at lunch, their friend's name only came up twice during those lunches – in both cases, a quick shared memory then immediately on to a new subject. Under the framework of protecting each other from sadness, the boys' tacit agreement not to discuss their shared loss resulted in a kind of collective denial of the depth of what they each had experienced.

The school social worker, Ms. Rivera, a Latina woman in her 40s, confirmed this. She told me that often when her students experienced a death of a loved one,

> *They kinda like dismiss it, they don't openly talk about it if they're sad. …They kind of just go on with their day. …Occasionally they come in [to my office] and they look sad, or they might cry, or they might talk about it. But a nice amount of kids that just, 'No, I'm okay, I'm fine. I'm doing my thing.' And you know that this should have, it does have an impact on them. So I think just, they try just continuing with life. …I guess they just feel like it's weak to cry and be upset. You have to kind of like man up and go on with your life. …You just have to go on regardless.*

Although the boys rarely explicitly described rules about "manning up" guiding their expression, the social worker's observations certainly aligned with what boys told me about their efforts to tamp down their sadness about losing their friend so that they could continue on with their daily routines.

Certainly, stereotypes of masculinity requiring strength and emotional stoicism are embedded in Latrell's worries that if he were to show other people his pain, he would look weak:

> *You can't let people see you hurt….if you show people that you're hurt, that's like a sign that you lost or forfeit, you're not supposed to show no sympathy. And not like show sympathy, but not let them see that you're hurting. And I was told that for every rainy day there is another sunny day.*

To him, it was a more powerful stance to look ahead to positive things in the future. Relatedly, several other boys took pride in being about to "deal with [my problems] on my own."

Sybrii specifically worried that if he were to share his feelings with friends they might "try to use it against [him] in an argument," as if the weakness he showed by talking about emotion could be exploited to hurt him later on. He explained that he viewed differently the idea of telling friends about small problems at home compared to talking openly about his deep feelings: "I wouldn't tell my feelings, but just like my mom trouble, like 'she on some weird stuff,' stuff like that, but I wouldn't tell him like how I feel and stuff. I never do that. I don't know why. I just don't like doing that. I'm not that kind of individual." He went on to describe his strategies for handling the moments when he feels really down: "I just like to calm down. Like I rather, like, go outside and just walk around, or go to a friend house and like just chill over there." When I asked Sybrii if

he ever tried telling a friend "how he feels and stuff," he conceded that he did with only one close friend – a Mexican boy who recently moved to his neighborhood but attended a different school.

Antoine, a junior, also avoided sharing his feelings with others; for him, the reason was slightly different:

> *I hate when people like tryin' to – it not, like I don't know, it's not a bad thing, but I don't like it – like tryin', 'Aww…I feel bad,' like hugging. I don't like that, so I'd rather not like go through that…I just do me, like I don't like all that huggy stuff, that mushy stuff. I don't like none of that.*

Antoine was concerned that if he displayed his own grief to others, then he would have to deal with their hugs or their pity. Still others worried about the reverse: that other people did not fully recognize the depth of their loss when it was a friend or classmate who died. One senior, Rodney, shared in a group meeting, "I think that when young people lose a peer, a friend, sometimes parents don't appreciate that. They think it was just someone you went to school with, not a real relationship."

Other boys made the connection between showing their emotions and implicitly asking for help, as if by expressing their feelings they were suggesting that they could not handle hardship on their own. Keith thought this was true for many of his peers: "I think we just try to hide our emotions. We don't want people to see how we really feel. We try to keep it in, [but] it's something I've got to get better with. Trying to tell people my emotions so they can help me...It's like I don't like getting help. I don't know why, but when I'm sad or something I don't tell people."

Like Irell who earlier talked about the midlife crisis that might result from his approach to locking all of his feelings away in a box, there were some students who

acknowledged that their approach to avoiding conversations about their loss might not be best for them. Shawn, 15, conceded that keeping to himself "is a big problem for me…that's not really good for me….because if you do that it causes damage to yourself. You've got to let that out." Similarly, senior Calvin confessed that he "tend[s] not to talk about my feelings and I tend to bottle it up until I hit my breaking point and just cry all day, and I've had those days. And I don't like having those days. I've come to realize that when you talk about your feelings regularly, you feel better."

Dealing with Emotion in School

Boys' Prep is a school for boys, and as such, they incorporated into their mission and daily practices some sense of what kinds of boyhood and masculinity they wished to encourage in their students – and what ideas about manhood they hoped students would *unlearn*. Dr. Stephens, the Principal, described these expectations in different ways to different audiences. To a room full of students at an assembly early in the year, he offered, "Not all Black men have to just act in anger or respond to a situation by wanting to fight. That's weakness, that's stupidity. If you've fallen prey to that, I hope you're growing and learning." In a speech to prospective parents before selecting students for admission in a lottery, he shared that Boys' Prep emphasized developing emotional intelligence in the context of students' developing masculinities: "they can proceed through adolescence without having to be overly macho [but] we recognize that the man we ask them to be here [in school] may be different than on their walk home." In more informal contexts, school administrators confessed that this work was messy and difficult and that they were not always sure they were doing it right. Dr. Stephens admitted that

living Black masculinity was challenging enough, let alone figuring out how to teach it well.

In practice, in the daily life of the school, sometimes students received mixed messages. For instance, early on in my research I overheard a male teacher chastising and advising a student in the hallway: "Basing your decisions off feelings is a bad idea, dude. You're in your feelings right now. That's illogical, irrational." Whereas that moment suggested that some teachers might not fully buy into the school's approach to developing a softer masculinity, other teachers felt that the school norms did, indeed, offer students more emotional freedom than Black men are traditionally permitted. In a focus group, one female teacher shared: "I think we, as a school, do a good job of letting the boys know that they are allowed to feel and have emotion and talk about things. I think that's something that we do well."

One way to make sense of these varied opinions is to acknowledge that strong individual student-teacher relationships often became the context in which students' emotional sharing and emotional vulnerability was made possible. It was primarily in their relationships with specific, often female, teachers were boys able to open up, receive emotional support, and learn how to be more expressive. For young people who are often not socialized to seek out help for a problem (Jacoby et al. 2018; Lindsey and Marcell 2012; Rickwood et al. 2005; Ward and Besson 2013), teachers often serve as non-parental "natural mentors" who can play a major role in helping students avoid risky behavior and open up about their feelings (Culyba et al. 2019; Lynn et al. 2010).

Yet in the context of interactions with adults across the school more broadly, the social rules around grief required different skills and strategies. Xavier, a senior who was

not personally close with Tyhir, but remembered the day of the morning assembly and memorial event, noticed contradictions between the way adults in the building purported to care about how students were coping with loss and yet how they would misinterpret students' behaviors that were based in grief:

> *[At the memorial], you brought [Tyhir's death] up, people are looking at his picture. This is something that's being talked about. It's not a place where you could really run away from it, and you have to feel it. Now people are expected to go to class right after. You aren't really excused unless you're crying or unless you break down, or unless you can talk about it. Some people can't. They might snap. In that day now, they might be in the middle of doing work and somebody's talking over there, and slam their pencil down, stand up and yell, "Shut up." Now they're being removed from the classroom, because they had an outburst or it was an unacceptable behavior in class. [The punishment is seen as] completely justifiable. It's not looked at in that specific lens.*

According to Xavier's assessment, those who were able to "talk about it" or made visible their feelings through tears could be excused from class and, presumably, offered some kind of support. But those students who expressed their grief in other ways – by "snapping," slamming a pencil on their desk, or yelling – might be treated differently, and even subject to punishment. In his view, the teachers did not see the student behavior through the "specific lens" of the memorial event earlier in the day.

On designated, publicly-marked days like Tyhir's birthday (which fell within a few days of the six month anniversary of his death) students experienced more freedom of expression around their grief, yet this also presented them with some internal conflicts. For example, on the day of Tyhir's birthday in February, just as the second trimester of the school year was nearing its conclusion, Tyhir's mother and other family members came to the school with pizza and cake. A few teachers organized about thirty students to gather for an hour to eat and "celebrate" the birthday with his family. Tyhir's mother

invited his friends to introduce themselves and share a memory of Tyhir if they wished. Sybrii was the brave one to stand up first and share a brief thought. For Sybrii, the event was "emotional" and he felt a lot of empathy for Tyhir's family which made him want to publicly demonstrate his closeness to his late friend.

About fifteen other boys also shared, some with longer stories of good times with their friend, and ten or so decided to stay quiet. Then Tyhir's uncle offered some encouraging words:

> *I work with young men every day. All the guys I work with are convicted felons….I see a lot of guys 13 on up who don't have a lot to look forward to, they just don't. Maybe it's a parenting issue. Maybe it's a peer issue, whatever. But you got something they don't have. You have the memory of Tyhir to motivate you, to inspire you. Not saying that whatever you do from this day moving forward is going to be easy. You gonna have some crazy times in the streets because it is what it is and we are who we are….but if Tyhir meant anything to any of you, let whatever your best memories of Tyhir inspire you to just do something great.*

Soon after he finished, the teachers passed out the pizza boxes and drinks and the boys sat in clumps quietly eating. The energy was lifted when one student suggested they put on some of Tyhir's rap songs, and then students began singing along, and even dancing. After a few minutes of this, the family brought out the cake and they all sang "Happy Birthday." The song went on for several minutes, including multiple variations and extra verses. Tyhir's mom filmed the singing on her phone, posting it to Facebook Live.

Several boys shared that the event was meaningful to them especially in the way it lived up to the expectation that it be a celebration rather than a sad occasion. Denzel articulated his view that Tyhir would not have wanted them to be sad:

> *We knew what he was about and we knew that he wouldn't want us to be down about his birthday coming up and he's not here, so we knew he wouldn't us to be mourning or sad about it. We just kept on a straight face, a happy face and just celebrated his birthday how he would want us to celebrate it.*

Similarly, sophomore Caleer expressed that being around Tyhir's family helped him feel more connected to his friend and feel his presence in the room:

> *That was actually a good time because I seen his mom's face. I call her my mom too. I seen his mom's face, I seen his little sisters' smile, listening to his music, hearing his voice. Thinking, basically I just looking to the side because in my head he stayed next to me just laughing and joking.*

Jonquett "rolled one for my dead homie" and decided to get high that morning before coming to school as his indication of connection to and celebration for his friend.

In contrast, other students expressed more conflicted feelings about gathering for Tyhir's birthday without him. Keith acknowledged that Tyhir's sixteenth birthday party was an event they had discussed while he was alive, so it was painful to be celebrating that occasion now in such a different way than they had planned:

> *It was hard because we're celebrating his birthday without him. It's hard to do that with somebody you normally celebrate their birthday with. This year, he already planned his birthday, so you knew that was going to be hard because he wasn't going to have the birthday that he wished.*

Kaliq as well found it hard to be there and see so many people, both family and friends, still struggling with their loss:

> *I wasn't really trying to be there. I just don't like seeing other people cry and stuff. I just seen his mom and his sisters and his grandmom, they was really tearing up. I just didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say or do or nothing. That's hard for other people when you seeing somebody your age['s] family going through it. …I don't know what my mom would do if I was to go, somebody was to take my life. I didn't even want to be there.*

Seeing Tyhir's family dealing publicly with their loss got Kaliq thinking about his own family and how they might handle a similar situation if he were to die. Overall, although rituals created space for expression that was not always available, they also forced the

boys to witness others' pain and sometimes put pressure on them to visibly demonstrate their closeness.

As the gathering began to wind down, one student wrote "RIP Tyhir" in big letters on the classroom dry erase board and other students started signing the board. Seeing this, Ms. Bloom grabbed a handful of chalk from her desk and invited students, if they wished, to add messages to the red chalkboard wall on the side of the room opposite the window. About a dozen students took turns writing messages on the wall and signing their names, some standing on desks or chairs to fill the upper spaces of the wall. Eventually, the teachers remaining in the room reminded students that they had promised to return to their regular classes by 1:40pm. Herc was sitting on a desk by the window staring into space; Latrell was by the red chalkboard wall, bent all the way forward as he scrolled mindlessly through Instagram; and Jonquett was collapsed face forward on top of two desks, his legs hanging off the desk. With some more prodding from their teachers, the three picked themselves up and headed to class.

Moving into the third trimester of the school year, the red wall and Ms. Bloom's classroom itself became an unofficial memorial to Tyhir. Several of Tyhir's friends would regularly come to the classroom during free periods or after they had finished eating their lunches – even if Ms. Bloom was teaching another class in the room. They would simply walk to the back of the room and sit at her desk or on the windowsill and do homework or play on their phones ignoring the class in session. One student explained that just being in that room made him "feel better" because of the combination of memories of Tyhir's presence there the year before, the memorial wall, and Ms. Bloom's compassionate affect and understanding of what he was going through. However, for the

freshmen Ms. Bloom taught, most of whom never knew Tyhir, trying to learn science while facing a wall covered in RIP inscriptions may have created some cognitive dissonance (see Figure 6.1 in Chapter 6).

Under the Uniform

As the school year continued, grieving their friend remained a part of the subtext of day-to-day life for many students, though avenues for expression were mostly sidelined to private material remembrance objects and social media. In interviews throughout the winter and spring of 2017, almost all of the Tyhir's close friends reported that they had incorporated a tangible reminder of their friend into their daily routines or displayed their grief in embodied or material ways – in the private space of their bedrooms, on their bodies, and on their phones – even six months and more after Tyhir's death.

Jimmy, who had been at the hospital the night Tyhir died all those months ago, had an RIP t-shirt with Tyhir's picture on it that he wore to school throughout the year, his senior year: "I wear it a lot…. That's my man so why not wear his shirt under [my school shirt] -- people can't see nothing." Three boys regularly wore dog tags with Tyhir's picture and name around their necks underneath – and sometimes on top of – their school uniform; one had a jacket with his name embroidered on it that he wore to school regularly; another had "RIP Ty" written in sharpie across the strap of his backpack and another on his basketball shoes. At least two boys showed me tattoos they had gotten in the last few months to memorialize their friend, and several more said memorial tattoos were planned. Some of the boys used a picture of Tyhir as the lock-screen or background image on their phone; some still listened to his music through their

headphones during lunch or study hall periods. Three shared that they kept a photograph or document related to Tyhir's death (obituary or newspaper article) hanging on their bedroom wall; another kept a picture of Tyhir tucked into the frame of his mirror alongside pictures of his family and motivational messages.

Sometimes these material artifacts became reminders of loss that contradicted the boys' efforts at denial or pushing away sad thoughts. Sybrii described this tension midway through the school year:

> *Every time I think about what happened like I cannot believe he gone. …As soon as I think about him dying, or like looking in my room at his picture, or my [RIP] shirts that I have, it like make me break down, like he really is gone. …Like I be trying not -- sort of not to like look at pics, but at the same time I miss [him] so it make me get emotional like I am.*

Sybrii articulated the conflict between holding on to the mementos that would keep Tyhir present in his life, but also trying to protect himself from sadness by not engaging with them.

Like the material artifacts of grief, social media also became a space where friends would periodically, for months and even years after the loss, check in on their own grief or offer a remembrance of Tyhir. Online many boys would break the unspoken social rules they had previously described about their emotional sharing. In Instagram stories and posts, they wrote explicitly about pain, sadness, and not being able to hold it together, and also about commitments they made to their deceased friend or themselves about the future. These posts might come at seemingly random times, untriggered by a specific anniversary or relevant public event. For example, in November, Hazeem wrote directly to Tyhir, alongside a picture of the casket being lowered into the earth:

"#LONGLIVETYHIR❤️…wish I could tell u. bout all this shxt [shit] homie pray for me down here & watch over me🙏" (Figure 2.1). That same month, in an Instagram story visible for only 24 hours, Kaliq shared a memory of Tyhir followed directly by a call for help (Figure 2.2). In March, Herc wrote a long message directed to his friend about his reflections on the shooting and what he missed most about him (Figure 2.3).

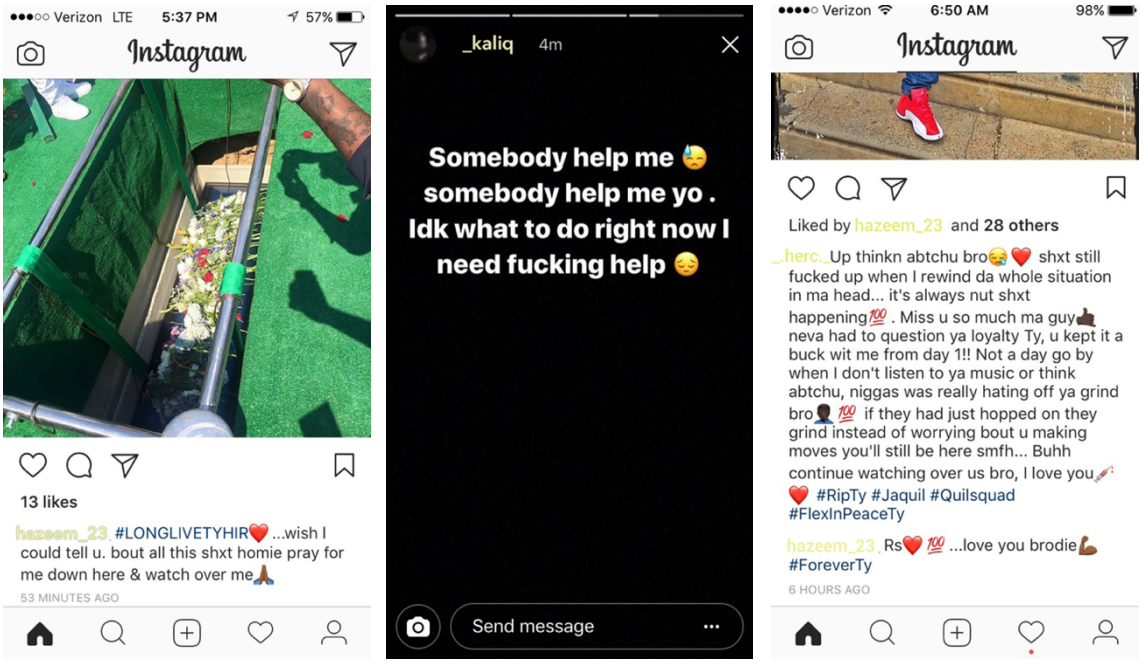

Figure 2.1 Hazeem's Instagram post. Image of Tyhir's coffin being lowered into the ground with a caption.
Figure 2.2 Kaliq's Instagram story. Text commentary about needing help.
Figure 2.3 Herc's Instagram post. Image of Tyhir (cut off) with extended caption and comment from Hazeem.

Extreme Reactions

Sometimes the freer expression of grief online negatively impacted other peers. Herc really struggled in the months following Tyhir's death, especially because he lost other friends later that summer and fall too. He explained, "I kept losing homies after

him, one heartbreak after another one. That jawn just really affected me. It made me depressed. It made me real depressed, I got to the point where I wanted to take my own life."

And one evening in December, he tried. He remembers being alone in his room, feeling particularly low. Scrolling through Instagram, he came across a picture of Tyhir. "I started thinking about [him] and how I found out. I don't know. I just lost it. Then I started thinking about my life and all that. So I got angry, depressed." A family member's prescription drugs were not far from him in the bathroom. Herc found the bottle and swallowed the pills.[38]

His brother, fortunately, found him unconscious shortly afterwards and Herc was rushed to the hospital. For the next three weeks, he would be in a succession of institutions, from hospital to psychiatric wards and back to a hospital. He missed almost three weeks of school and his grades plummeted.

Two years later, Herc would reflect on this period in his life: "Depression, that's probably the worst thing to suffer from. It really eats you up inside. You're not talking to nobody or trying to find help for yourself. It's just like, I don't know, it's just bad." Upon returning to school, Herc shared what happened with no one in his circle, and to this day I doubt that they know.

Herc's experience of not talking to anyone about his self-diagnosed "depression" and then not sharing with his friends or teachers after his suicide attempt is not uncommon for Black boys who experience high levels of stigma around depression

[38] At least one other study has found that social media can have a triggering effect in relation to suicide ideation (Elmquist and McLaughlin 2018).

(Cadaret and Speight 2018; Lindsey et al. 2010; Lindsey and Marcell 2012). Other barriers boys and men face to seeking help include negative attitudes and beliefs about professional help or its perceived ineffectiveness, perceived limitations in access, perceived social norms or fear of judgement, or "lack of emotional competence" (Addis and Mahalik 2003; Jacoby et al. 2018; Rickwood et al. 2005:1). In Herc's case, because he chose not to tell his friends what was going on with him, many assumed that he was out of school because he had been jailed for some drug-related infraction, and Herc was comfortable letting them believe that. He told me it was just "easier" not to explain to people what had really happened.

The assumption that Herc could have been in trouble for something related to drugs was not unreasonable – he had been caught smoking and selling small amounts of marijuana before. Like many other Boys' Prep students, smoking was a frequent pastime both socially and alone. Herc started smoking in fourth grade after someone in his neighborhood introduced him to it. It calmed him down from the anger he felt about his parents getting divorced the year before. He told me that in fifth grade he started focusing more on basketball and as he got better at the sport, he smoked less. But Herc stopped enjoying basketball after Tyhir's death and picked up the smoking habit again. He was also perpetually short on money to buy food and new clothes and get around the city. So he began selling small amounts of marijuana to make money.

In February, just two months after he attempted suicide, Herc was caught for the second time in as many years with marijuana in his backpack at school. After a teacher reported her phone had gone missing, several students' backpacks were searched and Herc's drugs, tucked away inside the body of a flashlight, were discovered. He was

summarily sent to the Principal's office without lunch to wait for the consequences to be levied. He waited for over an hour in the empty office, his backpack still on his back and his long legs outstretched in front of him. He alternated between texting and just sitting there silently thinking.

I went to check on him while he waited. "It's my fault," he said simply. I asked what he was thinking about as he was sitting there waiting for whatever would be coming next. "I've been thinking about a lot." He had called his mom, but she had hung up on him. The first time he was caught "she cried. Now she probably don't even care, she fed up with me." I asked him why he did it. "I needed money," he said softly. Downstairs in the cafeteria, at his usual table, only Jonquett and Latrell were there, taking in the news and theorizing about whether Herc would be kicked out of school and/or face legal consequences.

Eventually, Herc was sent home, suspended indefinitely, and threatened with expulsion. The following week, I talked to his English teacher in the teachers' lounge. She shared that Herc was the best student in her class: "He goes above and beyond and does good work." Had he asked, she would have gladly written him a letter of support for the expulsion hearing. Then she expressed frustration that the school had not been making more of an effort to support him, since this was his second offense and she assumed he had a drug habit:

> *Sometimes I smell it on him. I heard he was in rehab too. I mean, no one told me – they told me he was out for a few weeks [in December] for personal reasons, but I heard from someone that it was rehab. I assume it was for drugs heavier than pot because I don't think you go to rehab for pot, but maybe. But I just wish that we had been told about that. The whole 10th grade team could have gotten together with his mom and made a plan for him. We could have looked out for him. He's not one of those kids that's never gonna change.*

Like Herc's friends, this teacher also misunderstood his reasons for missing school after his suicide attempt, but she clearly believed in him, cared for him, and wanted to help. Although her interpretation of events was incorrect, the teacher was right that non-parental adult support, or "natural mentors," could play a major role in keeping Herc or other students away from risky behaviors (Culyba et al. 2019).

Ultimately, Herc was not expelled. Several teachers wrote letters on his behalf[39] and the Boys' Prep Board of Directors decided that the threat itself might function as enough of a deterrent from future misbehavior. By the next month, things settled down for Herc, but his reputation among teachers as a heavy smoker and seller — alongside his positive reputation as a sweet kid and decent student – remained. Later that year, once Herc turned 16, he began working at McDonald's and slowed his weed business. In hindsight, he described sophomore year as his hardest year because of the combination of his inability to get work because of his age, the "street wars" going on, and all the losses he experienced.

Additional Losses and Support

There were several moments throughout the year that suggested that Herc's teacher was right that had she known what was *really* going on for him, she might have been better able to respond. More generally, there were many teachers at Boys' Prep who were poised to offer support and comfort to students going through a difficult time. I witnessed at least two instances of this in the spring when more comprehensive

[39] In Appendix E, I discuss my decision to also write a letter on Herc's behalf for the expulsion hearing after being asked to do so by both him and his mother.

information-sharing allowed school adults to offer much needed and timely assistance to particular students.

In mid-February, one of Latrell's best friends from growing up was shot and killed in broad daylight just a few blocks from his school as he walked home. Latrell, who rarely posted on social media, shared many tributes to his friend after learning what happened. He also wrote of his group neighborhood crew, "we weren't supposed to take no more L's," referring to the number of people they had lost to violence. When Latrell came to school the next day, somehow Ms. Rivera, the school social worker, already knew that something was up. She found him in his morning class, and escorted him to her office where she offered him the chance to talk. He said he was fine and preferred to go back to class. Later, Ms. Rivera explained that when a student loses a friend (as opposed to a family member) she almost never finds out from the student's parents. More often, she finds out from a fellow student, a teacher, or sometimes from the student himself:

> *Some kids who are vocal, they'll let everybody know that their friend died. But for the most part, most kids are not like that. They'll tell one person, or two or whatever….Or sometimes kids are acting different that day in class, like quiet or sad, and the teachers will refer him to me and then I'll find out that way that something happened….When they're sad like that and nobody knows and a teacher witnesses them being sad… usually it's a friend [who died].*

In Latrell's case, it was Ms. Rivera who called home to let his mother know that her son was grieving a friend. A few days later, he missed school for his friend's funeral. Over text message, Latrell reported, "it was hard but I only cried twice."

Jahsun, 17 and a junior, was another student who experienced multiple losses in quick succession. When Tyhir died, Jahsun opened up to his mother about how devastated he was, and he asked her why bad things happened to good people. A little

more than six months later, Jahsun lost a second, even closer, friend to gun violence: a young man he had known growing up who had lived in his neighborhood and was, coincidentally, also an up-and-coming rapper on the local scene. The next day at school, Ms. Rivera was on it: she emailed Jahsun's teachers to let them know what had happened and request that they give him some leeway if he was seemed down or distracted. Jahsun's history teacher, Ms. Cain, a white woman in her late 30s, reflected a few days later that receiving this information made all the difference in her interactions with Jahsun. He had his head down most of class for the next few days and, normally, she would have chastised him for this behavior, but knowing that he was grieving, she instead approached him with empathy.

Despite the support he received from many of his teachers after his friend's death, Jahsun started to develop digestive problems and an infection, which his mom theorized were "from so much depression" after his losses. These health problems made it painful and more urgent for him to use the bathroom. A month after his second friend's death, Jahsun described an incident where he felt he was unfairly disciplined for a behavior that, in his view, was a symptom of grief:

> *[Yesterday] I got to go to the bathroom. We had a substitute…she don't know me like that, so I was nice and I was like, 'Can I please go to the bathroom?' She said, 'No, this is the last person going.' The last person was the first person and the only person. I was like, 'It's a medical thing.' She says, 'So what? You should have had a note.' I'm about to be eighteen. Like usually when we have to go to the bathroom, they say yes. So I just waited. I was like three, four more times, she kept saying no so I had to walk out the class to go to the bathroom and then she wrote me up for skipping and then emailed [the dean] and all that. …Mind you the teacher that she was subbing for didn't even leave any work so we didn't have no work to do. All we was doing was talking on our laptop, playing around and stuff like that. So she didn't have no reason for me not to go….I was mad. I'm like, she was weird. I don't even know you and you just like being weird.*

Although he was never formally punished, he did get a talking to from the Dean when he walked into the school building the next day. Coincidentally, this was the same day we had scheduled for our first interview after Jahsun had been introduced to me a month earlier by his friend, Yaja, a junior I had been getting to know through a lunchtime club I was helping to advise twice a week.

In late March, as Jahsun and I sat in the empty windowless office by the school's main entrance, which I had coopted for most of my interviews, he played with a green squishy ball I often brought along to interviews to fend off awkwardness. Jahsun spoke in long, thoughtful sentences but did not make much eye contact. He had recently gotten a tattoo for his two lost friends across his entire forearm, and he was eager to show it off. In a matter-of-fact tone, he told me: "Death...is like, you never know. I know that I just, like, tell my friends to be safe and stuff because…I'll never know my last time talking to them, and it's a scary thing. So yeah. I feel like death is constant right now. Like I lost somebody every year so far." A few days later, in the school hallway, we bumped into each other and Jahsun told me that the conversation had been "relieving" — that it felt good to share his ideas about violence and loss and mortality and he was hoping we could do a second interview sometime. That spring and summer, we exchanged periodic texts about scheduling, but he was very busy with football pre-season practices and we never got around to scheduling another interview.

Summer 2017

Jahsun's words of anticipatory grief (Sweeting and Gilhooly 1990), of not knowing whether a conversation with a friend might be his last reverberated throughout the summer. Many boys actively worried about whose deaths the warmer months would

bring, knowing that violence almost always increases with the rising temperatures (Michel et al. 2016). They shared hopes and prayers that Philadelphia's increasing epidemic of gun violence would not touch anyone close to them. Keith posted a message on Instagram that was a mixture of worry and warning: "This summer getting dark for niggas cause I can't lose another brother I swear I'm about to really be in the field," meaning that though he was hoping that the summer would not bring another loss, if it did, he was prepared to be "in the field" seeking revenge. Though Keith did not lose anyone, that summer, at least five Boys' Prep students' friends were killed, including Jahsun's in July (see Figure 7.3 for a full timeline of losses impacting the school community).

That same month, on the anniversary of Tyhir's death, dozens of his friends gathered at the basketball court now dedicated to him to release balloons. The crowd was large on the humid evening, though only about five students from Boys' Prep and four faculty members attended – many others reported that they could not make it because of summer jobs or other obligations. Even those who could not be there in person posted anniversary tributes on their Instagram pages, including Herc who wrote: "Damn [Tyhir] 😓❤️ this shxt [shit] hitting me Nd [and] I got nobody to talk to 😪 Buhh Ik u [But I know you] want me to be strong for u bro so I gotchu 💯💪🏿 Ima make it out just for u Nd [and] no matter what Ima keep ya name alive […] 😇❤️💉." Although he expressed that he had no one to talk to and directed his message to Tyhir himself, a common practice in online bereavement (Rossetto 2014; Stein et al. 2019; Williams and Merten 2009), Herc also received several comments on the image from friends sending him love and support. Just

before the new school year began, the summer basketball league hosted a special tournament in Tyhir's memory in which several Boys' Prep students participated. Memorializing Tyhir would now be a ritual every summer.

CHAPTER 3 | A New School Year Begins

I just…tell my friends to be safe…because…I'll never know my last time talking to them.
Jahsun, junior

The 2017-2018 school year did not begin like most others at Boys' Prep. Dr. Stephens, the veteran Principal started the year in a new position as school CEO, filling the vacancy left by the retirement of the school's founder. He was replaced as Principal by Mr. Donaldson, who had been the math department chair and basketball coach for several years. Mr. Donaldson, white and in his late 30s, would be the first non-Black Principal of the school in its decade-long existence. He was joined by a new Dean of Students, also white and new to Philadelphia, Mr. Hopkins. Mr. Hopkins would head up the "climate team" overseeing Mr. Pratt and Mr. Hardwick, the Black School Support Officers (SSOs) who had been at the school for ten and two years, respectively. Mr. Pratt, a pillar of the school wore many hats and served as a father figure to numerous boys in the building. He was in his mid-40s, tall, and with a sweet smile. His relational stance toward students embodied many of the tenants of Bass' (2019:16) theory of Black Masculine Caring including "tak[ing] pride in their caring roles,…view[ing] themselves as father figures, … believ[ing] that actions should follow caring." Mr. Hardwick was younger, newer to the school, and had a smaller physical presence – a former wrestler and wrestling coach. He also took pride in really *knowing* students and being seen as caring, but was more prone to demonstrate his care through "rough love" (Bass 2019). Students often drew distinctions between the two SSOs or "disciplinarians" pointing out

that Mr. Pratt really listened to them while Mr. Hardwick sometimes jumped to conclusions before doling out punishment.

As the 2017-2018 school year began, there were approximately ten new teachers joining the Boys' Prep community, and making up about one quarter of the faculty. According to veteran teachers, the new administrative team initiated "a lot of changes" in the early weeks of the school year. In Mr. Pratt' words, "we tried to do a lot of little creative things" to improve the school culture. The team started out with very ambitious new theories of discipline including a commitment to avoid suspending students in favor of restorative justice practices that would keep students in school. They also focused a lot of attention on students' exterior displays such as uniforms and cell phone use. The team of SSOs insisted that students arrived at school with their "uniforms put on and put on properly"; any student who did not walk in wearing the right kind of shoes, the requisite belt and black socks, or the blazer, tie, blue shirt, and khaki pants was either required to purchase the missing item from the school or go home and retrieve their own before they would be allowed into their classrooms. This meant that especially in the early days of the school year, many students missed one or periods of the school day because of uniform violations. And those in school were constantly being chastised for additional breaches like "excessive jewelry," hats, or headphones.

At the start of the school year, there was also a new cellphone policy, which required students to store phones out of sight in their lockers during school hours. One teacher described the struggle administrators faced in instituting this policy: "So in lunch, it was no phones. And Hopkins would get on the stage with a microphone and he's talking to the kids, telling them to put their phones away and no one's listening to him."

As two students explained to me, "they don't realize that we have nothing to do if we can't have our phones. We can't even play cards anymore." Mr. Hopkins experimented with creative solutions to keep students in their seats but occupied without phones during the lunch periods, including organizing team-based games like Family Feud, but most students thought – or at least outwardly expressed that they thought – these ideas were "corny." Indeed, the vast majority of students I observed continued to store their phones in their pockets and sneak peeks throughout the school day; some teachers patrolled this vehemently, while others turned a blind eye to the obvious infractions. At one point in the early fall, the pushback against the new phone policy from students was so extreme that there were two instances of holes appearing in walls in the school building, presumably created through student action, with notes strategically left inside the holes saying, in one case, "give us back our phones or else."

By Thanksgiving, many of these strict new policies had given way to a more relaxed approach. Overwhelmed by the work required to police minor infractions and the challenge of implementing a restorative approach to bigger disciplinary issues, the administrative team loosened the smaller restrictions and tightened the bigger ones. With little fanfare or communication to faculty, the administration stopped heavily enforcing the no cell phone policy but reinstituted detentions and suspensions.

A Challenging Year for Teachers

With any new administration, there are bound to be "growing pains," as several faculty members acknowledged. Many teachers tried to give the new leadership grace as they found their footing in new positions, though they expressed the frustration and confusion surrounding the succession of changes to disciplinary policy over the first few

months of the school year. One veteran teacher described how these changes looked from his position in the classroom:

> *At the beginning of the year they just decided they were going to do away with, we weren't going to do detention anymore, we weren't going to suspend kids. Everything would be handled in some sort of one-on-one conversation, or like a lunch meeting, and I think they just didn't realize the number of kids that were going to get in trouble and needed, like, they were just, they were outnumbered. So they decided to bring back those two models [detention and suspension]. …So I feel like they were just trying stuff out and then [the teachers] were dealing with the repercussions of those decisions.*

Another teacher similarly criticized "all the flip floppy, detentions, no detentions, suspensions, no suspensions: it's too inconsistent." Another complained that "we started the year with no detentions and then eventually, we got to a point where it was suspension, suspension, suspension," suggesting that their frustration was not just the return of the initial disciplinary approach, but the magnitude of it when it was reinstated.

Other teachers' frustrations were less about the policy changes within the year and more focused on the overall change in school culture over time. As the fall continued, there was a growing sense among many teachers that the shifts over time were leaving them with less support and back-up in the ways that really mattered in their day-to-day work life. Veteran teachers confessed to me things like what one college counselor said:

> *This is the first time when I've felt completely unsupported in the building...I feel unsupported by the administration. I feel unsupported by the SSOs. I feel unsupported by a large chunk of teachers. And that's new.*

Another explained that "There are times when I would text for support and no one answered or no one came." While some acknowledged that previous eras of school discipline might have "gone too far" in terms of strictness, now things have gone way too

"far the other way…where no one's in uniform, everyone has their phone out, everyone's listening to music on their headphones, kids are cursing at teachers."

Teachers worried that students who observed a lack of consequences for their behavior, or inconsistency in consequences, were also more likely to cause trouble: "[In] the hallways…there's no consequences. It doesn't matter what they do. Worst case scenario is they're going to be gone for seven hours. Then they're going to be back," explained one staff member. Another reflected, "They can't keep their hands to themselves and they don't have a reason to because there are no consequences. I've had kids grip each other up and throw each other against the wall in my classroom and not even get detention."

All of this resulted in a general feeling among the majority of the school staff that the "culture and climate of the school was a major struggle" as the school year began and continued. A college counselor who had been at Boys' Prep for most of the school's existence explained that this year the "feeling in the school culture overall, and feeling what I really liked about the place is changing, it's just a lot less pleasant to be here than it's ever been before." A first-year teacher similarly reflected that the school days are long, and there are some days when "everything is blowing up, that we just wanna run away from them."[40]

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[40] In a moment of vulnerability just before the start of the year, Mr. Donaldson expressed to me that though he had many ambitious ideas for improvements to the school, he knew that just staying afloat might be good enough. He also worried that with so much change in the building, students would surely be getting mixed messages about masculinity. He hoped that students could view masculinity as "nuanced and subtle," but also said that sometimes he was not sure "we even know what kind of masculinity we're promoting. There may be male faculty here who hold very traditional views."

Many school staff also attributed the evolving school culture to change in the type of Boys' Prep student over the years. A few years earlier, the school had switched from an application-based admissions process to a lottery, and several faculty members pointed out that they noticed a change since then in the type of student coming into the Boys' Prep halls. As Mr. Pratt described it, "the student is different now…We're getting more students who have IEP's [Individualized Education Plans, for students with special learning needs], who have various emotional issues, who have various problems, or concerns...That number is growing, [but] we have to accept [these] young men, their parents want them to attend." He acknowledged that students with greater needs, whether they be academic or behavioral, made his job as the primary disciplinarian "a little more difficult." And teachers, too, reflected that "as we get guys that have higher needs, we need more support for those people, but we have a Board who thinks that our classroom should have 25 students in them and who aren't on board with paying our teachers, quality teachers." The teachers did not feel like they had enough support to handle the behavioral, social/emotional, and academic needs of their students.

Herc's New Year

For students, too, the administrative and policy changes brought new challenges to their school day. During a lunch period in mid-September, the new Principal, Mr. Donaldson, approached Herc as he was eating lunch. In a slightly performative *new Principal* way, he asked Herc sternly what was wrong with the situation he was observing. Herc, annoyed but genuinely in the dark, said he did not know, though he seemed to assume it was something about his uniform and began looking down at his clothing. Mr. Donaldson suggested he "start from the bottom up," and then quickly

offered the answer: “black socks. Do you have black socks?” Herc made an ambiguous gesture and sound as he continued eating his chicken sandwich and staring straight ahead, avoiding eye contact.

Mr. Donaldson continued to prod: “Why didn’t you wear your black socks today?” Herc shrugged. “Will you get black socks?” Another ambiguous sound. “You can get them from me. $2. You can pay $2 to get them from me.” Herc told him, half speaking and half gesturing toward the a la carte lunch station that he had just spent all his money on lunch. “Well, does your mom have a credit card?” Herc nodded. The Principal continued, though this conversation was becoming painfully one-sided due to Herc’s resistance – “would your mom put $2 on her credit card so you could get black socks?” Herc became more decisive, shaking his head and saying that he was sure she would not. Mr. Donaldson, somewhat taken aback by this response and Herc’s decisiveness, returned to the question of why Herc had not just worn black socks from the beginning since he knew full well they were part of the uniform.

The conversation continued in circles. Mr. Donaldson had squatted down to be eye-level with Herc, presumably in an effort to build a more personal connection through eye contact, but Herc refused to turn toward him. Eventually, Mr. Donaldson walked away, and Herc said that he was not really sure how the conversation concluded because, as he told me with a shrug while taking the last bite of his sandwich, “I stopped paying attention to him.” Then Herc pulled a bag of chocolate chip cookies out of his pocket and added, “this school a joke to me. Look who works here” gesturing toward Mr. Donaldson and Mr. Hardwick, the disciplinarian, who were both milling about the cafeteria.

Two days later, I followed up with the Principal who referenced that conversation as the one where "Herc ignored me." He explained that he found Herc the following day and pressed him a little more, saying something like, "we've never disrespected each other." When Herc was wearing white socks, instead of black, again that day, Mr. Donaldson just gave him a pair of uniform-compliant black socks. "I wasn't going to make him pay after all that." Then he added that he worried Herc was high most days when he comes to school.

Herc's Uno-playing group lunch table crew had disbanded by the time junior year got underway. Jonquett was not invited back to Boys' Prep that fall after failing the majority of his freshman year requirements for the second time. In mid-October, Latrell also left the school and transferred to another charter school with fewer graduation requirements. Halfway through the year, Hazeem, too, left Boys' Prep in favor of online courses taken from home. Kaliq and Herc had different lunch periods and did not seem to be as tightly bonded without the social glue of the group. I saw Herc sitting alone some days at lunch, eating his lunch quickly and then scrolling through his phone or sneaking out of the cafeteria to wander the hallways. He said that during that fall he "wasn't talking to nobody. Came in [to school] with a strong face every day, [a] get-the-fuck-out-of-my-face type face." He told me there was not really anyone at the school that he trusted now that Latrell and Jonquett, his two closest friends, had left Boys' Prep.

Outside of school, Herc was working long hours at McDonald's, sometimes until 11pm, and then would stay out with friends (Latrell and Jonquett worked at the same McDonald's) until 3am some nights smoking and hanging out. By the time he got home and went to bed, it was so late that waking up on time for school in the morning was a

serious struggle. Other nights, when he was fighting with his mom, she would lock him out of the house and he would have to go to his sister's apartment which was further away from school. He quickly began accumulating class absences and tardies which hurt his grades even in the first few weeks of the school year. About a month into the year, he tried to leave the school, but Dr. Stephens, now CEO, made a personal plea to him: "we've put so much energy into you, you can't leave now" and reiterated to Herc how much he loved him.

During one of our interviews early on in the school year, Herc predicted that junior year would be a bad one for him. At my request, he mapped out his feelings about middle and high school so far, noting when things felt positive or negative (Figure 3.12). He mapped an upward trend of positive feelings through middle school and then a sharp dip and downward trend beginning in 9th grade. In 10th grade, he alluded to the effects of grief by labeling the year on his mini chart as "the first year without Ty." Junior year was looking even more negative, with the caption "I don't care as much."

One Thursday at the beginning of November, only the second day that week that Herc had made it to school, he told me that he just had not been feeling much like coming lately. As I walked with him to class, one student passed by with an expression of feigned disbelief, "wooooah, Herc's here." On days like that one when he did get himself to school it was often because he did not "want to hear my mom's mouth."

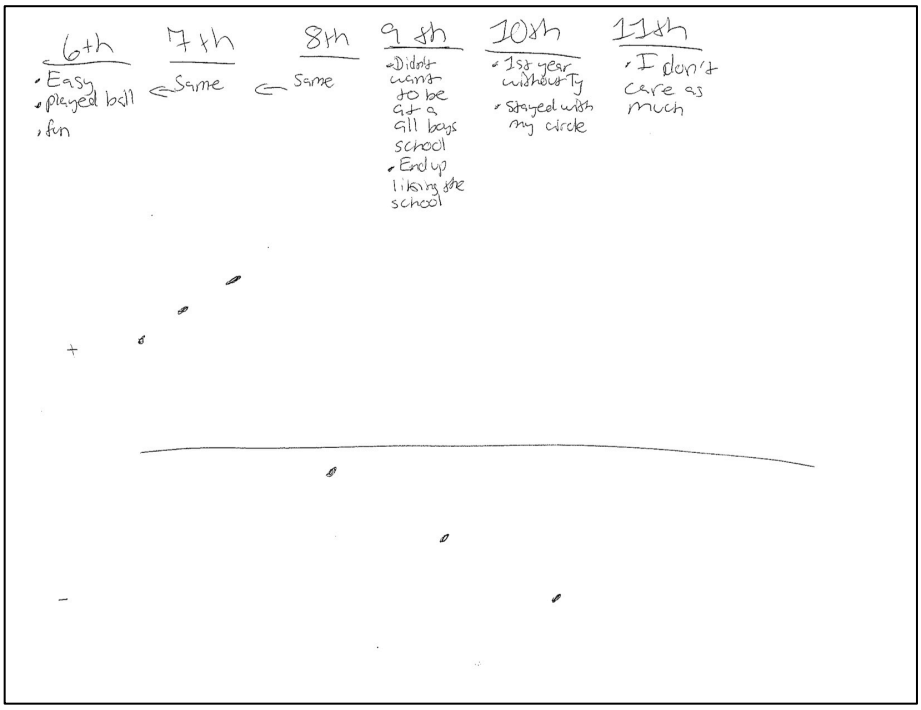

Figure 3.1. Herc's drawing of his feelings toward school in 6th through 11th grades. The horizontal line I drew represented neutral; dots above the line represented positive feelings about the year, and dots below negative feelings.

Hazeem and Kaliq's New Year

Hazeem and Kaliq had more uneventful falls – at least at school. Hazeem developed a relationship with a girlfriend over the summer, and started spending more time with her. He began to rely on her for emotional support in ways that he felt were very good for him. In mid-November, he got a job at McDonald's (a different one than where Herc, Latrell, and Jonquett worked) and was excited to be able to make his own money. After a major dip in his grades at the end of the prior year, Hazeem was trying hard to improve them in the fall despite his perpetual plan to leave Boys' Prep in favor of cyberschool.

Kaliq, as he was getting older, was being asked to do more at home. He was feeling periodically overwhelmed by caretaking responsibilities for his five younger siblings, including a one-year-old brother, and his part time job working with his uncle as a weekend janitor for another high school. His grades started slipping as a result; at the end of the first trimester, his average was well below passing. But Kaliq was generally feeling happy at school. His teachers praised him regularly for helping out his peers in class. And, in the early fall, he discovered that Jahsun, one year ahead of him at Boys' Prep, was actually his second or third cousin, which tightened their bond almost instantly: "we had to get that close 'cause, like, we blood…our bond just got very, very tight."

Jahsun and Ezekiel's New Year

Jahsun, the football player I had met the year before, was now a senior. Last year, he had lost two friends, including Tyhir, to gun violence within six months. At times he felt so overcome by grief that it had affected his body – but it had also given him some purpose as he now wondered whether he might want to be a therapist. In July, another close friend collapsed on the basketball court and died. I texted him when I saw his post about it on Instagram. Jahsun responded simply, "Thanks and it's upsetting but I know that I will be ok."

Despite this, Jahsun's senior year was off to a good start: He was starting on the school's football team, applying to several local colleges, had hopes of playing football in college. He had Ezekiel (or Zeek), his best friend, and a close-knit crew of other seniors, as well as his half-brother, Bashir, who had just started at Boys' Prep as a freshman.

Jahsun was also well-liked by most of his teachers. He had an especially close relationship with Ms. Estevez, a Latina math teacher in her late twenties. They had

bonded the year before over their shared experience of losing friends too early. Jahsun was also the kind of student about whom teachers passed on praise and insight to the teachers who would have him the next year. Ms. Finn, Jahsun's 10th grade history teacher, shared with Ms. Cain, who would teach him in 11th grade history and then again in Honors Philosophy senior year, that he was an especially thoughtful and smart student, but would not boast or be showy about his intelligence in class; instead, it would come through in his writing.

Just as Ms. Cain had become quite fond of Jahsun, Jahsun also seemed to be especially enjoying his Honors Philosophy class which he and Ezekiel shared. In this unusual class, which seniors had to apply to take, Ms. Cain, chair of the history department, took students through the basics of ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical philosophy. They pondered the Big Questions: life, identity, and social responsibility. They held weekly Socratic seminars on such topics as masculinity, happiness, and the nature of memories. For many of the students it was their favorite class, and several confided that it may have been the only class at the school where they actually had to *think*. In a self-portrait that he created for a mid-September class activity about values and identity, Jahsun included the following words to describe himself: "rough past," "resilient," "driven," "very educated," "bright future," "love football," and "college bound."

I also was able to study Ezekiel's self-portrait for the same Philosophy activity. His included references to activities and people he valued: "music," "family," "mom," and the phrases "always strive and prosper" and "never leave my brothers." Ezekiel's portrait actually caused something of a stir in class because a large lit blunt was hanging

from his mouth. Zeek already had somewhat of a reputation for being a regular smoker. This was no surprise to those who knew him, since before senior year he would often come to school high; in fact, he was famous for the "kit" he carried with him – which included Gatorade, eye drops, cologne, and mints – a combination designed to mask the smell and appearance of being "fried."

Ms. Cain was caught off guard by the inclusion of the marijuana reference in Ezekiel's self-portrait. She had often told him that she worried that he smoked to "hide his feelings," but Zeek insisted that he just liked the way it made him feel.

Ezekiel had a difficult start to the year. The first week of school, he found himself in trouble after a classroom encounter quickly escalated. As it was written up in his disciplinary record,

> *Ezekiel went to the restroom and came back to his desk to find his worksheet smeared with [hand] sanitizer and noticed his belongings were missing. He asked the people around him where his belongings were and no one responded. As a result, Ezekiel began walking around the classroom looking for his belongings and did not follow redirection. Got into an argument with [another student] and Climate team was called. [The Dean] tried to redirect Ezekiel but he became even more upset and trashed the classroom when he could not find his belongings.*

As Ezekiel described it to me a few days later, he angrily threw a chair at the wall after discovering that a classmate had gone through his backpack. Instead of being suspended, Ezekiel was assigned to a weekly meeting with Mr. Hopkins. It was, he joked, "sort of like therapy." When I asked Mr. Hopkins about the meetings, he told me that they had helped him understand the challenges Zeek was facing. Like Herc, Zeek worked late shifts at Dairy Queen and did not get enough sleep. Mr. Hopkins took pride in having learned this and helping Zeek strategize solutions: "You know, he set fire to the bathroom last year and was almost expelled," Mr. Hopkins recounted to me in the lunchroom one

day, “but I have the benefit of being new,” suggesting that he felt he could see Ezekiel with fresh eyes and without the baggage of his past school indiscretions.

Though Ezekiel experienced these periodic disciplinary troubles and was sometimes distracted or “not feeling it in class,” he was regarded by his teachers and peers as an intelligent, perceptive student, which was also my sense of him. There were many days that fall when his thoughtful side came through. In the Honors Philosophy class with Jahsun, Zeek often came alive. One day, he plopped down in the small circle designated for their regular Socratic seminars and declared with a winning grin, “I’m in a good mood, this discussion about to be good.” Around the same time, he was moved up to Honors English because the teacher of his “regular” English class thought the work was not challenging enough for him.

One day, in one of his classrooms, there was word of a theft. Mr. Pratt came in to check students’ bags. When Ezekiel realized that the bag check was beginning at the end of the room furthest from where he was seated, he turned to me: “I usually would have gotten checked first,” he said with a look of sincere surprise. “You’re moving up in the world,” Ms. Cain responded with a laugh and a gentle touch of his shoulder as she walked by us at that moment. Zeek explained that the year before, he would have been “checked, double checked, asked to take off his uniform...they criminalizing me...I have a false reputation in the school according to them,” but things were maybe looking up this year.

For Jahsun, on the other hand, an unlucky event sidelined him in mid-October. During “senior night” for the football team, he was accidentally kicked by one of his teammates during a complicated play. Jahsun limped off the field with a serious knee

injury. Eventually he was taken to the hospital. Two weeks later, I chatted with Jahsun in the cafeteria one afternoon sitting beside Ezekiel. He had an immobilizing cast on his left leg that went all the way from thigh to ankle. He told me that until certain test results came back, his doctors could not tell him the timeframe for his recovery. Of one thing he was certain: he had plenty of rehab to look forward to. He seemed disappointed, but when I asked if he was bummed about missing the rest of the football season, he said that he was focusing on being able to play in college and was trying very hard not to stress about this. Kaliq, his newfound cousin, had become his protector traveling home with him sometimes to "watch his back" since he was relatively immobile. The following week, Ms. Cain informed me that Jahsun would be out for several weeks for knee surgery – but he would, in fact, never return to school.

A few days before school closed for the Thanksgiving holiday, Jahsun received his first college acceptance letter in the mail. It was a full scholarship to a mid-size public university about two hours west of Philadelphia. Jahsun asked his mom if he could go visit his older sister a few hours away for the holiday to celebrate. Maxayn, Jahsun's mother, obliged and drove him to 30th Street Station, his knee still immobilized in a cast, to catch the train. He was to spend the weekend with his sister and her boyfriend. The three were joined by his sister's boyfriend's friend and his girlfriend and the group apparently partied Friday evening in Jahsun's sister's apartment. However, by early Saturday morning, something had gone very wrong. Jahsun was shot nine times by the visiting friend. He died that morning in his sister's apartment.

I learned of Jahsun's death Saturday afternoon from another student, the same one who had introduced me to Jahsun nine months earlier. The brief text from Yaja read: "Hey Nora .. I don't know if you got the news .. But Jahsun died earlier today."

The text from Yaja is still on my phone. I stared at it uncomprehendingly that day, and many times since. I had come to the school a little over a year earlier to understand how the gun murder of a teen boy named Tyhir affected his friends – boys like Jahsun. I was getting to know Jahsun as a brother in grief, someone whose sense of loss I was trying to understand. But he was not just a subject of my study, he was a lovely young person I was getting to know and had grown quite fond of. Now suddenly he was dead, lost, gone. Now suddenly he would be the epicenter of more grief and trauma for *his* friends and social circles.

Ringing in my ears were Jahsun's words that you "never know [your] last time talking to [someone]." For me, the quick conversation in the cafeteria with Jahsun and Zeek when Jahsun told me he was focused on college, and then an unanswered text message I had sent him checking in when I learned he was having surgery and would be out of school for a while were, in fact, my last times talking to him.

PART II | The Death of Jahsun

CHAPTER 4 | The Easy Hard: Collective Grieving after Shared Loss

The air was quiet. Everybody was feeling down about it,
Herc, junior

In November 2017, just three days before Jahsun's death, a column in the local paper caught my eye. It was titled, "Look at the faces of our dead," and it featured a tableau of headshots of the twenty-six teenagers who had been killed in Philadelphia to date that year (Ubiñas 2017). The graphic presentation was stunning in so many respects, not the least of which was the fact that the young faces looking out from the page were almost all Black, and all but one were boys. That day in the hallway of Boys' Prep, I overheard two students talking about how weird it was that they each knew, or knew of, almost everyone listed in the article. Between school and sports and friends of friends, Black Philadelphia teenagers were connected in life and in death.

That Thanksgiving weekend, when Jahsun was killed, the first students to hear the news were Ezekiel and Tony, two of Jahsun's best friends. They both happened to be up early around 7am on Saturday morning when Tony got a text from a girl whose aunt was friends with Jahsun's aunt. She texted him that Jahsun had just been killed, but Tony did not believe her at first:

> *I'm like, "you playing, he must be bidding [making a joke]." I'm thinking* he *playing. So I called him, I called him like four times. No answer. But still, I'm not jumping to conclusions because I'm not seeing this nowhere, nobody calling me, it's just this one girl telling me. So then…I call Zeek. I'm like, "Yo, why [this girl] say that Jah died?" We wasn't believing it….So we on the phone for about two hours…We type in Harrisburg, see shootings. We go on Instagram and his cousin*

> *had posted he died or whatever. Now we were like, "Damn, this really is real." We was just at a loss for words. I was at a loss for words.*

Tony reports experiencing a "numbing phase" when he does not initially believe the news (Bowlby 1980). Clinicians consider these responses the first phase of childhood traumatic grief; because of the violent and unexpected nature of Jahsun's death, his friends were "dealing with both trauma and loss" (Cohen, Mannarino, and Deblinger 2006:15).

The news of Jahsun's death spread quickly among students through texts, calls, and social media. The digital spread of this grave report reprised what had happened after Tyhir's death sixteen months earlier, and among some of the same Boys' Prep circles of friends.

On at least two group text message chains – one for Jahsun's group of senior friends and another for the football team – the news was shared Saturday early afternoon, first tentatively, questioned and disbelieved, and then confirmed. Khalil, 17, a senior who shared several classes with Jahsun, described his experience finding out on a group text chat with his friends:

> *I remember this whole thing. I was in my room playing a game and then I'm on my phone and I go to the group chat and … Owen had sent it to the group chat and we all askin', "Is it real? Is it real?" So then, everybody calling [Jahsun's] phone. Everybody just calling him and he not picking up. Everybody texting him and he not texting back. So then, I think, like an hour later, his mom had posted it. So once I knew that, it was just like, I knew it was real. Then I started crying, like real loud and my mom heard me. My door was closed, so I know I was really crying, 'cause she came in my room and asked me what happened. I just couldn't stop crying.*

Social media posts from family members confirmed what at first did not seem real. Then the boys began sharing screenshots and links to the developing news stories coming from Harrisburg. Upon hearing the news and confirming its veracity, Messiah, 16, one of

Jahsun's football teammates, left his house and went to a nearby park where he ran up and down a hill for three hours while he processed his feelings and avoided having to discuss it with his family.

Boys' Prep classmates who were more distant acquaintances also got the news through group chats and online posts. The news interrupted students while at their jobs, home relaxing, hanging out with family or girlfriends. Emmet, a senior, was cooking when he heard: "I was cooking sweet potato yams and I was like, 'Alright they look good, they taste good,' and I was trying to flex in the group chat [of his friends from school]. And I started putting it in the group chat and [then someone] was like, 'Jahsun died.' I'm like, 'What?'" After confirming that the story was real and not a joke, Emmet threw a pot at the wall; he did not know how else to react since the news was so unexpected and upsetting.

Several boys described immediate confusion since Jahsun was not someone they associated with being at risk of getting killed or otherwise caught up in violence. As Herc put it, "I thought it was a joke at first because I didn't think it would be him." Jahsun was not one of those people who "made his own bed [brought it on himself]. That's why I really hurt because he ain't make his bed at all."

Students' Initial Reactions

On Instagram, Jahsun's classmates and friends shared pictures of him, many in his school football jersey, as well as messages about his life and about their disbelief and emerging grief. Many posted on Jahsun's own Instagram page and particularly on his final post from about a month earlier which included two pictures of him in his football jersey and had been eerily captioned, "Don't miss if you try to shoot at this Nigga..!"

Some posted messages directed to him like "good morning" while others specifically alluded to their grief; some friends posted every few hours. Even classmates who were not very close with Jahsun posted RIP messages, like Jason, who explained that he felt posting "was the right thing to do, just out of respect." Many students told me later that they first learned of his death by opening up their Instagram app and seeing others' posts; one said that at first he "thought it was, like, his birthday or something… 'cause I wasn't reading the captions that was on Instagram," only seeing the flurry of pictures of Jahsun on his timeline.

The earliest posts online expressed mostly confusion, anger, and sadness. Alongside RIPs and photographs of Jahsun, the boys wrote messages like, "this can't be real," "I never wanted to see your name like this," "wtf," "never thought this could happen to you." Many began immediately recalling recent memories with Jahsun: "we were just bidding on [Instagram] live," "you always gave me advice," "we were just rapping," "we used to cheat on tests together," "I was just watching your football highlights," "you always used to look out for me," "we were just talking," "you just dapped me up last week." Most of these messages were written in the second person directly to Jahsun, and many voicing a deep love for him: "I loved you and I always will."

Boys also vividly expressed their pain with messages like: "I'm really hurt," "I'm lost for words," "I'm destroyed," "I'm lost, I don't know how to move past this," "I'm drained of strength, I'm broken in tiny pieces." A few students communicated deep pessimism related to what had happened, explicitly questioning their god or expressing the view that the murder was a result of jealousy: "No one wants to see you strive."

Others shared nihilistic views of the world: “I’m happy you left this fucked up world,” “I feel crazy, trying to be sane in a world full of fucked up shit,” “the world is unforgiving,” “I’m losing sanity.”

Several boys referenced their other lost loved ones as if this one retriggered the memories or the pain: “I lost another one” or Kaliq’s devastating post about experiencing multiple losses, including Tyhir the year before:

> *Shit hurt me so deep 😪! I was just coming back from a couple losses now I’m back in pieces. They took my dawg from us 😪. Idk [I don’t know] how to recuperate from this shit dawg! I’m really broken all up man! Back to back to back losses 🙎🏿 tell me when Ima win god 😪. Bring my guys back 😪. This shit ain’t even for the gram [Instagram]. This me getting my words & anger out 😤. #LLJ18 ❤️ I gotchu Dawg Rs [real shit]!*

Like Kaliq, Herc also immediately connected Jahsun’s death to the loss of other friends. “So many of my homies dead. I feel like I post them every day,” he wrote on a Snapchat story. Another student shared in an online post, “grew up being told I was going to lose friends in [high school, but] didn’t know it was going to be this way” referring to the idea that friendships may come and go as people grow older; but he had not expected he would experience the *deaths* of multiple friends.

In these posts just a few hours into experiencing their grief, the boys were already looking ahead at the experiences that they would not get to have with Jahsun (“we don’t get to graduate together”) as well as ways they would honor their friend in the future: “you’ll live through me,” “we gonna keep your name alive,” “I’m gonna take things to a whole new level for you (with football),” “I’m not going to do anything dumb,” “Ima put in the work for you.” Most posts concluded with a variation of the phrase “Long Live Jahsun” (or LLJ), often represented as a hashtag. This was an intentional contrast to the

typical expressions of Rest in Peace or Paradise, suggesting a collective commitment to keeping Jahsun's name and memory alive rather than putting it to rest. Some boys also spoke in their social media posts directly to Jahsun about their own future death with sentiments like, "save me a spot up there." Another student flipped the sentiment proclaiming: "I'm glad I'm still alive to live for all my dead homies."

Some students self-policed their presentation of grief or online acknowledgement of the loss as if to preempt any critiques from peers about their right to grieve. For example, Kamren, a recent alumnus of Boys' Prep, posted a picture of Jahsun to Instagram soon after he learned of his death with the caption: "I'm not even gonna sit here and act like I knew him like that, but I heard good things that you had a good head on your shoulders. You were a friend of my friend and I respect you for that. Gone too soon. #ripjah." The post began rather distantly in the third person, but moved to the second person as he spoke directly to Jahsun acknowledging his "respect" for him. Similarly, Jason, who was in the same class as Jahsun but did not identify as a close friend, shared: "We were never that close but I could always identify you as a real individual. You respected those who respected you and were a man of your word. Even still…words cannot express. RIP Jah 💔🕊️." These posts align with prior research suggesting that though there may be a "vocal minority" of grievers who post constantly, the majority worry that it is not their place to share public remembrances (Pennington 2013).

As the hours progressed on Saturday, some of the posts became more relational: boys asking for help, like one who wrote, "I need [Facetime] calls to just make me smile

again," or thanking people for checking in. Some boys added comments or responses to others' posts, like "keep your head up" or "this shit nutty" pointing out the senselessness of the violence. Some boys acknowledged plans to "distance myself from the bullshit"; only a handful of posts referenced any thoughts of revenge or seeking justice.

Planning to Return to School

The text I received Saturday afternoon, about 12 hours after Jahsun was pronounced dead in his sister's apartment, made me one of the first adults in the Boys' Prep community to get the news, though it had been spreading widely among students for a few hours. By early evening, an email with the news was sent by Principal Donaldson to the entire faculty. In it was a link to a newspaper article reporting what had happened and the beginnings of a plan for what was to come when school reopened on Monday, including counseling resources and a space for students to meet, a 7:30am faculty meeting, and a 4pm schoolwide gathering. The Principal concluded the email with a message directly to his employees about their own wellbeing:

> *Please feel free to experience this loss in the way that comes naturally to you. You do not need to feel obligated to partake in any of the services or gathering times provided. Seek out your own space for grieving, experiencing this loss and ultimately starting the healing process. For some this will be moving through Monday as a normal school day running your classes and starting off the new trimester. For others this might mean time with students or other teachers in the classroom space provided. Please feel you have the latitude to approach this day in the way that serves you and your students the best and understand students will need this same latitude.*

The email acknowledged that individual grief experiences, for both adults and students, would vary and that Boys' Prep faculty should feel they have "latitude" and to offer their students the same. However, the message also refers only to Monday as a time when

regular school life might be upended and suggests that "starting the healing process" might begin immediately.

This was the first time in Boys' Prep history that a current student had died during the school year, so administrators were groping for the right response and largely making it up as they went. Dean Hopkins lamented to me later on that the school district handbooks and manuals for dealing with these events mostly cover strategies for communication – who needs to be told what when – rather than for supporting the school community's emotional needs. The handbooks he was relying on from Fairbanks, Alaska and Madison, Wisconsin focused primarily on examples of deaths as the result of suicide, drug overdoses, or car accidents, but rarely dealt with the aftermath of gun violence. Relevant messaging that was in these handbooks and other materials school leaders accessed right away about in-school approaches to handling the days following a loss said things like, "discourage any dramatization, memorial services, PA announcements, or closing the school for the funeral" (Fairbanks North Star Borough School District 2014:4). The official handbooks encouraged administrators to "determine friends impacted," but offered little advice for how to serve or support them.[41] So Boys' Prep school leaders had limited outside guidance as they navigated this unexpected tragedy.

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[41] The Uplift Center for Grieving Children, which serves schools and families in the Philadelphia area and eventually became a support to Boys' Prep, advises school staff in an online tip sheet: "You may notice students' reactions in school in a variety of ways. It is important to recognize behaviors that may occur as a grief reaction and to try to understand what the student really needs during that time. Frequent trips to the nurse, daydreaming in class, a sudden drop in grades, social isolation, or acting out could all be a student's way of responding to the death. Even if students did not have direct contact or a close relationship with the deceased, they still may have a response based on the school environment, their past experience with death, and other unknown factors. …Accommodations are generally necessary after a death in the school community to acknowledge what has occurred and to provide a supportive environment for students to grieve. Although it may be difficult for them at times to focus on school when they are grieving, the routine is the familiar piece in an uncertain time. Understanding that students also need a space to grieve and allowing that space within the routine of the school day will be helpful to both the student as well as the

For the administrative team – CEO Dr. Stephens, Principal Donaldson, and Dean Hopkins – there was at least the solace of a little extra time to prepare. Sunday, they convened a meeting at the high school with several key staff members – including a handful of veteran teachers and one of the college counselors who had prior training as a guidance counselor. Together they discussed what would be the school's overall approach to handling Monday and, to a more limited extent, the days to follow, and they began to arrange logistics. They identified services in the city that could provide grief counseling and reorganized the class schedule to free up one classroom for that purpose for the day. They planned for the Monday morning announcements over the loudspeaker and an early morning faculty meeting, as well as a vigil in the afternoon in collaboration with Jahsun's family. Jahsun's mother, Maxayn, expressed to the school that she wanted the event to be a "celebration" with Jahsun's "Boys' Prep family." They began to identify by name the students who they anticipated being most affected, as well as the close friends of Bashir, Jahsun's freshman half-brother. And they made other administrative decisions, such as to remove Jahsun from all class rosters and online school records immediately, to notify his coaches and the colleges to which he had applied, and to collect photos of him for the vigil as well as eventually for the Class of 2018 yearbook.

Jahsun's circle of close friends were clued into these preliminary plans through Ms. Bloom, who was at the Sunday meeting. As the planning got underway, she sent off a group text message to about a dozen seniors she knew to be Jahsun's closest friends.[42]

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greater school community" (Uplift Center for Grieving Children 2020:3)

[42] The text chat Ms. Bloom created to communicate with Jahsun's friend group was renamed "JahWorld" by one of the boys. It remained active throughout the school year, used when Ms. Bloom needed to share information with the group or wanted to offer support, or when the boys wished to include Ms. Bloom in

She invited them into the building later that afternoon to decorate the locker that had belonged to Jahsun. She helped them get their favorite images of Jahsun printed up, and then the nine boys who were able to come taped them to the locker alongside messages and signatures they added in sharpie. While they worked, they shared memories of their friend and started mapping out ideas for the vigil the next evening. The boys took a series of group photographs in front of the locker once they had finished decorating it, and then Ms. Bloom offered to take them out for pizza to conclude the day. In a text message later that night, Ms. Bloom told me that the impromptu gathering of friends "started off pretty somber but they started talking and goofing around. I can tell they are having a hard time."

Over the weekend, teachers also leaned on each other for support. One group of veteran teachers, who regularly communicated through a group text chain they had titled "work ladies," were in constant communication — first clarifying details of what had happened, then sharing ideas for how they might each handle their classes on Monday and support newer teachers who might have an especially hard time. Over texts throughout the day Sunday, they also brainstormed readings for the Monday vigil since one of them had been asked to close out the event after hearing that some of the students helping to organize it worried that they would be too sad in the moment to do so. The Principal also reached out personally to each of Jahsun's teachers to make sure they felt prepared to come in to school.

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their own peer communications.

In a final email on Sunday to the faculty Mr. Donaldson, still less than three months into his role as Principal, offered a matter-of-fact message with more concrete details about Monday's logistics. That night, Dr. Stephens, the CEO, explained to me that his goals for Monday were to create a space for everyone, a balance between acknowledging what everyone was experiencing and keeping a routine for people who needed that. He explained, "My guess is majority will want routine…Then you start to worry they're internalizing it…But we have to think not just about tomorrow, but what are doing in the weeks and months to come."

The "Easy Hard" Day

The following day, on Monday, school would resume with one less student roaming the hallways. What decisions would the administration make about how to respond to Jahsun's death? How would the teachers handle their classrooms? How would Jahsun's friends cope with their loss? And how would these different levels of social response be intertwined and shaped by each other? The rest of this chapter is about what happened for the Boys' Prep community when they returned to school on that late November Monday. I describe the way students, teachers, and administrators responded to Jahsun's death in the immediate aftermath and specifically how the school routines and rituals functioned for each of these groups on the first day they returned to school after the news. Though this is the story of one student's death at one moment in time at one school, it is also the story of the beginning of a cycle of grieving that had and would occur in this and many other schools every time a student is taken too soon. Using a phrase that emerged on that day, I have come to view the collective grief of the first day back at school after this tragedy as the "easy hard" day. This short period of time was

devastatingly difficult for most people at Boys' Prep, and yet, its difficulty was made easier because it was shared and it was public.

Everyone knew that returning to school on Monday — just days after Jahsun's death, with the news still fresh and his funeral still to be scheduled — would be painful for students, teachers, and administrators alike. Sunday night, Hazeem, a junior who had been close with Jahsun, often sharing a lunch table with him and other friends, posted to Instagram a story with just the text: "tomorrow gonna be hard." Emmet, a senior who had not known Jahsun very well but shared a number of classes with him, explained that "Sunday I was trying to brace myself 'cause I knew Monday was gonna suck so bad." This concern was echoed by several other students, like Kendrick, who confessed that he "didn't want to come to school that Monday because I already knew it was going to be so weird, and so awkward. People was gonna be crying all over the place." Omari, one of Jahsun's closest friends and teammates on the football team, decided to stay home on Monday because, as he rationalized it, "I just didn't feel like I was emotionally strong enough." Other students made a point to come, even though they knew it would be hard, in order to be a support to their friends and "brothers."

And certainly it was very clear in the school building Monday morning that something was different, something bad had happened. I drove to school earlier than I normally would that morning offering a ride to a teacher who lived in my neighborhood. We made small talk in the car, but I think we were both in a daze and not really present, trying to steel ourselves for the day ahead. We got to the building at 7:20am, and entered through the side door near the parking lot. We passed a few teachers in the stairwell up to the second floor and the hellos were quick and quiet. The first student I saw, as I was

opening the locker where I kept my belongings in the second floor hallway, was Bashir[43], Jahsun's freshman half-brother. In perfect uniform and swaying his body back and forth in his usual way, his eyes were filled with tears. I was caught off guard to see him, assuming he would be home with family for at least a few days. But, apparently, Bashir had arrived at school at 6:50am as was his typical routine and had been wandering the hallways, mostly alone, since then. After giving Bashir a big hug and offering myself if he needed anything, he wandered away and I went to the nearest office to let several teachers know; one of them, Bashir's history teacher, volunteered to go find him to keep him company and be of support.

Upstairs on the third floor, senior Owen was leaning against the wall staring at Jahsun's now-decorated locker and crying. He had headphones in his ears and I could hear a faint hip hop beat coming from them. Several students walked by, some acknowledging Owen and offering words of support, but he remained still and staring straight ahead. Another student later described seeing this scene: "Monday was bad cause I came in and I saw Owen and I saw [Jahsun's] locker and that hit me hard. You never feel it until it hits you." Owen himself remembered that "it just felt, like, weird for me to go to school on Monday. So when I came in and I went past the locker, I just broke down."

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[43] In a tragic coincidence, I had met Bashir for the first time just the day before Thanksgiving weekend. At an annual Thanksgiving celebration that one long-time teacher hosted in her classroom, Bashir offered a public thanks for his brother who he said was getting better and healing from his football injury. Ironically, this was the first time that many in the room, including myself, knew the two were related. Though Bashir and Jahsun shared a last name, they did not look much alike and their personas in school were wildly different – Jahsun popular and Bashir more of a loner.

Jahsun traveled in many social circles and as a senior he had come to know and befriend a range of peers across the school.[44] His closest group of friends, though, were fellow seniors many of whom were also on the school's football team. This group included Owen, Omari, Rajae, Ramell, and Theo as well as Ezekiel, Tony, Khalil, James, and Antoine who were not teammates. Other seniors who were part of this extended group of friends included Jahmir, Samuel, Quartell, Tameron, and Jai. Though the biggest personalities of the senior class split across two distinct friend groups, there were several senior boys from the *other* group – generally higher achieving and more focused on school leadership activities than athletics – who also identified as close with Jahsun.

Jahsun's circle of friends was distinct in several ways from the cohort of students most deeply impacted by Tyhir's death the year before. Tyhir's friends, at the time of his death, were early in their high school careers, many of them still finding their way – earning mediocre grades, experimenting with class clown identities – with a few students who contrastively prioritized pursuing higher marks in their classes or success on school sports teams. Though many of these boys had developed strong relationships with Ms. Bloom and Ms. Kim, most had not achieved favored status with many other teachers.[45] Jahsun's friends, of course, were older and had had more time to get accustomed to Boys' Prep's expectations and build relationships with teachers. Many more of them were high-achieving academically, most were intending to go to college. Some teachers theorized that there may also have been socioeconomic differences between these two groups of

[44] See Appendix A for a visual representation of Jahsun's friends in relation to Tyhir's friends.
[45] This, among other things, was reflected in the fact that nearly half of Tyhir's close circle of friends to whom I had been introduced in December 2016 had left Boys' Prep by that time the following year.

friends, with more of Jahsun's friends coming from two-parent households with more stable, middle class incomes. And yet there was also much overlap between the two friend groups including, most notably, Kaliq, Hazeem, and Herc, who had been decidedly part of Tyhir's circle but had also come to see Jahsun as a close friend and older brother figure over the years.[46]

The School Day Begins

As the early morning continued, the air in the hallways stayed heavy and still. Students entered the building and headed to their lockers in silence — many with their heads down, some visibly crying. Students described the school has having "a gloomy vibe" or being like "a ghost town." Senior Kendrick said that he

> *could actually feel the tension…This school is never quiet. If you've been here long enough, you would see it, and know. Everywhere, there's some people being rowdy, big fighting, yelling, which is an all-boys school type atmosphere. But that day, it was quiet. It was really weird.*

A handful of students joined Owen to gather in front of Jahsun's locker on the third floor, some adding their names and messages to its surface in blue, black, and red marker (Figure 4.1).

[46] Just a few months before Jahsun was killed, he and Kaliq had learned that they were distant cousins which had tremendously increased their bond of friendship and then the devastation of the loss for Kaliq.

Figure 4.1 Jahsun's locker (and the one below it) decorated with photographs and memorial messages.

Before the official start of the school day, the faculty convened in a classroom on the first floor. The room was as quiet as the hallways, the teachers sitting at desks throughout the room some sniffling, others looking stone-faced. Once a critical mass had gathered, the Principal began his message to the faculty. His remarks were mostly to the point – acknowledging what had happened, talking through the basic logistics for the day including the vigil that would be held after school, and explaining that there would be two grief counselors in a designated room available for any student who wanted to talk or take a break from the classroom routine. He also requested that everyone check in on each other and support each other, as well as students, throughout the day and that every

adult try to be out and about in the hallways when possible: "we want to make sure there isn't a student alone in the stairwell feeling sad." Standing at the front of the room facing a couple dozen weary and teary teachers, Mr. Donaldson seemed calm and pulled together; he projected a sweetness and empathy that I confess I had not fully expected from him given our previous interactions in which he had been quite stoic and serious.

Mr. Donaldson concluded his prepared remarks, referring to a folded sheet of paper where he had presumably written some notes, by suggesting that the faculty try for some sense of normalcy for those who might need it. He also pointed, unexpectedly, to me in the back of the room and reminded teachers that I would be around all week and could be available for support or triage since I did not have defined classroom obligations. Then Mr. Donaldson said, gently,

> *Do your best to be a genuine version of yourself and understand that not everyone is going to make perfect decisions as we're trying to figure this out. Give yourself that forgiveness and understand that there's no right or wrong to move forward in that, and just to do your best to be an authentic version of yourself today.*

Generally, the message of the meeting was responsive to the range of possible grieving experiences of teachers, as well as to what they might expect from students – and what they should allow for.

Before the meeting officially closed, Mr. Donaldson solicited from the room the names of students they imagined would be most affected – Jahsun's friends – as well as Bashir's social network. He wrote down these names on the piece of paper in his hand, while also sharing that a loss like this might trigger memories of other losses for everyone, even if they had not personally been close with Jahsun. Ms. Gallo, one of the college counselors who had some prior training in social/emotional counseling, passed

out a four page handout she had downloaded from the Coalition to Support Grieving Children for teachers about things they might say to comfort students. The document reminded teachers to "expect a range of responses" and that the best way they could support their students would be to "be present and authentic…listen more, talk less…avoid trying to 'cheer up' students…accept expression of emotion…[and] show empathy."

As 8am neared and the hallways filled up with more students, some of them peered curiously in through the small window on the door of the classroom where the teachers were gathered. There were several moments of awkward silence before Mr. Donaldson officially dismissed the gathered faculty. While some teachers rushed off back to their classrooms and offices, others were moving in what felt like slow motion; they took a few extra moments to wipe their tears and compose themselves for the day before venturing out of the room and into the sea of students and what would be a very long day.

Collective Public Grief

The official school day began with homeroom. Coincidentally, it was also the first day of the new trimester so students' schedules had to be passed out and there were some other necessary instructions to be shared with students. In the homeroom in which Jahsun had been, there were about 15 students and a first-year teacher who had confessed to me in an email the night before that he had no idea how to handle the occasion. He awkwardly passed out the new schedules, leaving the papers beside students' bowed heads if they did not acknowledge him. Jahsun's own school records had already been swiftly removed from the school's online record system so his schedule was not included in the printed stack.

The voice of Dr. Stephens came on clear, yet monotone over the PA system. He explained that Jahsun had died and told the students: "Some of you may find peace in the routine of the normal school day today. Others may need to talk with counselors and/or friends. Different people grieve differently and we will have avenues for those differences throughout the day." After sharing the logistics for each of these "avenues," the CEO led a moment of silence and then signed off. A few days later, one student told me that hearing that moment of silence "really hurt – I don't think people were ready for it."

A few minutes passed after the end of the announcements, and in this classroom feeling Jahsun's absence most acutely, these minutes were filled with total silence, interrupted only by a sniffle coming from Owen sitting in one corner. When the bell finally rang marking the end of homeroom and transition to the first class period, no one flinched for what felt to me like several more minutes, though it was really only about 30 seconds. Most students stayed in their chairs – stone-faced, some teary-eyed – as if they were unable to move. Eventually, I slowly got up and walked towards the teacher at the front of the classroom, which seemed to trigger some of the guys to start to gather their things and head to the door, many of them leaving behind their new trimester schedules, untouched.

I followed Jahsun's class schedule to first period and joined the French class he would have been in with Ms. Kallum. In an email the night before, the veteran teacher told me: "I still feel like I hadn't gotten to know Jahsun too well so I'm mostly just sad that he's gone and feeling like I missed a chance to get to know a good kid, you know?"

She told me I was welcome to come to her classes "to join in or just observe. I'll mostly be the officiant and tissue/hug/chocolate provider I think."

Indeed, this was a good description of the role Ms. Kallum played in that first period class. By the time the bell rang for first period, most students were in their seats staring straight ahead or with their heads down; some had headphones in or sunglasses on, and the room was unusually silent. Ms. Kallum walked slowly to the classroom entrance, holding a travel container of coffee, and gently closed the door. Then she walked up and down the aisles of desks, checking in on each of her students: "You guys think we should have class today? It's up to you." Hearing no audible response, she walked to the back of the room, took out a big box of cookies, opened it, and began walking up and down the aisles again offering the box to each student. Ms. Kallum seemed to be gauging each student's status and who might be more open to talking. Once she completed the rounds, she returned to the front of the room and offered up a question about Thanksgiving: "How was your Thanksgiving? What did you eat?" This got a few of them talking and she continued engaging in this conversation, while keeping an eye on the quieter students. She passed a box of tissues to one boy in the back row whose eyes were full of tears. "Want to talk or watch a movie?" Ms. Kallum finally suggested. "The silence is kinda weird," offered up one student opting for the movie. Ms. Kallum flipped on the tv at the front of the room and started running through some options; the few talkative students agreed on the kids movie, *SING*, and Ms. Kallum pushed play. For the rest of the period, they sat with the lights off and the movie on, some students still occupied by their own inner worlds or with their laptops out while others became engaged in the movie.

When the bell rang, many students were still moving in slow motion as they gathered their belongings, moved out of the classroom, and through the hallways to whatever was next on their schedule. As the day progressed, the mood remained heavy and the hallways stayed quieter than usual, though it became clear to me upon reflection later that each student was experiencing a unique reaction. Herc described the mood on Monday at school:

> *It was, like, just sad. The air was quiet. Everybody was feeling down about it, including me…I had two, three classes with [Jahsun] and it was just weird not seeing him in there….I had algebra, I had [computer class] with him and this other elective with him…He sat near me in all those jawns, so…It been horrible. He's still not here. You got to move forward regardless. …I'm used to it so, like, I don't really cope with it no more.*

Meanwhile, Kaliq was also experiencing a complicated range of emotions on Monday. He explained that he began the day trying to keep a normal routine, but found himself needing a bit of time alone before he could get there:

> *I came in, I'm like, alright, they gave us the option of going in the room and like being around like a bunch of friends and stuff like that, talking about it and all that, or go to class and try to be normal and go through it like that. So I said, 'I can't sit around and cry and stuff, and then fallback on school, so I'm gonna go to class.' So I tried to go to class. Then it was just like, the teachers are looking sad, they was saying his name and stuff, 'rest in peace, we lost Jahsun' on the loudspeaker, it just hit me like, 'yo, this is really real.' So I started crying in class, I just had to step out first two periods….I sat in the office, you know, clearing my mind…Wipe my tears all away, clear my head, all of that. Right back to class, and just finish my day out like that.*

Each student needed different things throughout the day ranging from time alone to process their feelings, time to talk to counselors or friends, or an attempt at normalcy and regular school activities.

Like in Ms. Kallum's classroom, several other teachers made deliberate efforts to bring comfort and care to their students and acknowledge the range of needs. Some teachers had made sure to bring in extra boxes of tissues from home for their students. In a science classroom shared by two teachers, they had set up a memorial table in the center of the room. On it were several lit candles and stacks of construction paper and markers. During class students were invited, if they wished, to write cards addressed to Jahsun's mother or Jahsun himself. In the college office, where several seniors often spent their free periods using the computers, chatting with the college counselors, or just hanging out, a large group of seniors were camped out for most of the morning. They used up all of the chairs in the office leaving some guys to spread out on the floor. The college counselors had given the students permission to drink water from their typically faculty-only water cooler, which the boys were getting a kick out of since this restriction generally had no exceptions.

In the hallways, behaviors that would normally have provoked a disciplinary response were overlooked. Students were not chastised for wearing sloppy uniforms or even having an entire piece of their uniform missing. A student found wandering in the hallway was asked how he was doing before he was asked where he was supposed to be or where he was headed to. This was a sharp departure from the usual, but was in keeping with the Principal's instructions that Boys' Prep adults offer students the latitude to experience the day however they needed to. In general, whether feelings were being written on to cards, eaten in sweet form, or blown into tissues, Monday was a day when everyone's grief was public and out in the open – and it was allowed to be.

Acknowledging Emotional Distress

During first period, a group of six seniors had a study hall and were sitting around a round table in the empty cafeteria. When I joined them, several had laptops out and some were actively working on schoolwork while others seemed to just be chatting. As I sat down, one of them was passing out tissues from a stack he had just procured. Jason took a tissue, neatly folded it and placed it in his pocket, and said with a cautious smile, "I'm saving this for the candlelight."

The designated counseling space was visited by a handful of students each period, mostly those in younger grades and Jahsun's football teammates. Hazeem and Bashir, Jahsun's brother, spent several periods there talking with the therapists. I arrived when a mini group session was wrapping up. The therapist was telling the two of them along with the handful of other students in the room that "things will get more challenging," but, she encouraged them, it was important that they talked to people, drank water, and got sleep. She emphasized that those were the three most important things, and also suggested that they stay off social media for a little bit if they were finding it too upsetting or triggering.

The third floor quickly became a gathering spot for Jahsun's closest group of friends, a crew of seniors who were a mix of high-achieving honors students and periodic rule-breakers. They spent much of the day gathered around Jahsun's locker. A few pulled chairs out from a nearby classroom so that they could more comfortably convene to share funny memories or commiserate about their grief. Some boys did not seem to want to engage in these conversations; they just stood silently staring at the pictures taped to the

locker, often zoned out from what was happening around them and immersed in the music playing through their headphones.

Hazeem was one student who was visibly distraught throughout the day. He had earlier posted that Monday would be hard and he was right. He spent most of it in the designated counseling room and for a while was pretty open to talking to the counselor. During the first few hours of the morning, small groups of students gathered in the room and the visiting counselors ran short group sessions. Hazeem latched on to Jahsun's little brother, Bashir, and decided to take him under his wing. They spent a lot of time together that morning sitting in the counseling room and talking. But by about 10am, Hazeem was starting to fall apart. Shaking and tensing up, at one point he got up, walked out of the room and into the hallway, and punched a locker making his hand bleed. Within a few seconds, he was surrounded by the school social worker and the two visiting counselors who ushered him back into the room and began comforting him and attending to his wound.

An hour or so later, Hazeem messaged me, through Instagram direct message, requesting that I come find him. He wrote, "I'm really losing it" and told me that he had punched the lockers some more. Eventually, I found him back in the counseling room where he lamented, "I was just getting myself together then this happened." He reflected on some of his recent memories with Jahsun. He explained that in the last few days that Jahsun had been in school, "it seemed like something was wrong." Hazeem had seen Jahsun scraping change together from the bottom of his bag to get cookies, and Hazeem felt bad that he had not had anything to give him. "If you do the right things, it seem like it's still hard to survive….we were always in [Instagram] Live together bidding…he

would see me smoking and tell me to stop." For the rest of the day, Hazeem vacillated between wanting to talk either to me, a counselor, or Bashir, and closing himself off from others consumed by grief and anger.

Lunchtime Reflections

On his way down to lunch, Herc told me, "I'm okay" in his usual straight-faced way. Yaja, the boy who had initially connected me to Jahsun the year before, was decidedly not okay. After I microwaved his cup of Ramen noodle soup in the teachers' lounge, we stood leaning against the wall looking out at the cafeteria. "I never cried so much in my life," he said of Saturday when he found out. He shared that some of his friends had not been super considerate, saying things like, "why is it so depressing here?" One of Yaja's friends said something so hurtful that Yaja worried they would never speak again.

While we were chatting, another senior came by and joined in. He said this was his first real loss, "the first person I really connected to who died...it makes me cherish moments more, not want to walk around all angry." As a small group formed, they began discussing how they had been feeling. Emmet explained that he was "all cried out by 4th period." The boy who had just acknowledged that this was his first real loss agreed. But Yaja countered: "there's more crying in me, actually...at the vigil, I'm gonna die." He went on to explain that Dr. Stephens had showed him some of the pictures in the slide show they would be playing during the vigil and there was one of Jahsun with angel wings on, from a school play two years earlier. "I just lost it," Yaja reported.

Many students used the freedom of the lunch period to post their thoughts and reflections online. Posts from Monday ranged from expressions of grief and missing Jahsun to memories of past losses to worries about losing more friends in the future.

In the teachers' lounge, faculty were using their free periods to check in with each other, relax, and regroup; no one really seemed to be successfully doing work as they usually would. They checked in with each other about individual students: Ms. Finn shared that Kaliq was weeping in the morning, but "now he's pretending it's not happening – he actually did work in my class today." Others commented that two sophomore students were "skipping all their classes because they can." The Dean, Mr. Hopkins, who walked into the lounge briefly to heat up his lunch in the microwave, reflected to the group of teachers gathered there that he anticipated today would be "the easy hard day, tomorrow is the hard hard day...and beyond is the hardest." He shared an update that most of Jahsun's friends were spending time in his large office on the third floor or in Ms. Bloom's room next door. They wanted to be close to Ms. Bloom, he theorized, as they worked on planning that afternoon's vigil.

Other teachers were deep in their own grief as they took a break from students in the teachers' lounge. Ms. Estevez, a young Latina math teacher whom I had noticed was crying during the morning faculty meeting, was seated at the table in the lounge. "That's my boy," she repeated to me several times in a melancholic tone. "My one question was, why was he alone? And he wasn't even able to put up a fight because he was broken…I got up in front of my seniors this morning, I thought I would be ok, but I was like, 'I can't even look at you guys…this is your space, just do what you need.'…I can't teach today."

Then she added that she would have to figure out a way since she had freshmen classes in the afternoon.

The Afternoon

That afternoon, in the Honors Philosophy class Jahsun had been in, Ms. Cain also conveyed her own sadness and grief. She began class sitting on a desk at the front of the room facing the class. "This is a hard time for me," she offered as a tear fell down her cheek. She shared a few memories of Jahsun and then asked the class if it was okay for her to read a piece of his writing from a recent assignment. "That's perfectly fine," one student called out from the back, and then the room fell silent as she read. Afterwards, Ms. Cain passed out a worksheet to each student with questions about how they were feeling, what kind of support they might need from her, what they did not like or want during this period, and how they would prefer to spend the next few days of class.

Students' responses on these forms represented a range of reactions to loss and expressions of needs. Whereas Jason shared that he would "appreciate if we discussed dealing with the death of a loved one," Irell preferred that they "went along business as usual." Where Jahmir wanted to "hang around in groups more so that I won't have to be alone during this time," Samir requested that he be "given individual work instead of working in groups." While some boys expressed that they wanted people to check in on them and ask how they were doing, others said they preferred people not ask them too many questions. Many of the boys expressed that they might find it harder than usual to "focus," "concentrate," share openly, or have their usual energy or good humor. Several also asked for their positive memories of Jahsun to be part of the class still and to find ways to keep him present in the classroom.

In other classrooms, the mood had lightened a bit by the afternoon. Ms. Kallum, whose language classroom I had visited in the morning when most students were completely silent, told me in an email midday that the feeling in her room had changed:

> *This period the guys found the little mourning area I set up in the back of the room. There's a football back there that I cut open and wrote "Notes for Jahsun" and a pack of paper and the football players in this class just wandered back there and are joking around and FILLING notes and shoving them into the football and gorging on Twix. So a slightly different vibe but we're still watching a children's movie and not really ready to talk yet.*

When I visited her class a few hours later for one of the last periods of the day there was, indeed, a new energy in the crowded room. The lights were off and an animated movie was playing on a low volume from the big screen at the front of the room, but about a dozen boys were bunched in the back of the classroom eating candy and adding notes to the football, many with their backpacks still on their backs and headphones in their ears. The multiple boxes of cookies Ms. Kallum had brought to school that morning had been devoured by midday, so she used the prep period during which she usually ate her lunch to hop in her car and go to the nearest grocery store to buy bags of candy for the afternoon. As I watched the boys hover around the table designated for mourning, one candle lit, a student came over, wrote a brief note, and joked with the guys immediately next to him, "it's like my 11th note" as he neatly folded it and put it inside the cut open football.

The hallways also had a bit more energy by the afternoon. Bashir had been following me around and asked me to accompany him up to Jahsun's locker on the third floor. He explained that he needed to fix the spelling on the message he wrote on the locker. He had written to his brother, "you're still not a better raper than me," though he

had meant to say "rapper." When he sent a picture of the locker to his mom, she pointed out the misspelling. When Bashir and I got up to the third floor, four or five of Jahsun's friends were hanging out by the locker, staring at it. They greeted Bashir warmly, calling him "little brother."[47]

Candlelight Vigil

The Boys' Prep community finally made it to the end of the school day. After the 3:30 dismissal, all sports practices and club activities had been canceled to create space for the vigil in Jahsun's memory. The event began in the cafeteria, which doubles as an auditorium, where a hundred or so chairs had been set up in rows facing the make-shift stage and projector screen which was looping a slideshow of photographs of Jahsun. Around the perimeter of the room, the cafeteria tables were set up and covered with poster boards, white paper bags, and markers. The fluorescent lights had been turned off, so the cavernous space had a calmer energy than usual. As the room began to fill with students, teachers, and several of Jahsun's family members, some wandered to the tables and began writing messages on the large poster paper. By the time the service was about to begin at 4pm, the chairs were completely full and about 30 people had to crowd into the back, standing or leaning against the perimeter tables. I sat alongside several teachers on a low step at the side of the room.

The Principal opened up the space, welcoming Jahsun's family and acknowledging the heaviness of why everyone had gathered:

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[47] Unfortunately, not everyone at Boys' Prep was as supportive of Bashir. He reported that on Monday one of his classmates "put on Instagram 'all these n-words depressed' and I was just like, 'why?'" It was deeply hurtful to Bashir that someone was making fun Bashir and others for being sad about the loss of Jahsun.

> *We at Boys' Prep are experiencing a time of our own sadness right now. We have lost a special part of our community. We come here today to honor Jahsun, to celebrate his light that shines here today despite our darkness. We remember his spirit which is the light that keeps on shining. In turn, we will light our own candles to symbolize his spirit, the light that radiates deep in warmth and draws us closer together. After we have had more time to process this loss, there will be opportunities to share and celebrate our experiences with Jahsun together, but right now we're just here to acknowledge him and that his life impacted us all. We are here to acknowledge our emotion and experience how deeply our losing him hurts. We are here to acknowledge his life and how those who encountered him have fragments of his life in each of us. We are here to acknowledge we will need each other in the days and weeks ahead and find strength in the community where Jahsun loved his brothers well and was loved by them in return. We will acknowledge his light, share his life, and know that Jahsun lifted us all.*

Mr. Donaldson then passed off the microphone to Dr. Stephens, the CEO, who echoed similar sentiments and introduced a Philadelphia State Senator who had reached out to the school wanting to be there.

The state senator, a Black man in his 60s, spoke directly to the boys in the room, trying to motivate them to use this tragedy to drive their own futures. He went on to offer a reminder that Jahsun's death was not an isolated incident, but connected to bigger structural issues and the conditions they all faced as Black men:

> *Black men also die in record numbers, but they also don't talk to one another in moments of pain. They don't bond together, lean on one another. But by definition that's what makes up stronger, when we bond together, when we lean on each other in this moment of pain. That expression of tears or whatever may you have, the emotion that you are filled with, will make you a man. And that moment will allow you to go forward as a man, amongst men, to lead them.*

He concluded by encouraging the boys to deal with whatever anger they might feel "in ways the rest of the country doesn't expect you to deal with."

The formal event concluded with a slideshow of photographs of Jahsun and an invitation for all those gathered to write messages on white luminary bags. The vigil then continued on the school's field, where the bags were filled with sand to give them weight

and one lit tea light candle by student volunteers, including Kaliq who told me after that he offered to help because he thought it was the only way he could keep himself together. As the crowd slowly moved outside, I saw one student's bag with the message, "I'm never gone forget you Jah. We never really met but I wish we did." Another bag, held by a teacher, said, "couldn't have asked for a better person to teach these last 4 yrs."

Once out on the field, in the brisk late November evening, mourners arranged their bags in a large "J" shape. Jahsun's family members and dozens of Boys' Prep students and faculty encircled the glowing "J." Jahsun's closest friends gave short speeches, led off by Rajae, as did a few family members. A few people released balloons into the air, just as the sun was setting in a mix of pinks and purples, and a long moment of silence was punctuated by audible crying from the crowd and honking from cars driving by. Emmet, who had thrown a pot at the wall when he got the news a few days earlier, was audibly crying. He told me later, "the vigil was crazy. [My friend] was holding on to me, and he was hugging me, and when I'm crying the worst thing somebody can do is touch me – it just all comes out…and it overflows." Another student reflected that "it felt a lot better after the candlelight, to see how many people actually cared about [Jahsun]."

Shared rituals, when successful, can produce feelings of solidarity and positive emotional energy in a group. The candlelight vigil – indeed, most of the day on Monday – had all the ingredients of a successful interaction ritual by Collins' (2004:48) definition: 1) "bodily co-presence," or a group of people assembled together in the same physical space; 2) a "barrier to outsiders," meaning that "participants have a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded"; 3) a "mutual focus of attention" around shared ideas and

activities; and 4) a "shared mood…or emotional experience." Given the presence of all the necessary components on this day of collective grief, the positive outcomes of a successful set of interaction rituals emerged as expected. These included, according to Collins (2004:49): 1) "group solidarity [or] a feeling of membership"; 2) "emotional energy in the individual"; 3) symbols of social relationship that represent the collective experience (like the letter J in candles or the hashtags); and 4) "feelings of morality [or] the sense of rightness in adhering to the group." The gathering made most people feel good and more deeply connected to each other.

When the formal ceremony concluded, Jahsun's crew of friends stood around basking in this solidarity and shared emotional energy. They took pictures, sang and rapped songs that reminded them of their friend, and just grasped on to each other as if they did not want the moment to end. Several times one of them started up the Boys' Prep football chant that was used to motivate the team before games, and they huddled together tightly as they repeated it together. Each time the revelry seemed to be dying down, one of them would start it back up again with an inside joke, a new song, or a suggestion for another group photo. Perhaps they intuitively knew that once this evening ended, and they went home, back at school tomorrow would be a different kind of day. They were aware of the impending lockdown on their emotions.

The End of the "Easy Hard"

When, earlier in the day, the Dean of Students declared to a handful of teachers in the teachers' lounge that "today is the easy hard day, tomorrow is the hard hard day, and beyond is the hardest," he intuited that despite the tremendous difficulty of Monday,

there would be harder days to come. In the following chapters, I tell the story of the next days and weeks and months following Jahsun's murder.

What made Monday "easy" – or at least *easy* hard – was the collectivity and public nature of the grief that so many students and adults alike experienced. The day was not easy in any sense; it was catastrophic, in fact. But the horror of what had happened and the challenges of being in school facing it and figuring out how to move forward were *shared*. It was understood that everyone at school was grieving. And the opportunities to participate in rituals together – whether they were writing cards, sharing stories, eating cookies, or releasing balloons – created a sense of solidarity and shared emotional energy within the Boys' Prep community for that day (Collins 2004).

The collective heightened emotional state and the shared experience of grief resulted in a short-term suspension of the usual school norms for student behavior and academic focus and the kinds of regulations and practices that students generally found belittling. A culture of control was replaced by a culture of care. Instead of an immediate reprimand for a sloppy uniform or a series of questions about where he was supposed to be, on this day students wandering the hallways were met with hugs or queries about how they were feeling. Instead of struggles for power between adults and students, there was a kind of equalization – with both adults and young people at Boys' Prep similarly subject to intense emotional displays, feelings of vulnerability, and the need to be supported by others.

As a result, there was an abundance of kindness, tenderness, permissiveness, and latitude throughout the school day. There was an emotional freedom – particularly the freedom to cry publicly or to act out in unexpected ways – which went against typical

school and cultural norms. And various instruments and rituals for grief were implemented and offered to students top-down through both administrative and teacher-level plans. Students were supported both institutionally, through specific school policies and official resources available to them, and informally, by their peers and their individual relationships with teachers. On this day of "easy hard" grief, these institutional and informal supports worked in conjunction with one another.

The coordination between the institutional and informal supports did not last. Building off of the Dean's prediction, I divide the chronology that came after Monday into stages. After the *easy hard* day came the *hard hard* period, when top-down school policies to try to ease students back into everyday school life were implemented but bumped up against alternative views of grief and the needs of grieving students. Questions of who has the right to continue to grieve, what expressions of grief are appropriate, and how long they should last came up during this period leading to tensions and conflict between students and adults and among various factions of the school staff.

CHAPTER 5 | The Hard Hard: Enforced Grief Timelines and Disciplinary and Relational Tensions

Is this something you really need?
Mr. Gilbert

The vigil out on the field on Monday evening, the first day students returned to school after a Thanksgiving break punctuated by loss, was followed by a meeting of administrators and key teachers back in the school building. In the same classroom where they had met ten hours earlier at the early morning faculty meeting, those gathered reflected on the difficult day. They congratulated themselves and their colleagues for being proactive in anticipating what challenges might arise. They acknowledged both the resiliency of their students *and* the fact that some might not bounce back quickly or easily from this rupture. Despite their desire to continue caring for students emotional needs, there was also a looming pressure in the room to get back to work. The CEO shared his view that although it was important to still create space for students who needed one-on-one support, he worried that continuing to offer the counseling services and the designated classroom for grieving students would become a distraction and that there was a risk that some students might use it to avoid class.

Others in the room agreed; those who felt differently, as I learned later, remained silent. After some back and forth, the vocal participants formulated a plan that the Dean's office on the third floor would now serve as a designated space for any student who could not be in class and it would be supervised by a rotation of teachers, rather than grief

counselors, and have a sign-in sheet to keep track of students' whereabouts. By the end of the meeting, the team had made some preliminary decisions about which events would go on as planned later in the week and which would be canceled or rescheduled, and they parted ways for the night with the intention of trying to return the school to as close to normal the following day. It is unlikely any of them anticipated the kinds of tensions these decisions would produce in the weeks that followed.

The decision to transition as swiftly and as concretely as possible out of a state of acknowledged and heightened public grieving and back into the everyday business of school reflects an interest in order and control which is at the heart of many school decisions in this and other schools. So many facets of school life are structured and designed to promote order: students and teachers are assigned to specific rooms for designated periods of time throughout the day. Within each room, desks are arranged in rows, organized groups, or circles prescribing the specific space each student should occupy. Even the flow of traffic between class periods is highly regulated throughout the building, with one stairwell restricted for ascending and the other for descending. Of course, the school calendar raises regularity to an art form. In this case, adding to the disorientation of the first day of mourning was the fact that it was the designated launch of the second trimester of the school year: most students' class schedules were changing, new elective courses beginning, and a clean slate for grading. While these forms of spatial and temporal regulation are often tested by the unexpected events of each school day and the general energy of youth, the death of Jahsun created new pressures on the sense of the order of school life at Boys' Prep.

While the BP core administrative team, upheld by several teachers, expressed the belief that resuming the standard school schedule and expectations would meet students' need for routine and stability, it was my sense that day that a substantial number of teachers were doubtful that this was a realistic expectation so soon after their shared trauma. The disciplinary team, too, was somewhat divided on how much behavioral leniency to offer to grieving students.

Nor were most of the students on the same page. While it is true that some expressed annoyance that the school building had become "depressing" as everyone continued to dwell on the loss, I heard many others lament that their emotional experience was being pushed aside too quickly. These students, it was clear, were not yet ready to face the normative expectations of school.

Amid the emerging tensions that began on Tuesday, the sense of collective grief and a shared set of circumstances between students and adults at Boys' Prep – as well as within those groups – was replaced by a fragmented set of perspectives on how the students and the school should move forward. As the week progressed and the school year moved into December, some of these tensions dissipated naturally, but others solidified into more hardened disagreements.

This is the period following Jahsun's death that I am calling the *hard hard*. It is the period when his death was still a regular topic of conversation at all levels of the school; when students still felt they had permission to announce their grief; and when adults still factored it in to their decision-making about seeking order in their classrooms or the school building as whole. At the same time, it was the period when collective mourning was no longer a school-sponsored activity. The *easy hard* had lasted just a day,

Monday, during which grief was made easier because it was shared by nearly everyone in the building and expressions of grief and individuals' needs were more homogenous. Now, the student mourners would be entering a much harder stretch lacking consistent rules or expectations, and most of all, consistent supports.

The loss of a united emotional foundation left everyone at Boys' Prep, faculty and students alike, to make individual decisions, consciously or not, about what kinds of emotional work (grieving or otherwise) had the space to happen in the classroom or school building, and which emotions needed to be ignored, forfeited, or deferred. In this context, students' emotional sincerity might be questioned or their grief measured along one-size-fits-all timelines. Teachers disregarding the directives of business-as-usual or offering students support outside of the usual avenues might be seen by colleagues as coddling. Teachers not doing so might be seen by their students as callous and uncaring. The result was a patchwork at best, chaotic and divisive at worst, environment with mixed messages for Boys' Prep students about how to move through their grief.

Students' Readiness for the Day

Across Jahsun's friend group, students varied in their readiness to face the day back at school on Tuesday. As Tony told me later, for a lot of Jahsun's closest friends, "school was an outlet…even if [we] didn't want to do no work, [we] felt safe and happy at school." Whereas a handful had missed Monday, worrying they would be too sad, everyone came back on Tuesday.

Ezekiel still felt unable to be in class, especially since he had shared so many classroom spaces and experiences with Jahsun over the years. Instead, the senior started his day in the newly designated space for grieving students, but without counselors now. I

was asked to "supervise" this room, the Dean's large office, for the first period, and teachers rotated in throughout the day to supervise and ensure that students signed in and out. During the first period, Ezekiel and six other friends hung out in the office, sitting around the conference table and on top of the Dean's desk. They talked about the man who allegedly killed Jahsun (who was wanted by police, but not yet in custody), tattoos of Jahsun they wanted to get and where the school should put up a mural for him, as well as about their emerging plans for the following weekend to go to a party and "get tore" (which Ezekiel defined as the "highest level" of high). Ezekiel said that he had tried to go to his classes the day before, but he was not able to focus — especially as he was preparing his speech for the Monday evening vigil. He said that staying close to friends was making it easier for him to get through the days since Jahsun's death.

Hazeem, a junior who had been part of Jahsun's peripheral friend group, was still reeling on Tuesday after Monday had been so challenging for him. As we learned in the last chapter, Hazeem spent most of Monday in the designated counseling room and had latched on to Bashir, Jahsun's freshman half-brother. Hazeem had been open to talking with the counselors and getting their advice, and seemed to gain strength from the act of comforting Bashir, but he left the designated counseling room at least twice, walked into the hallway, and punched a locker. On Tuesday, he was still icing his swollen hand and spent much of the day wandering the hallways not ready to return to his classes, but without a clearly-defined place to go.

Herc went to his classes on Tuesday, but he posted a Snapchat video of himself during math class in the late morning with the caption: "algebra feels weird without my boy jah in here." He also learned that he had accumulated too many disciplinary write-

ups for being tardy to class over the prior month and would have to serve an in-school suspension the following day.

Competing Ideas about Students' Needs

Before classes even began on Tuesday morning, divergent views about how the day should be managed were already evident among the faculty. Around 7:30am, I bumped into Ms. Bloom in the third floor hallway, finding her eager for a listening ear. She repeated the decision made Monday night that the counseling services be withdrawn and opportunities for students to gather outside of class be limited to the Dean's office. This, she said with a snort, was a grave mistake since the seniors who were closest to Jahsun, she believed, were still in desperate need of time to process and be together. "They never listen to me here," she added under her breath as she headed into her classroom to start first period.

On the morning announcements, the Principal acknowledged that students as well as adults might still be feeling their loss. He encouraged the study body: "If you see teachers or students who are having a hard time, support them." Then he offered a limited sketch of the logistical plans for the day; more detailed instructions about where students who needed support or a break from class could go were primarily passed through word-of-mouth, and likely students who were not proactive about asking never found out.

Many classrooms dove back into academic material on Tuesday, though throughout the day I heard complaints in the hallways from some students feeling unaffected by the loss that they were still not getting any work done in their classes. More than one grumbled that school should have just been canceled for the day. In the teachers' lounge during first period, one teacher wondered out loud if Jahsun's friends were going

to skip all their classes again today. “Yesterday I gave them a break,” she explained. “But today if they don't come to me to at least check in, I'm writing them up for skipping.” While this teacher understood that Monday was a difficult day during which students ought to be given leeway, she did not feel the leeway should continue, and she expressed concern that students might take advantage of the situation by continuing to cut class.

But other teachers had a different perspective. Ms. Cain, Jahsun’s philosophy teacher – the one who had distributed the form the day before asking students what they needed from her – decided to take her classes outside to the school field where the vigil was held the night before. Ms. Cain often employed pedagogical strategies she had identified through her own research as being particularly affective for teaching boys, such as having students move around in the classroom, sit on the floor, and demonstrate their understanding of academic material through games and other competition-based activities. In this case, she theorized that students might benefit from a physical outlet for their grief – especially since Boys’ Prep has no gym or recess. When the bell rang, she instructed her class of twenty students to go quietly “like hallway ninjas” to their lockers to get their jackets and meet in the lobby. Once gathered out on the field, she led a handful of team building games. To my surprise, even the most typically too-cool-for-school boys readily joined in – no eye rolls or protests or requests to sit out. They were game, many of them channeling a childlike playful side of themselves I had never before had a chance to see. Like the day before, when Ms. Kallum discovered that what students most wanted was to watch an animated children’s movie, it was becoming clear that in this moment of extreme vulnerability, if allowed, the boys wanted to access their

childhood and perhaps to feel like kids who were safe and protected by adults. When given the space and freedom to grieve, they revealed their youth not their stoicism.

After the planned activities, Ms. Cain invited her class to use the rest of the period to do whatever they wanted. She had brought along a football, a frisbee, and a hula hoop, and soon groups of boys were playing with all three. Others sat on the grass and relaxed, enjoying an unseasonably warm late November day. News started to spread through the building (I assume through a combination of text message and other students looking out the window) and by the second half of the period, several of Jahsun's friends, who were not in Ms. Cain's class, had joined the gathering outside. At the start of the next period, many students remained claiming they had a free period or their lunch period, and a handful of other teachers joined along with Jahsun's younger brother. By late-morning, 40-50 kids were outside, and it was a bit unclear who actually had permission to be there. Two football games started up – one more competitive and the other more low-key. A few of the teachers said that it was so nice that they did not want to go back inside. One senior laid out on the grass, legs outstretched, and wistfully shared, "It feels like I'm out of prison."

Yaja, a senior (the one who first introduced me to Jahsun all those months ago), sat down next to me on the grass as I was eating my lunch; he reflected on what he called the "magnitude of it" as we looked out at the field full of BP students engaged in play, many with big smiles on their faces. He said wistfully, "it's all for Jah, I can almost see him running down the field…and his little brother out here…it's perfect." Yaja explained that he was supposed to be in Ms. Abioye's class but she let him come out. Apparently, about 10 of the guys out on the field were from that class, meaning only 10 others were

still inside participating in the class. As Yaja explained it, “Ms. A doesn't really grasp the gravity of the situation.” He conceded that Ms. Abioye had not really known Jahsun (she was a first-year teacher and never had him in class), “but still” he added and trailed off as if to say that her newness did not negate the expectation that she be understanding. After another moment of reflection, he got up to snap pictures of some of his friends who threw up their hands in the shape of an “L” to signify “Long Live Jah.”

Around 2pm, at the end of her final class period for the day, Ms. Cain gathered her class together to mark the official end of the outing. She told them that it had been a good day: they were outside to have fun and be together and help each other through a tough time. She offered the hope that they could do this again, but to do so would require them to all be on their best behavior when they got back in building – meaning perfect uniforms, “indoor energy,” and “no junior-senior drama.” One student yelled out, “thanks mom” and several more echoed this sentiment as they pushed close together in a big clump and grasped arms. On Ms. Cain’s count, they all shouted, “Long Live Jah.” And then they started wiping away their sweat, tucking in their shirts, and heading back towards the school building, their khaki pants covered in grass stains.

Reactions to the impromptu outing among students were uniformly positive, but not so among school staff. The teachers who were able to join the boys outside reported having a great time and thinking it was probably healing for students to be able to play outside and channel their youthful energy. One teacher posted a picture on her Instagram page of the boys huddled together on the field with a caption sharing how meaningful it was for her to see the boys “lift each other up” during this difficult time. Other staff, however, complained to the administration about the chaos of boys going in and out of

the building (some of them cutting class), and a few small fights broke out in the building that many attributed to the excess energy being brought in from the field. In response, Ms. Cain, sent an email to the faculty listserv at the end of the day apologizing: "I missed what were some unfortunate events inside the building. Any outside energy that spilled inside and affected you/students is my responsibility-- sorry!" Compared to the united front of Monday, it was evident even by Tuesday that there was no longer a shared adult perspective on how to support the grieving boys of Boys' Prep.

Easing Back into School Routines and Discipline

Over the course of the week, school leaders and disciplinary staff tried to restore order by returning to some of their regular activities. By Wednesday, four days after Jahsun's death, uniform checks began again, although somewhat more gently than usual: "button your top button" or "make sure that shirt is tucked in" or "where's your belt?" were called out during passing periods in the hallways. I heard one teacher lovingly admonish a student for wearing mismatched socks by yelling to him with a smile and a sing-song tone, "I hope you find your other black sock by the next time I see you."

An assembly for freshman to recognize their academic honors went on as scheduled Wednesday morning – as did that day's in-school suspension where Herc was expected to be. And yet, at the same time, the disciplinary team made an explicit decision to fall back from some of their usual demands. In an interview at the end of the school year, SSO Mr. Hardwick, explained that Jahsun's death "threw a monkey wrench" in his team's efforts that fall to hold students accountable for their uniforms and general behavior in the building. They realized that, given what had happened, if they "pushed too much," the students might "snap off on you." So, Mr. Hardwick explained,

> *it became one of those things where we still enforced the rules, but it had to be a little loose just for the sake of maintaining the peace in the school. …It depends on the situation and then sometimes we're like, 'Yo, man.' [Me and Mr. Pratt] look at each other and we're like, 'Yo, what's the plan for today?' He's like, 'Well, let's just stay observant. Don't force nothing. Let the kids that's going through what they going through be. If you're going to enforce the rules, enforce it loosely. If [their misbehavior is] not overboard, if it's not too overboard then leave it alone,' because the main thing here is to allow kids to be able to deal with their emotions and not hassle them to a point where it becomes more of an issue than what it needs to be.*

Mr. Hardwick recognized that pushing discipline on an emotionally vulnerable young person might end up creating "more of an issue." In theory, he and Mr. Pratt focused during what I am calling the *hard hard* period on "staying observant," "enforcing school rules loosely," and focusing only on infractions that were "overboard." Though, in practice, Mr. Hardwick found this kind of restraint and shift in priorities somewhat harder, as we will see later on.

In the classrooms where Jahsun had been a student, teachers also tried to find a balance between responding to students' emotional needs and getting back to work. Ms. Kallum began Wednesday's senior French class with, "Let's try to get back to before Thanksgiving, what we were learning then" and pulled up on the board a translation they had been working on as a class. She led them through it, but allowed one of the students she knew to be Jahsun's close friend to keep his head down for all of class, two others to wear headphones, and another to keep his sunglasses on, though all of these behaviors would normally be prohibited in class. About 15 minutes into class, two students started bickering back and forth and Ms. Kallum became frustrated with the disruption. She never yelled, but said multiple times that she was frustrated. The argument prevented the

class from ever getting into an academic rhythm and, by the end of the period, they had only gotten through four lines of translation.

In a sophomore and junior social studies classroom that day, Ms. Finn turned off the fluorescent overhead lights so that just the natural light coming in from the windows made the room feel calm and restful. She instructed students to work at their own pace silently, taking notes from their textbook onto a worksheet. Ms. Finn described the scene to me during the next period: it was "amazing – I fully walked out of room to get tea and came back and everyone was still quiet and working."

In Jahsun's senior Honors Philosophy class, his presence was still strongly felt. Mid-week, Ms. Cain used a game of logic puzzles to try to ease the class back into their regular course material. The students arranged themselves into teams to compete to answer questions she put up on the Smartboard. As they worked through the problems, one team of four students kept referring themselves as a five-person team: they had included the empty desk where Jahsun used to sit as part of their cluster and him the fifth member of their team. They put his name up on the board as their team name. No one in the class questioned this; in fact, the other students in the class seemed to appreciate this continued acknowledgement of their peer's presence.

Supporting Struggling Students

As the week continued and more and more classrooms returned to semi-normal lesson plans and routines, teachers' support of struggling students shifted to a one-on-one activity squeezed into the nooks and crannies of the school day when teachers had free moments. One senior English teacher spent her full prep period one afternoon with Rajae, a senior who had been close with Jahsun — and the one who got the speeches started at

the Monday night vigil. After they talked for a while, Rajae said he wanted to show the teacher Jahsun's locker and they walked together up to the third floor, and spent part of another period there reflecting. Although this teacher told me she had always felt that she and Rajae had a good relationship, she did not expect him to open up as much as he did: "so much stuff just came out, he was shaking at one point… I'm not equipped to deal with this!" This teacher felt unprepared for the grief counselor-like role she felt she was being asked to take on.

Teachers' collective support of grieving students also had to happen mostly informally once the official school mourning rituals on Monday concluded. For example, on Tuesday, a teacher in the teachers' lounge shared with the colleagues gathered there that she perceived that one particular senior, Antoine, was "very sad, it's right below surface," as she held up two fingers about a centimeter apart to show this distance figuratively. The other teachers nodded sympathetically and perhaps some made a mental note to pay extra attention to this student when they next encountered him, but there was no formal plan concocted to support Antoine's recovery.

By Thursday, five days after Jahsun's death, Ezekiel made it to most of his classes for the first time. In the hallway, he told me, "My first class, he was in there with me, so…" Ezekiel trailed off and looked away as he said this, seeming to ponder the fact that just a week earlier, he and Jahsun had sat in that classroom together. "I was able to push through it. I was high though. I was fried," he confessed, explaining that smoking marijuana helped him get through the morning, but when the high wore off around lunchtime, he found it harder to be in school. He added, trying to make sense of how his grief seemed to come in waves, "I cried a little bit yesterday, but I'm chilling. I have my

days, I have my moments. I had a moment yesterday — I was distant from everyone else. I was just chilling. Some days I'm not myself, some days I'm myself….When I see my guys though, that brings me back into the mood though. They definitely be helping me out for sure."

Hazeem was also still struggling on Thursday. In the morning, he received permission from his teachers to sit by himself in an office and complete the classwork on his own rather than being around all the other students in class. During the lunch period, he posted an Instagram story about Jahsun's empty seat in the cafeteria with the caption, "he can't sit next to me"; then Hazeem got up and left his spot at the table. I found him upstairs by the main office with his head down listening to music. His glasses were off and he was visibly crying. When Hazeem did not respond to my verbal greeting, I wondered if he would be more open to communicating by text since we had previously had many serious conversations that way. While sitting next to him, I sent him a message to which he responded once but not again. At one point, a senior walked by and called out, "Yo 'Zeem, you good bro?" and Hazeem also ignored him.

After I approached the secretary in the main office asking her to check Hazeem's schedule and which class he was supposed to be in next period, he eventually looked up at me and agreed to walk upstairs to the social worker's office. Ms. Rivera, the social worker, found him a private room — the windowless office by the front entrance which I often used for my interviews — and collected his classwork and homework from each of his afternoon classes. Hazeem spent the rest of the day alone quietly working on his class assignments or sleeping.

Roughhousing

The in-betweenness of this *hard hard* week produced a new level of physicality and chaos in the building, particularly among Jahsun's circle of senior friends. Early in the week, for example, two of Jahsun's close friends made a scene by play-fighting in the cafeteria. It began with them trying to grip each other's shoulders and swatting each other's arms away while seated at the table, but eventually they both rose to their feet as it escalated. The taller of the two hoisted the other one up on his shoulders and carried him through the aisle between lunch tables. This drew attention from the rest of the students and eventually the whole cafeteria became engaged cheering and egging them on, before Mr. Pratt broke it up.

I encountered a similar scene the following day during last period: Ezekiel was cutting Physics class and hanging out in the second floor hallways with some of his friends. They were periodically putting each other into headlocks, and sometimes unsuspecting younger students passing through the hallways would get caught up in the playfighting. As I leaned against a set of lockers observing, Zeek came over to me, put his arm around my shoulder and said wistfully, "today was a good day." His explanation: he made it to *some* of his class, "really all of the important ones besides math" — and, of course, the one he was currently missing. Instead of attending math class he sat in Ms. Bloom's room, which was right across the hallway from math. "I'm so behind in that class and they had a quiz," he offered as an explanation. I dipped momentarily into teacherly mode and reminded him that the best way to avoid getting behind would be to actually go to class, or to at least talk to his teacher and tell her what was going on with him. He nodded, acknowledging I was right. I used that momentary agreement to

encourage and usher him and the other guys back to their physics class. Ezekiel resisted, claiming that he "doesn't learn anything, it's boring," but eventually the guys, somewhat sweaty now from all the horseplay, returned to the classroom with just a few minutes left in the period.

Later in the week, at the end of the day, there was more of the same. Just as I was emerging from the stairwell on the third floor, I was almost run over by two students, Bashir, and a senior I did not know, who both seemed to be running towards the stairwell fleeing something happening in the hallway. The senior warned me that it was "not a safe environment up here," and Bashir added, with a laugh, that it was "gang violence." As I reached the middle of the hallway where I finally had a view down the main hall, I saw a number of pairs of guys putting each other into playful headlocks. The guys, mostly seniors, were running through the hallways chasing each other, grabbing each other by the neck, and in some cases wrestling their partner to the ground. As I watched, they came after Bashir too and chased him into the stairwell. A junior, Tyrese, walked by and said in his usual mumble, "I'm out for blood, not sure who" and then ran lightning fast to the stairwell, grabbed Zeek, and put him in a headlock that he had to struggle for several seconds to break out of. Ezekiel was out of breath for a few minutes after this bent over in the stairwell. I asked him for an honest assessment of whether I should be concerned that someone might get hurt in all this. He shook his head, "we're just letting stuff out, having fun." By the end of the week, there were small signs of damage throughout the school building — including black marks on several hallway walls and a few dented lockers.

Policing Each Other's Grief

Simmering below the surface of this playful energy were more complex tensions between students about their grief. Though Jahsun's core circle of friends offered support and solace to one another – sometimes through physical playfighting – as they each pushed through their own grieving experiences, students whose relationship with Jahsun existed outside this core circle were sometimes subject to questions about the sincerity of their feelings.

Some students believed that their peers might exaggerate their grief to feel more a part of a shared experience or perhaps to feel closer to their other peers who were experiencing the loss. One student explained:

> *You can tell who didn't know the person and who did know the person. And what I mean by that is the people who didn't know them just wanted to claim them as their friend just because that person died or they thought it was cool…It was like people coming out of the woodwork at school claiming him, wearing t-shirts, and I'm like, "Y'all didn't even know him." People just, I guess trying to be down or whatever…Wanted to be cool, wanted to be a part of the situation, [wanted] a new friend, basically, to be able to be in the in-crowd. ...I don't know, it's like you wanna make friends with people and that right there will definitely bring people closer together.*

This student theorized that someone who could claim close friendship with a young person who had been killed might receive certain desirable social benefits such as street cred or sympathy. Other students speculated that boys who posted RIP messages on social media that were "not genuine" or "phony" might be doing it "for attention."

These accusations came to a head towards the end of the week. I heard that there was some tension building between Hazeem and another student in his grade, David. David had posted some images to Instagram from the Monday evening vigil with the

caption “We missing you down here bro bro but your legacy def living on 💯💪🏃…Rest In Peace n Paradise Big Bro.” Perhaps seeing this post for the first time while scrolling through Instagram in class, Hazeem apparently turned to David in the middle of their shared Social Studies class, “You don’t know my mans like that,” suggesting that David did not have a right to post about Jahsun’s death.

Walter (2000:101) reminds us that this is nothing new: “In every society, the expression of grief is regulated by conventions and rituals which indicate how, and how much, mourners should speak about the dead and express their feelings.” Just as in face-to-face interactions, online grieving also has norms of expression and is susceptible to interpretations of a hierarchy of grief (Degroot 2012; Robson and Walter 2013; Wagner 2018). Some scholars have referred to online mourning behaviors without a personal connection to the deceased as “emotional rubbernecking” (DeGroot 2014).

In this instance, Hazeem’s critique of David’s grief threatened to produce a serious conflict. Feeling himself getting upset, David left class to cool off by the main office. During the passing period, as I walked past the office, the Principal pointed David out to me, sharing a version of what happened and asking if I could check in with him. When I sat down next to David and asked him what is wrong, he said it was about “that football player who died.” They had four classes together over the course of their years at BP and they “used to chop it up [joke around].” David knew that he and Jahsun had not been close, but he felt Hazeem had no right to question what he posted online. David said that he felt like he was “about to hit [Hazeem]” in that moment and had to get away. Even after cooling off alone, he still worried that if he did not talk through his feelings more,

he might take out his anger during his wrestling match that afternoon and actually hurt someone. Even though David and I had never talked at length before this, he asked if we could sit down together later that afternoon. Meanwhile, this event seemed to have upset Hazeem as well and he told me that he did "not want to be around people right now" though he did not mind working on his schoolwork alone.

Disciplinary Interactions

Wednesday, as school leadership was re-instituting some of the regular disciplinary activities, Herc was assigned to an in-school suspension for accumulating too many tardy write-ups. In-school suspension required him to come to school, on time and in full uniform, but spend the half day (Wednesdays school let out at noon, before lunch) in the cafeteria in silence. It was essentially a half-day study hall, sometimes with the expectation of help with chores around the building.

Herc was excused for an hour mid-day to attend a group counseling session, which the social worker had set up for him and two other students — Yaja and Matthew — earlier that fall. The three students met weekly with two Black male counselors and each week focused on a different topic. Coincidentally, that week's theme was grief. The counselors opened up the space, asking the three students to reflect on what had just happened in the school and talk about "grief and loss in our community, as individuals, as people, as Black males." The boys were pretty quiet and the two counselors filled in the silence, encouraging the boys to not try to rush through their grief. Kenneth, one of the counselors, elaborated on a boxing metaphor: when you get punched, the goal is to get back up and continue the fight. "If we stay down it's like taking a loss, but it's not always a benefit to get up too soon." He illustrated this point with his own story about wishing he

had taken more time to grieve before returning to college after his grandmother died. Later on, as the session wound down, Sean, the other counselor, offered: "You don't have to hide shit for nobody, dog. Doing that will kill you or make you kill someone." They closed by advising the guys that it was important that they have goals: "You need goals, something that matters, it's dangerous if you don't have that."

When Herc returned from the counseling session to the cafeteria, the in-school suspension students were being asked to help clean the cafeteria. Herc was not into this, so he ducked out of the in-school suspension early and wandered up to the third floor where he intended to hide out until noon when he could leave the building without being questioned. Mr. Pratt noticed he was gone and since I happened to be around, he asked me to go look for Herc upstairs. When I found him, Herc refused to return to the cafeteria and said he did not care about the consequences of leaving early, though he strategically knew that since he had two tests the following day the administration would likely not punish him with another day of in-school suspension. As soon as the clock struck noon, Herc was gone from the building.

Herc's affront to the BP disciplinary machine had ramifications the following day. At lunch, Herc and Mr. Hardwick started arguing. Herc felt himself getting angry and tried to extract himself from the situation, but Mr. Hardwick continued chastising him for his behavior the day before. Eventually, Herc lashed out at him and then tried to leave the school building again. This only resulted in more trouble for him: by the afternoon, he had been suspended and sent home.

Mr. Pratt, the head disciplinarian, reflected later in the day while sweeping up the cafeteria floor that he had tried to give Herc space knowing that he was going through a

lot, but added that once Herc threatened to punch Mr. Hardwick during their argument, he had gone too far: "that attitude will get him eaten alive out there. We care here but not out there," he said as he pointed out towards the cafeteria doors that opened onto the street. "I know stuff's going on but….He don't want to be here, but he gotta figure it out or his parent has to figure it out."

Mr. Pratt and Mr. Hardwick often approached situations differently which, during this period of heightened emotions, added to the disciplinary tensions in the school building. Mr. Pratt, who had grown up around the corner from the school, prided himself in *really* knowing his students. He felt that his role was to determine how to best serve each boy under his care based on his individual needs. And, likewise, students often told me that they did not mind being disciplined or punished by him because they knew that he approached every situation first in an effort to understand and hear each person's side. As one student put it, "he wants to understand where you coming from first." In that vein, Mr. Pratt recognized that especially in the context of grief, it was even more important to approach each student individually:

> *You know how you go up to the McDonald's register and that person says, "Welcome to McDonald's, how may I help you?" We had to be that individual. We had to be the person behind the register asking, "How may we help you?" As opposed to us saying, "This is what you need to do. This is how you need to grieve." You can't tell people how to grieve. You know what I mean? …[Additionally,] there may be a situation where a student passing away reflects on a loved one that went through the same situation. So you can't just say, "Oh you're faking, go back to class.." No. Because his dad may have gotten murdered. You know what I'm sayin'? So we may be bringing up some old things.*

Mr. Pratt tried to consider each student holistically to imagine the varied ways Jahsun's death might be affecting them even if, on the surface, they did not seem to be a close friend. In the case of Herc, Mr. Pratt's approach after the incident Wednesday was to give

him space because he thought that is what he most needed in the moment. But the challenge was that for the disciplinary team of three – Mr. Hopkins, Mr. Pratt, and Mr. Hardwick – managing 450 students, it was not possible for each of them to know the individual needs of every student.

Add to this the disciplinary team's shared worry that some students were likely "taking advantage of the opportunity" as the school was in morning and become "more negative in behavior." Despite what he shared earlier, Mr. Pratt theorized that he had no doubt some BP students were thinking, "So, I don't know the student that passed away, but I see that everybody else is going through something, I'm gonna utilize this opportunity to be lazy. I'm gonna utilize this opportunity to not do work. I'm gonna utilize this opportunity to slack." Mr. Pratt and his colleagues worried that there were many students who reacted in this way, using the extended moment of collective grief and school chaos to get out of activities they did not want to participate in. They had to balance their feeling of "this pulse" in the school building with what they knew about each individual student.

In Herc's case, the suspension on Thursday "shook him," according to the Dean, Mr. Hopkins. After so many disciplinary infractions over the years, Herc and his parents worried that perhaps this could be the last straw. The next day, Friday, Herc was invited back into the building at 3:30pm with his father. The reinstatement hearing to see if he was ready to return to school after the short suspension was led by the Mr. Hopkins. Ms. Bloom, his favorite teacher, and I were invited to join as observers and advocates for Herc. Herc wore the most impeccably pulled together version of the school uniform that I

had ever seen on him as he entered the school building with his father, a man in his late 40s with whom he shares a strikingly strong physical resemblance.

In the reinstatement hearing, the Dean laid out his interpretation of the events of the week and tried to get Herc to acknowledge the consequences of his actions — specifically his very public fight with the disciplinarian and attempt to leave the building — and identify his goals so that they could map out a plan to get him back on track. Herc's dad tried to mediate, acknowledging that his son certainly needed to apologize to the staff member he threatened but also earnestly asking whether the altercation that led to his son's suspension could have been prevented if the disciplinarian had not egged Herc on. The conversation continued in this direction for a while with Herc's dad wondering why the disciplinarian was not at the meeting, Mr. Hopkins asking me and Ms. Bloom to share what we saw of the incident (we both honestly felt that both parties got worked up and made the situation worse than it should have been), and Herc offering only a very roundabout apology. When they came back to thinking about next steps and how Herc could improve his grades and attendance, Herc offered, looking down at his hands: "I live day to day, I'm not thinking about the future." Given that one of Herc's friends and classmates had been murdered less than a week earlier, this statement was not completely unreasonable.

Like many conversations Herc had with authority figures, this one felt like pulling teeth as Mr. Hopkins encouraged Herc to share his perspective on his year so far. The new trimester had just begun and, with the week he (and everyone) had had, it was unlikely Herc had completed any of the assignments yet. All of us in the room were well aware that Herc's grades up to this point in the year, his junior year, had been far below

his potential. In the first trimester of the school year, he failed four of his seven classes and received Cs in the other three. On his report card, his teachers expressed disappointment about his attendance and inconsistency, but also shared their genuine affection for him with comments like, Herc is "polite and engaged," "a strong student when in class," or "such a special student — he is earnest, thoughtful, and kind. I have really loved working with him." The paradox of Herc is how genuinely likeable he remains even when he is resisting school norms the most.

Mr. Hopkins continued prodding Herc trying to get him to commit to making some changes for his own betterment. Only four months into the job at Boys' Prep, Mr. Hopkins has a kind affect and many creative ideas — at the beginning of the year he tried to institute a restorative justice model in place of suspensions, but reverted back to the old model within two months — but he struggled to construct a persona of authority in the school. As a white man, and a small statured one at that, the students were apt to mock him behind his back; they particularly enjoyed performing exaggerated imitations of his high and "very white" voice. After about 40 minutes with little headway in a plan beyond how and when Herc would make up the work he missed during his one day suspension, Mr. Hopkins reinstated Herc allowing him to come back to school the following Monday. Though in some sense this outcome was never in question, it still felt like a relief for everyone in the room. After the meeting, while his father waited outside the main office, Herc went to visit each of his teachers to get his missed work, which he promised to complete by Monday.

Bringing Closure to the Week

Friday, before the official start to the school day, there was a faculty meeting focused on how teachers could continue to support students while returning to regular day-to-day school life. Like the early-morning meeting Monday, the room full of teachers was mostly silent while the Principal addressed them, but there was not the same sadness hanging over the space. Mr. Donaldson began by acknowledging that "it's been a challenging week on a number of levels." He described his plan to gather Jahsun's closest friends (the ones who had been involved in much of the roughhousing in the building) for a meeting later that morning to "check in with them, see how they're doing, and encourage them that Monday needs to go back to their normal schedule and routine." He laid out a plan for target dates for students to turn in missed work and provided updates about the planned funeral services. The meeting concluded in about ten minutes.

I followed the Principal back to his office, where he asked my advice on how to handle a sensitive situation with the morning announcements. On this morning, members of the student council were supposed to announce over the PA the winners of athletic awards for the fall season. Before he was killed, Jahsun had been honored with the scholar-athlete award for his participation on the Boys' Prep football team and his academic achievements. Mr. Donaldson was not sure whether he should include Jahsun's award in the announcements: "I don't want to trigger anyone first thing in morning." He ultimately decided to leave his name off the list and find another way to honor him for this achievement.

Around 10:30am, Jahsun's friends gathered in the special education classroom, which is smaller and more intimate than other rooms with the desks arranged in rows

facing forward. Thirteen of Jahsun's friends crowded into the seats, and Mr. Donaldson pulled one of the desks out of the row to sit in on it at the front of the room. Ms. Bloom, who told me she wanted to be there in case the principal said anything "insensitive," and I sat at desks along the wall. Mr. Donaldson opened up the conversation by acknowledging what a hard week it had been and thanking the boys for being such great supports to each other since "as teachers, we know we can't always be everything that you guys need us to be." While he talked, the guys sat silently staring straight ahead or down at their desks. Khalil was having a visibly hard time and, at one point, Ms. Bloom reached across and put her hand on his arm. Mr. Donaldson continued with his primary message about the return to normalcy:

> *We want to make sure that you guys are getting the opportunity to get back into the things you need to do, because we don't want you getting to a place where you're really far behind in your senior year. You guys gotta be moving on towards graduation. We don't want that to get lost in what's going on. Obviously, there's going to be challenges with that. We get that. It's not going to be straightforward and easy. But we want you guys to start moving in that direction. We are hopeful that on Monday the expectation is that you're back in class as normal… There's gonna be days, guys, it's gonna happen, like that's just a normal part of this whole process [so] if you're having a day, you're having a moment, you're having a class period, you need to go through normal routines of doing that. You need to be able to say to your teacher, 'Hey, like I'm really having a struggle today. Is it okay if I go to Ms. Rivera?' And even if Ms. Rivera isn't that person that you need to talk to, she's the person that you need to check in with because that's her role in the school of finding you to that right person.*

Mr. Donaldson suggested that the boys not overwhelm Ms. Bloom and make sure to give her the space to take care of herself too. He reiterated the deadline to get in missed work and encouraged them to communicate with their teachers because starting Monday they would be expected to be back in all their classes.

Mr. Donaldson invited the students to share if there was anything on their mind, but when no one did, he continued, trying to offer encouragement:

> *How do you take the challenge, how do you take the experience of this person that's impacted your life and take that with you on a daily basis? Right? It's one thing to be able to just be in that moment and focus and think about how that person impacted you. It's something else to think, how do I take the way that Jahsun impacted my life and make that part of my every day and the routine and the normal? As you start to figure that out, there are going to be moments where it feels off, where it feels hard, where it feels difficult. Make sure that you're letting people know.*

There were a few moments of silence and then Ms. Bloom jumped in, close to tears herself:

> *I just want to say, I don't want you to think that we're putting a timeline — like on Monday that you have to stop feeling. Like, it's going to stay with you for a while. I think what we're trying to message to you is that there's no words that's going to make you feel better, nothing we say is going to make you feel better, nothing we say is going to help make sense of it. But if we're learning anything from it it's that you have to value your own life and the life that you have left. …I think you've done a really good job of keeping each other close. And I'm always going to be here if you need me. But you guys, like all of you in this room, have been working really hard for four years to get your GPAs right and go to college — or like, do whatever you want to do [if not college]. We want you to keep going with that because that's what Jah would have wanted because he had the same goals. So everything you do you have to do it for him because he doesn't get the chance to do it. Okay? And if you need me, I'm here. I love all of you.*

The boys continued to sit silently, several close to tears, as Ms. Bloom's words landed on them. Mr. Donaldson echoed her message — "I think that's exactly where my heart's at too." Then he reiterated his earlier points about the plans for next week, and officially closed the meeting. The room was filled with silence for several moments, punctuated by a single sniffle.

As Mr. Donaldson stood up to leave, one student pulled out his phone to share the ABC news story that had aired the night before featuring several of Jahsun's friends

being interviewed outside of the school building. After Mr. Donaldson watched and congratulated them on representing themselves and Jahsun well in the interviews, he left the room, and the boys remained to hang out for the rest of the period. Pretty soon the hanging out turned into wrestling, which got a little more rough than usual – with guys grabbing each other by the neck while others grabbed their legs so that one person was being pinned down by multiple people. At one point, one boy fell to the floor and I worried that he might actually get hurt. I was surprised to see Ezekiel not participating, but instead still seated at a desk listening to music through his headphones and straight-faced. Ms. Bloom noticed this too and walked over to him, putting her hands gently on his shoulders. Eventually, when the bell signaled the end of the period, the group headed out and moved on to their regularly scheduled next classes.

Institutional Definitions of the Boundaries for Grief

As one week since Jahsun's death creeped toward one month, the divide widened between people in the school who were ready to move on and those who were still debilitated or in need of support. In this context, teachers continued to have to make decisions about what grieving behaviors looked like, how long it was appropriate to grieve, and who was really grieving. I heard numerous instances of teachers discussing with each other which students were "faking it," exaggerating their expressions of grief for attention, or "skipping all their classes because they can." There was at least one student who admitted later on that he had made up a story about his brother dying so that he could differentiate himself from his peers by claiming to be grieving *multiple* losses. Although this student was certainly an extreme outlier, many teachers seemed to fear that

they were being played by students who were only pretending to grieve, especially as time built a distance from the loss itself.

One afternoon in mid-December, two first-year teachers were chatting in the hallway about their view of the administration's handling of a recent student suspension. This reminded one of them about the issues he was noticing with grieving students in his junior and senior classes. Mr. Martinson, a white man in his late 20s who had just started teaching Social Studies at the school that year, referred to Jahsun's senior friend group when he said he thought the "grieving is going too far." He told Ms. Rossi, the new music teacher, also white and in her 20s, that the he felt students were using it as an excuse to not do work and skip class, and "teachers are buying them gourmet meals." He described what he witnessed the night before when he returned to the school building around 8pm after coaching an athletic event and was surprised to find several students still in the building, hanging out with a teacher and eating food she had bought for them. Mr. Martinson's story became a rant as he continued: "the system is tough on young Black men and they are going to face a lot of trauma, so you have to learn to keep moving after trauma…otherwise we're causing [dependency]." He said he still had several students regularly skipping class, but then he would find them laughing and playing in the hallway and they would say they were grieving. Mr. Martinson shared a specific example of a student who both teachers know who, as he described it, would "be looking at snap videos on his phone and then say, 'I'm grieving.'" The other teacher, Ms. Rossi agreed, chiming in, "it's been two weeks already. I tell them they need to go to the social worker if they say they are grieving and then I check in with her to see if they went, and if they didn't, then they're skipping class."

This is the stuff of these *hard hard* days – the weeks following Jahsun's death. From the perspective of some teachers, students should have made the transition from the traumatic event back to regular school life. There was no more need for hand holding or the extra tenderness of that first Monday back. No more excuses for skipping class or wandering hallways lost in thought or getting distracted in class. And any adults who continued to offer comfort or allow these behaviors to go unchecked could be accused of enabling, not supporting kids in developing their own resilience or toughness.

The disagreements between teachers about what constituted care and what constituted coddling continued to play out throughout the winter and spring. A group of seniors — about 15-20 of them — who were closest with Jahsun struggled through most of the rest of the school year. They acted out in class, causing disruptions that would derail lessons, or cut classes to hang out in the hallway by Jahsun's locker or in Ms. Bloom's classroom (even when she was busy teaching freshman science). Two factions of seniors also started to emerge and would engage in verbal sparring in classes, and roughhousing between friends also continued. At one point in the late winter, five seniors, all in Jahsun's tight circle of friends, were being considered for expulsion – though ultimately none of them were. Ms. Bloom expressed to me that she worried that these students had lost respect for the administration and that many of the disciplinary hearings she was privy to were not working because the administrators were "asking the wrong questions."

Students were sensitive to teachers' varied approaches, latching on to some teachers and rejecting others. Reflecting at the end of the year on Jahsun's circle of friends and the way teachers responded to them, the Principal offered:

> *I think they just showed the signs of their grief more outwardly, and almost like acted out in how they were processing and dealing with it. I think some of them became sort of* against *people in the building. One of the challenging pieces of all of it is that when kids are going through that, you have teachers that are going to extremes to care for them. Unintentionally, it creates sides, and so if you're someone who would do whatever to help a student, anybody that's not willing to do that is all of sudden not a good teacher or not a caring person. It's sort of like camped people into those groups…When someone like Ramell was acting out, and somebody like Ms. Wu that knows him will handle it in a way of like being concerned and caring, but then another teacher just as lovingly was like, "You can't continue to do this. You need to get yourself together." In the student's mind, it sort of became these are the people that are good, these are the people that are bad.*

Mr. Donaldson acknowledged that though each teacher might have good intentions, the students interpreted their actions differently, which fed some of the discontent in the building over time.

Even among the school staff who acknowledged that grief was an individual process and might look different for different people, there was a constant focus on trying to differentiate those students who were *really* grieving from those who were not. Mr. Gilbert, a veteran freshman literature teacher who was known by students and adults alike for his above-and-beyond efforts to connect with his students outside of the classroom by learning about their families and personal interests, put it this way:

> *[After Jahsun's death,] there was a lot of taking advantage of the grace that was provided. I think some students needed that grace, but I think there were also students who didn't. And they definitely pushed beyond boundaries….So then the question is are you trying to take advantage of something? Are you just trying to get out of class? Is this something you really need?*

Mr. Gilbert and other teachers wondered aloud to me as well as to his colleagues how many students were *really* continuing to experience debilitating grief several weeks and

months after Jahsun's death and therefore needed continued "grace" from the Boys' Prep community.

But Mr. Gilbert's question was equally about supporting suffering students as it was about identifying possible fakers. He asked, "If [a student] needs [support] for that long, what do we all do to help [him] to be a fully functioning student at this school? Is there outside counseling we can get for [him], or [can he] eat lunch with someone and talk once a week or something like that?" In a group interview with teachers at the end of the year, several faculty echoed this concern that there were never larger conversations among school staff about how they could support the students who were still in active mourning even once school life generally returned to normal. Ms. Cain asked, "if you want to have a bunch of one-on-ones with kids [to check in on them], where is the time for that? How long is it going to be between the time that this happened and there's some resolution?" She critiqued the current system which relied too heavily on the disciplinary team to resolve student crises that arose midday and failed to find ways to capitalize on the strong student-teacher relationships across the school building that could have served as a source of student support.

Memorial Events and Grief Groups

In the three weeks leading up to winter break, the normalcy of the school schedule was broken up by a small number of organized and impromptu grief-related activities in the school building. On the first Sunday in December, almost a week after students returned to school with the news of his death, Boys' Prep hosted an official memorial service for Jahsun, organized primarily by his family. A set of speeches, songs, and praise dancing in the cafeteria was followed by a balloon and dove release right outside the side

door of the school, and then a repast lunch back in the school cafeteria. Despite the thoughtful efforts to decorate the space with posters of Jahsun's picture and balloons and streamers in his favorite colors, Dr. Stephens discussed with the school's janitor that there should be "no trace of this" by Monday. He wanted to ensure that students would not be confronted with remnants of a memorial when they returned to school.

However, for some students, the decision to attend these memorial events had lasting effects. For instance, Omari, a senior who was very close with Jahsun had to miss work to attend the service, which led to him being fired from his job. He posted the text exchange with his supervisor to social media (Figure 5.1) with the caption, "Some people only care for themselves 🙏." In the exchange, Omari explained the situation to his supervisor, saying that he could not come in to work the following day because he had "a good friend who was shot [and] killed and tomorrow is his service." He was met with hostility and immediate termination, his supervisor telling him that "every weekend it is something." In the text exchange, Omari responded with polite frustration that his employer could not recognize his loss and grief: "I don't think you understand. I'm 18 years old and I just lost a friend to the streets and you're gonna fire me because I'm going through a tough time. I found out while I was at work…I could've left, but I stayed. I can't even get a sorry for your loss." He concluded by thanking the employer for the opportunity.

Figure 5.1 Omari's Instagram story. Screenshot of his text message exchange with his boss after he called out from work to attend Jahsun's memorial service.

The following week, Ms. Rivera, the school social worker, organized a group counseling session for Jahsun's closest friends. A counselor from a local non-profit facilitated a two-hour session with about fifteen students who were bused over to the middle school for the session (since there were no available classrooms in the high school). Later that afternoon, when the group had returned to the high school, I passed Ezekiel and another student who participated in the hallway and asked them about it. They told me it was fine, "they made us talk for two hours" which at first I assumed was a bad thing, but then they described liking it. I asked if anything was surprising and Ezekiel said that most of it was pretty expected except one of his friends saying that losing Jahsun had made him "mentally stronger." Ezekiel also clarified that this was not

the first time the group had talked about what happened and how they were feeling – "we talk about it every day, like how we're always going to be there for each other and that no one is alone."

Another student who attended the group meeting, Kaliq who was a junior and had only recently learned that Jahsun was actually his distant cousin, told me that the group was not as beneficial for him. He said they just sat around and talked about memories and what they were doing to cope. It was "probably helpful for others, but not for me... I'm already past it, it's not like it's my first time." Kaliq drew a comparison between himself and many of Jahsun's other friends who had not lost anyone significant to them before this. Indeed, there is research supporting an "inoculation hypothesis" that young people who "have not experienced bereavement or prior adversity may be at particular risk for health and adjustment concerns following the loss of peers," but those who have lost friends before may show less physical signs of distress (Andersen et al. 2013:8). Kaliq noted that many of Jahsun's friends who were going through this for the first time had told the group that their first feeling when they found out their friend died was sadness, whereas for Kaliq, "my first thought is who did it, where are they?" with anger and thoughts of revenge mixed into the sadness.

Hazeem did not attend this group session, but Ms. Rivera added him to the roster for the external counselor who came to the school for individual therapy sessions once a week. Hazeem said that his first session, his first experience with therapy ever, was "okay, but she asked a lot of questions." Herc, too, was on the counselor's roster in addition to the group sessions with the two male counselors. Throughout the remainder of the year, Ms. Rivera drew on a number of local resources to provide counseling and

mental health support for the students she perceived as most in need. To access these services, though, students would have to be identified by an adult in the building as in need or they or their families would have to know to request them.

The Unique Challenges of the Hard Hard Period

The swift transition from the collective institutionally sanctioned and structured grief practices of the *easy hard* day (the grief counselors, the extra room for students to gather, the disciplinary leniency, the comfort objects in each classroom, the schoolwide vigil) to the *hard hard* period's attempts at institutional normalcy reflects larger patterns within both modern society and American culture. Numerous scholars have argued that we have become increasingly uncomfortable with death, pushing a natural occurrence that was once public and part of communal life into the shadows. Death is now "compartmentalized from everyday life…[it] is clean, sterile, sanitized," and along with it, "grief has shifted from the everyday realm and no longer has a place in our society" (Cann 2014:2, 3). Shared grief rituals have become progressively shorter and people are forced to do most of their mourning in private. Grief that spills out too far into public view might be viewed as pathology or in need of clinical intervention (Breen and O'Connor 2007; Doka 2017; Granek and Peleg-Sagy 2017; Walter 2000). The U.S., our "denial of death" impacts the living (Aries 1981; Becker 1997) through barely existent bereavement leave policies for workers,[48] and often no formal policies for students in secondary school contexts.

[48] Bereavement leave in the U.S. is not mandated by any federal or state codes, and generally covers only up to three paid days for salaried workers and possibly no paid leave for hourly workers (Cann 2014).There have, however, been some recent moves toward changing bereavement leave policies in the US. For

In the case of Boys' Prep, as the school switched from a collective to an individual model of grieving, the sense of loss remained salient for many students. Ghosts still lingered in the school building – in hallways and classrooms and in students' memories. Grief continued to manifest for some boys in the form of physical ailments or bad dreams. Remaining outwardly connected to their loss also led to forms of social support and community. Though during this period their feelings of loss were most fully represented by the death of Jahsun, for many BP boys the experience of loss and grief was "constant" – Jahsun himself had used this word to describe the presence of death in his life when I interviewed him months earlier. Other peers and friends had died and, sadly, would continue to. As such, their grief was present and sustaining, and it was often impossible for them to disconnect from it or move on in ways the adults at Boys' Prep may have hoped or expected.

The school as an institution, on the other hand, had many incentives and pressures to distance itself from what happened and return to business-as-usual. This meant that over time, school policies guided by the urgency to return to educating students produced "normal" or "legitimate" timelines for grief that played out in academic and disciplinary protocols. These institutional timetables were somewhat arbitrary, based on the socially constructed schedule of the school year. They relied on days of the week, weeks of the year, trimesters, school breaks – rather than on the unscheduled and unpredictable nature of human emotion – and therefore existed at odds with many students' individual timelines of grief. The institutional grief timelines also often ran counter to professional

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instance, in the last few years, Facebook and several other major technology companies have increased the number of paid days off for bereavement leave (Brenoff 2017).

wisdom that "there is no timeline for grief" (Uplift Center for Grieving Children 2020), including the instructions offered in one handout teachers received: "Grief proceeds on its own terms. There is no set time frame. There are no firm stages. Children don't get over grief in a fixed amount of time" (Coalition to Support Grieving Students 2020). But this expert advice had to compete with other messages the school was constantly receiving about how behind their Black male students were in the American educational race and how much every school day counted in catching them up to their white and/or wealthier peers and giving them a fair shot at a college and social mobility.

Inside the delicate balance between clinical advice and pedagogical pressures at the school-wide level, teachers often served as the mediators of the administration, bringing the institutional policies and values to bear on students through their pedagogy, classroom management, and approach to their overall relations with students. These teachers experienced the dual pressures of their desire to be sensitive to their students' needs *and* their awareness that they themselves were being evaluated and policed by those above them based on how well their students met various benchmarks. In the middle of this disconnect between the students who were still in their grief and the school-level policy about returning to work, a difference of philosophy surfaced at the teacher level. Without explicit discussion or debate, two camps of teachers emerged on opposite sides. Each felt they knew what was best for their students, and each felt the *other* group of teachers was doing it wrong.

The first subset of teachers believed that they singularly recognized students' distress and aimed to accommodate their needs even when doing so required them to

work against top-down directives for business-as-usual. These teachers[49] – like Ms. Bloom, Ms. Cain, Ms. Kallum, Ms. Finn, Ms. Jordan, and Ms. Kim – quickly developed the reputation among students as caring and compassionate; even before this, many of them were the teachers students regularly pointed out as favorites. In the privacy of their own classrooms or through their individual relationships with students, these teachers allowed for and recognized alternative expressions of grief and offered emotional support in culturally-competent ways. They negotiated alternate homework deadlines, allowed students to disengage from class without penalty, and checked in regularly and persistently with boys about how they were feeling both in person and over text. Though these women's own personal cultural styles of coping were often different from their students' (most of them followed a typical middle class white feminine approach to expressiveness, sharing, and help-seeking), some of them still engaged in the boys' culturally-specific mourning rituals (such as purchasing and wearing RIP t-shirts and bracelets and attending candlelight vigils and balloon releases outside of school).

The other camp of teachers, however, saw these behaviors as coddling. They worried that masses of students were taking advantage of the situation or exaggerating their own grief to get out of full participation in school. And, further, they believed that students would benefit long-term from learning to become, as many put it, more "resilient." Like the administration, these faculty felt the immense weight on the school to drive achievement and therefore prioritized corralling students back into school

[49] Nearly all of the teachers who fell into this category were white women, though not all white women teachers fell into this category. Given the high percentage of white female teachers in the school, it is hard to say whether this is a pattern. It is certainly worth further exploration in future research designed more explicitly to study teachers.

routines and enforcing disciplinary order. To them, the important thing was to differentiate between the students genuinely in need of additional grief-related support and the emotional free-riders whose expressions of grief were insincere, for whom they had little patience.

Particularly within this camp of teachers committed to promoting resilience, there was a racialized tinge to their view of their students. Even among those adults who expressed authentic care for their students, long-ingrained stereotypes of Black boys persisted. At the same time as the boys were deprived of bodily and behavioral agency in the school building, they were often also viewed as adult-like in the expectation that they should be able to control and push through the emotional pain of loss. Unspoken stereotypes of Black manhood came out in BP adults' expectation that their students either had few emotions or that they ought to handle their emotions like adults. In this period of tremendous vulnerability, when the boys were probably confused and scared, and most in need of the wisdom that comes with age, they were expected by many adults in the school building to already behave like grown-ups.

All of this meant that for the boys themselves, not only did many of them have the unfinished business of grieving to attend to, but they also had to deal with the tensions simmering above them between faculty and administration and among the two emerging factions of teachers.

Whereas during the *easy hard* day, forms of institutional and informal adult support for students worked in tandem, during the *hard hard* period, students were exposed to differential and conflicting sets of norms or feeling rules related to their continued grief. Students traveled through a school day sometimes alternating hourly

between classrooms run by teachers they viewed as callous and uncaring and those who they felt 'got it.' Getting through the school day entailed negotiating two sets of clashing feeling rules – one institutional and one relational. The institutional rules, enforced by the administrators, disciplinarians, and one group of teachers, required that any student who was experiencing grief or any other kind of emotional rupture in a way that distracted him from schoolwork needed to explicitly articulate that and go through the correct channels to receive support. Any other forms of expression were disenfranchised and could be penalized through the regular disciplinary procedures. The relational feeling rules scripted by another subset of teachers and enacted in the private spaces of their classrooms and their one-on-one relationships with students allowed for more long-lasting and organic expressions of grief. As we will see in the next chapter, when even those spaces became more limited over time, continued expressions of mourning moved out of the school building and primarily into the peer-driven spaces of social media and the boys' own inner worlds.

CHAPTER 6 | The Hidden Hard: Private Grief, Ideas about the Future, and New Forms of Relationship

Everything be alright until I think about hitting my dawg up cuz I can't.
Ezekiel, senior

At first glance, Ms. Bloom's classroom on Boys' Prep's third floor looked like any other. Twenty-five metal desks with attached chairs arranged in small clusters throughout the room. Heavy textbooks, often frayed at the binding, piled up on the windowsills. An open-top trash bin near the front door brimming with empty bags of chips and Cheetos. In the back corner is Ms. Bloom's desk, almost invisible beneath the stacks of lab reports and quizzes to be graded. In another corner is a Chromebook cabinet to store and charge student laptops as well as a large cart on wheels with materials and supplies for conducting elementary science experiments. Taped to the wall above the teacher's desk beside the daily class schedule are several personal cards students had written or drawn for Ms. Bloom. On another wall is a bulletin board which Ms. Bloom had painstakingly decorated with a collage of photographs of BP students over the years in a formation to mimic a recent album cover by Philadelphia rapper, Meek Mill. On another wall is a large whiteboard, while another has a recently-installed Smartboard.

But there is more to the room. The wall opposite the windows had been painted with chalkboard red paint and decorated over the years – most notably, during Tyhir's birthday gathering the year before – with RIP messages in white chalk. Both Tyhir and Jahsun were represented on this wall several times over, along with a popular alumnus

who had committed suicide in early 2016 the year after graduating from Boys' Prep, as well as a few other names, alongside hashtags, hearts, and short messages. And above Ms. Bloom's desk, beside the cards were the obituaries and funeral programs of these same students. Well-liked teachers often post on their walls tributes from students and other material that attest to their affectionate relationships with their charges, but this classroom had the feeling of a memorial.

Over time, I felt the effect of the wall on me more strongly, and I have to believe many students did too. The summer before Jahsun's death, when the Smartboard was installed in the room, the classroom was reoriented to accommodate the new technology. Now the students' desks actually faced the red chalkboard wall. In effect, the memorial wall, so striking and moving when looked at detail by detail, became a permanent backdrop for their coursework (Figure 6.1). As students focused on lessons about math and biology, their eyes might move in a moment from the whiteboard with formulas they were learning to the Smartboard with the lesson plan for the day to the memorial messages on the wall. The memory of deceased Boys' Prep students had become the room's wallpaper.

The literally embodied metaphor of wallpaper represents the period of grieving at Boys' Prep that I am calling the *hidden hard,* which continued through the remainder of the school year. By January, the intensity of grief had subsided and both Tyhir's and Jahsun's deaths no longer entered everyday conversations or considerations at the school. Collective and outward expressions of grief had receded into the background of the school day. Yet an observer could not help but find plenty of evidence during this period that students' feelings of loss lingered – sometimes, as we will see, hiding in plain sight,

making it possible for students to dwell on or ignore depending on their depth of focus; sometimes coming and going in waves beyond their control.

Collective references to their shared losses would reemerge around key events in the calendar – birthdays, preparations for prom and graduation – and in physical spaces of significance in school building. But broadly, students' continued grief was pushed out of the school building during this hidden hard period. Still, most students continued to grieve, projecting their feelings out into the world through their smart phones and their social media apps.

Significantly, their grief would also show up at the year's end on their report cards and, in interviews with me, in their ideas about the future. For some, a debilitating sense of numbness or nihilism would stunt their academic progress; for others, conversely, it would renew and enhance a commitment to advancing their lives through school, sports, or pursuing college and other goals for the future. There were also some socially meaningful, even positive, outcomes during the hidden hard period, among them, principally, the strengthening of brotherhood bonds and the establishment of new forms of fictive kinship connections.

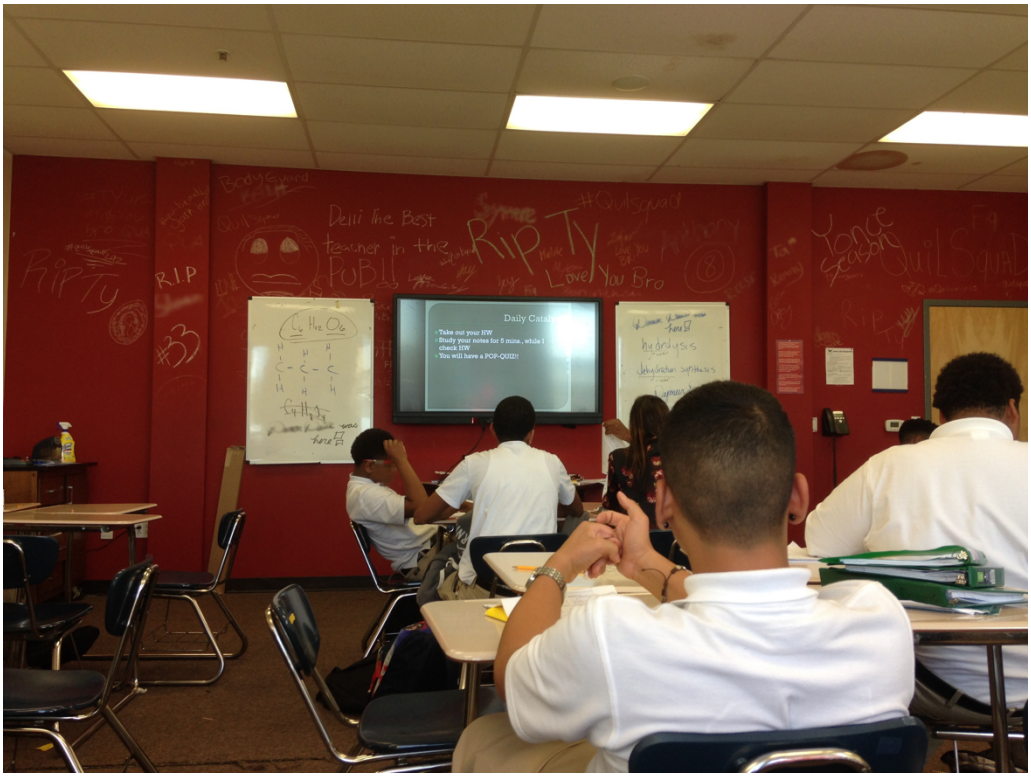

Figure 6.1 Ms. Bloom's classroom with the red chalkboard painted wall decorated with memorial messages to Tyhir, Jahsun, and others.

School Spaces

As weeks and months passed and the school year continued into the winter and spring, and even as the boys eventually endeavored to return to their school routines in accordance with the institution's norms and expectations, they acknowledged various spatial and physical reminders of their loss in school. Particular school spaces, like Ms. Bloom's classroom, remained significant for many people throughout the year in both meaningful and distracting ways. In part because of this memorial and in part because of Ms. Bloom, and the special relationship she had with many students, upper classmen would often congregate in her room during their lunch or free periods – even if Ms. Bloom was teaching a freshman class at the time. They would come and go from the

room freely and sit on the windowsill in the back or at her desk browsing social media on their phones, listening to music in their headphones, and/or working on homework while the class went on around them. This was just a part of the culture of the classroom and no one questioned it, though every once in a while Ms. Bloom would express frustration if the older boys in the back of the room were disrupting or distracting the learning experience for her classes of freshmen. I often wondered when observing in that classroom how these younger students, who did not feel a personal connection to any of the names on the wall, balanced the lessons on the board about hydrolysis or the instructions about the upcoming pop quiz with the loss conveyed in the messages on the wall.

Some of the students who regularly hung out in Ms. Bloom's classroom explicitly made the connection between their comfort there and "all that stuff in there" – including the wall of memorializations, but also the programs from students' funerals hung by her desk and a wall of pictures of students over the years. Tyrese, a close friend of both Tyhir and Jahsun, explained that being in the room with all of those memories "sometimes [feels sad], but then it makes you think [of] some good stuff. Can't just be sad all the time. Pretty sure [my deceased friends] wouldn't want you to be sad all the time, so sometimes you got to look at the good side." Another friend described that room as a place that "makes everyone feel better. Sometimes I go into Bloom's room to feel better."

In that classroom and others, students and teachers often pointed out to me which chairs or desks used to be occupied by Jahsun. Messiah, who played on the football team with Jahsun and shared several classes with him, told me that "when you get to school and you look at the chair he sat in, and not see him there, it hurts." Because Jahsun's

death occurred just before the start of the new trimester, when Boys' Prep classes came back in session, some rosters had been reshuffled and new courses had begun. This meant there might be new students' in the classes and classrooms where Jahsun had previously been; and sometimes they sat, unknowingly, in the chairs and desks he had used causing upset to some of his friends.

Jahsun's decorated locker also created complex territorial conflicts: the hallway near the locker became a hangout spot for Jahsun's friend circle. Many of them had lockers nearby, or had coopted unused nearby lockers in the immediate aftermath of his death, and would gather there in the mornings and after school. Some of them created personal rituals in which they would interact with Jahsun's locker in a special way each day. Ramell tapped Jahsun's locker each time he went to his own which was right next to it. Another student said he would take a moment to look at the locker before grabbing his stuff. Similarly, Kaliq explained that he "made it like a little ritual thing to come in here, go to where his locker at, say 'what's up' to him… Every day, before I leave, I tried to do like that [and] in the morning…I try to just think about stuff he'd say in the morning like I'd be like, 'yo, bro' and he'd be like 'yo, fat ass.'"

Bashir, who often got to school nearly an hour before classes began would pick up breakfast from the cafeteria and eat it on the floor of the hallway in front of his brother's locker. Sometimes Jahsun's older friends would join him for breakfast. Another student described a day when he unexpectedly sat in front of Jahsun's locker for the whole period caught up in memories of his friend. "Other days go on," he explained in contrast, "and it's like a normal thing…I walk by every time [and] I got used to it."

Though these rituals were meaningful for the students involved, one freshman who also had a locker nearby but had not known Jahsun, told me that he felt uncomfortable and "weird" being in the middle of all of these grieving rituals and activities each day. And Randy, a senior who had been friendly but not super close to Jahsun, was disturbed by seeing the decorated locker each day as he went to his own: "I look at it every day…It really just doesn't even feel real to me…It just feel like he went on vacation and just didn't come back."

Material and Bodily Markers

In addition to the physical memorials in the school building, both Jahsun's and Tyhir's friends continued to memorialize them in tangible, material ways on their own bodies with t-shirts, jewelry, markings on their shoes and bags, and images on their cell phones. Many boys talked about getting tattoos to commemorate their friend and by the end of the year, a handful of them had followed through. Embodying grief by marking it on the flesh is a popular practice particularly for marginalized grievers or those "whose deaths are not typically socially recognized"; a tattoo is a way of "carrying the dead with us in a world where death and the corpse are denied" and talking about death regularly is generally not socially acceptable (Cann 2014:15; Kirkland 2009). Further, a tattoo is a way to "establish the identity of the bereaved in a fixed and permanent way" and to give a "virtual afterlife" to the dead (Cann 2014:49); many of the boys viewed it as a sign of respect to their friend and way to ensure for themselves that they would always remember him.

There were many other, less permanent, markings too. Nearly all of the boys had t-shirts or sweatshirts commemorating their fallen friends. The shirts, worn under

uniforms or on evenings or weekends were a way to "maintain proximity" to the deceased and "unify survivors," marking the wearer of the shirt as part of the bereaved community (Bordere 2009:224; Cann 2014; Jimerson 2014; Johnson 2010b:368). Some boys talked about wearing specific colors that they knew their friends especially loved. During the baseball season in the spring, Khalil wrote Jahsun's name on the inside rim of his baseball cap and ordered new cleats with Jahsun's name and football number (18) inscribed on them. Most of Jahsun's friends also wore the red silicone wristbands inscribed with his name which were given out at his memorial service. Kaliq promised himself he would never take it off: "I [even] wash up with Jahsun on." Samuel similarly said that he has not found any occasions to remove his wristband: "it gets dirty too, so it needs to bathe too." Theo had one that the wore around his wrist "til it fall off" and another on his dresser wrapped around a trophy. Rajae also kept his wristband on his dresser alongside the "funeral paper."

Sybrii, who was still mourning the loss of Tyhir more than 18 months after his death, told me that he still wore the dog tag with Tyhir's picture on it. While he used to wear it under his school uniform, over time he realized that it "distracted" him while in school – "it made me get out of character, [get] upset." So instead, Sybrii's routine when he got home after school in the afternoon was to take off his school uniform and then put on the dog tag under his regular clothes. Tyshiem also kept his dog tag with Tyhir's picture hanging on the knob of his dresser so he would think of his friend "every time I open it." Their grief was mapped on to these material objects that they kept central to their daily lives.

Like the changing meaning of the dog tag for Sybrii, as the weeks and months passed, many of these physical reminders of loss changed in their salience. Jimmy, who kept a picture of Tyhir as the wallpaper of his phone, said that over time he found that he was not "really focused on looking at the picture but I just know the picture there." Others who had incorporated RIP or LL hashtags on the bio pages of their Instagram accounts would sometimes forget that they were there. One freshman whose locker was just a few feet away from Jahsun's related his experience to what he had seen on the TV series *13 Reasons Why* about the suicide of an adolescent: "I just think of it every now and then. You first notice the locker, like in *13 Reasons Why*, you notice the locker a lot when you're watching the first episodes, but when you're progressing, you don't really notice it. So it's just there." The spatial and physical reminders of loss gradually receded into the background, becoming a kind of wallpaper.

Return to Normalcy in the New Year

Despite all these tangible and material markers and reminders of loss throughout the school building and on students' bodies, life at Boys' Prep gradually returned to relative normalcy on most school days. By mid-December, Jahsun's friends were attending class regularly, chatting in the hallways about girls and weekend plans, and preparing college applications. When students returned to school in early January after the winter break, there was little public acknowledgement of what had happened just six weeks earlier. The school building bustled with the typical combination of laughter and joy, annoyances and frustrations, focused attention to work, and simmering disciplinary tensions.

The roughhousing and playfighting among Jahsun's close circle of friends slowed down and evolved into a form of playful bullying of underclassmen. Led mostly by Ezekiel, the group developed a handful of rituals that become a staple in the hallways throughout the winter. First, they came up with "ishka" – a meaningless word that they would yell to passersby (peers, underclassmen, even teachers) in the hallways. The rule of the game was that if the person replied with "what?" or "huh?" the instigator could then yell back at them aggressively. Once this game started spreading and people learned the "rules," they would try to catch themselves from the automatic clarifying response when hearing the jumbled phrase shouted to them. Mr. Pratt periodically got involved in the joking too.

A few weeks later, "ishka" evolved into another inside joke and display of senior power. During passing periods and after school in the hallways, Ezekiel and his friends would call out to unsuspecting freshmen and other underclassmen, "Did you ever get that paper signed?" When the target of the joke would look confused or ask what paper or form he was talking about, Ezekiel would point at him and laugh mockingly. After a few seconds of processing, most students would laugh too, but some would scurry off embarrassed to have fallen for the trick or still utterly confused. Ms. Bloom and I periodically joined in on the game if we were in the hallways at the same time as Zeek or his friends were playing.

Grief Online

As the space to publicly grieve in school became more limited and pushed further into the background, many of the boys continued to actively express their feelings of loss

and grief through social media posts mostly out of view of their teachers.[50] Online memorialization through posts on social media, the sharing of pictures, or interaction with the deceased's own past social media posts often employ a tone and type of language that is "strikingly different from the discourse of funerals and public mourning rituals" (Cann 2014:122). Instead of the formal language, past tense, and third person of these occasions, boys' memorializing interactions through social networking sites reflect an interest in maintaining continuing bonds with their deceased friends and extending the deceased's legacy (Irwin 2015; Klass and Steffen 2017; Neimeyer et al. 2006).

When students felt unable to fully express their emotions inside the school building, the world of social media – which played out simultaneously to the real world, co-existing in students' lives, and building on the social ties and networks developed in school – created and connected a community of grievers. Whereas in a funeral service and other public grief rituals, the friends of victims might be very low on the hierarchy of grief, and perhaps not even publicly recognized at all (Robson and Walter 2013), in online spaces, grief is democratized (Cann 2014; Rossetto, Lannutti, and Strauman 2015; Stein et al. 2019; Walter et al. 2012). Mourning on social media and the "a-temporal space of the internet" offered the boys a way to escape the socially imposed temporal restrictions of grief generally present in public life, and certainly present at Boys' Prep (Mitchell et al. 2012:428; Wagner 2018; Williams and Merten 2009).

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[50] Most Boys' Prep teachers did not "follow" their students on social media (at least not until they graduated from Boys' Prep), citing their obligations as mandated reporters if they were to see any illegal activity referenced in a student's post or their desire for clear boundaries with their students. However, there were a handful of teachers who *did* follow and interact with current students through Instagram – sometimes posting about their students, sometimes liking or commenting on their students' posts. Ms. Bloom and Ms. Kallum were the teachers I witnessed doing this regularly.

Sometimes the boys' online expressions of grief had no obvious source or trigger. For example, in an online post in December Ezekiel alluded to the way feelings of loss might arise unexpectedly when he felt the urge to call up Jahsun and remembered he could not. He wrote, "Everything be ard [alright] until I think about hitting my dawg up cuz I can't." Then again in early January, he similarly shared, "4 in the am I'm thinking about my brother 💔." Likewise, Rajae posted one early morning in late January that he was missing Jahsun because he just woke up from a dream about him.

Boys seemed to find particular resonance in their final memories with their friend. For instance, Kaliq posted in mid-February, "one of them nights…missing you badly dawg" alongside a screenshot of his final text message exchange with Jahsun a few days before he was killed. And Hazeem shared a story to Instagram that said, referring to Jahsun, "💔 losing you I lost a part of me 💔"; below this, he listed three phrases that he recalled were the last words Jahsun said to him, all expressions of support and encouragement (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Hazeem's Instagram story. Image of his feet with several captions including the last words Jahsun spoke to him.

A few weeks later, Hazeem shared a picture of the program from Jahsun's funeral with a long caption detailing how his grief had evolved in the months following Jahsun's death:

> *wassup bro I miss you my dawg❤️ [I know] you watching down on me mane…seeing me a couple months ago I was broken as shit my heart was shattered felt like the world stopped mane🤦🏾‍♂️ but listen bro [I know] you proud of me now knowing I'm doing better I felt them drugs alone like u always would tell me💯 [I know you] see me out here tryna stop being violent towards niggas but bro it's [too] much anger ima try [though] I just miss you my dawg me and Kaliq was just talking bout you and the shit you would tell us🙏 we miss you mane I'm still hurt but I'm tryna turn this pain into motivation [I know] you see me running it up even [though I don't lose] no money on the gram💪 just be w me every move I make💯 #LLJ❤️🤞 my dawg4life🙏*

Hazeem imagined that Jahsun would be proud of the progress he had made in repairing his broken heart, finding motivation, and avoiding destructive activities like drugs and violence. He asked Jahsun to "be with [him] every move [he] make[s]."

Others were prompted to post a message on social media when they noticed a time when Jahsun was *not* with them. For example, Omari's post from almost a year after Jahsun's death marked his location at a local movie theater with the caption, "I just saw Night School and I just cried becuz I ain't graduate with my whole gang." Despite the levity of the movie, for Omari, watching a movie set in a high school with a pivotal graduation scene reminded him of the loss of his friend and the fact that Jahsun never made it to his high school graduation. Below the caption, Omari added a message directly to Jahsun: "I miss you a whole lot gang 💔💯😓" (Figure 6.3).

Boys' online posts were often more frequent and expressive than were their acknowledgements of grief and emotional pain in non-digital social interactions. Though the popular narrative often holds that social media has a negative influence on young people's social lives, it may be that for marginalized groups like Black boys who face particularly restrictive and constraining expectations for their identity performances, social networking sites can offer a kind of social liberation. By articulating their feelings in writing for an Instagram post or story, boys may have been able to get more deeply in touch with their feelings and also acknowledge shared feelings with others.

Sometimes, online posts referenced IRL ("in real life") feeling rules or the self-silencing of emotions. Boys shared the way their grief, sadness, or other vulnerabilities might be covered up during in-person interactions by smiles or performances of

toughness. For example, Kaliq created an Instagram story with a photo of himself with a serious expression and the caption that he was "going thru da most shxt [shit] and I swear I never will show that I'm hurting," followed by the symbol 💯 meaning that he was *keeping it 100* or being fully honest. Others suggested that even when they were smiling, those expressions were hiding deeper feelings: Hazeem posted that he sometimes "smile[s] to hide the pain iont [I don't] say much"; Herc shared a picture of himself with a big smile and the caption, "laughing to hide all dis pain"; and Kaliq paired a photo of his smiling face on a school bulletin board acknowledging an award he won with the caption, "Still smile thru all the pain🤦🏾‍♂️" (Figure 6.4). Omari also frequently posted about the ways he might disguise his true feelings, like one action shot of himself from a football game with the text, "Hide The Pain Behind The Mask" and another post captioned, "You Can See The Wounds But The Pain Is Invisible." Though these posts expose boys' constant efforts to hide their true emotions, they do not actually reveal the subtleties or nuances of these emotions beyond descriptions like "hurting" or in "pain."

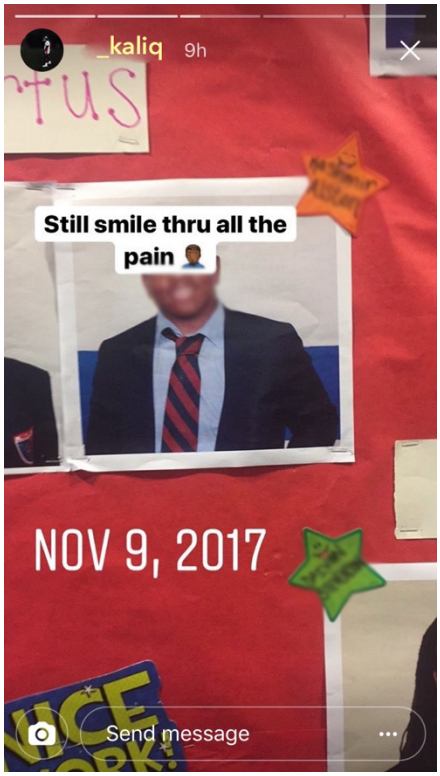


Figure 6.3 Omari's Instagram story. Image of his feet located at a movie theater with a caption about missing Jahsun.
Figure 6.4 Kaliq's Instagram story. Image of Kaliq's smiling picture on a school bulletin board for an honor he received, with his face covered by a caption.

Online, the boys might also confess to their social or emotional missteps in the face of loss. For example, at the end of his senior year, Rajae posted a picture of Jahsun and several of their shared football teammates with the caption, "Pushed a lot of people away when I lost you bro. Just wanna talk to you again 😢." Similarly, a full two years after Jahsun's death, Yaja shared a screenshot from his Twitter account with the tweet: "my anger has always been a reflection of how hurt I am, nobody understand that though." After the fact, social media functions as a repository to explain unhealthy grief responses that they have been able to reflect on in hindsight.

Enforcing Grief Timelines

In addition to these prosocial uses of social media amidst grief, there were also instances when boys policed the boundaries of the grieving community, questioning others' motives for posting or the frequency of posts. Outward expressions of grief that were viewed as passing "acceptable" or expected timelines could lead to different kinds of concern from others. Hazeem, for example, experienced both positive and negative feedback from the people in his life who noticed how often he continued to share online his feelings about the deaths of friends – even years later. For example, eighteen months after Tyhir's death, Hazeem continued to post text or images to memorialize him online as often as once a week. These posts sometimes graphically referenced death, such as using images of the coffin being lowered into the ground (as in Figure 6.6), while other times they were more expressive of a momentary thought or memory. One post from March 2018 showed Tyhir's legs and sneakers in the open casket with the caption "seeing you laying in the casket traumatized me 🤦🏾‍♂️ …that shit still fuck w me yark [you already know] I gotta plan for us and the rest of my boys ❤️💯" (Figure 6.5).

Hazeem's online posts sometimes led to offline conversations and support from his friends. For instance, on a Thursday in the early spring (not an anniversary, birthday, or other significant date that I knew of), Hazeem posted a story to Instagram that included a similar picture of Tyhir's open casket at the funeral with the caption, "Shit right here really fucked me up." His good friend Kaliq explained that when he saw the post, he called Hazeem up to check on him:

> *He probably was in the moment. He probably was thinking about [Tyhir]. Best thing I can do is call him like, "Yo, bro, you straight?" "Yeah." "I seen the post*

> *you posted" and stuff like that. He's like, "Yeah, bro. I just miss him," and all that. I'm like, "Right, we all do." That's how the conversation go. Then I'll talk about it more, then I'll try to switch the subject just to get his mind off it. I talk about, "so you trying to do this and the third after school" and stuff, just to get his mind off it because I don't want nobody thinking like that. I know if Ty still was here, he wouldn't want us crying over nothing.*

Hazeem's visible grief online triggered peer emotional support. Kaliq sought connection with Hazeem, but once on the phone, Kaliq tried to usher his friend back into more acceptable approaches to dealing with grief – that is, "get[ting] his mind off it" and not "crying over nothing." Kaliq demonstrated the perspective, like Denzel had the year before, that the strengths of their friendships and the care the boys had for each other did not require explicit conversations about their shared losses to be felt.

Figure 6.5 Hazeem's Instagram story. Image of Tyhir's legs in his open coffin (screenshotted from another person's post) with several captions about Hazeem's feelings about his death.

At the same time that his regular posting led to support from friends, Hazeem's online activity was policed by adults. Hazeem told me in an interview less than a month after Jahsun's death that his father had recently chastised him for posting "too much" on social media about the deaths of his two friends. Specifically, Hazeem interpreted his father's critique as him "grieving too much."[51]

This kind of explicit policing of grief came less often from peers. Only very rarely did the boys mock the expression of grief by peers. For example, Herc once posted, "I hate a nigga dat hop in his feelings on this app 🤦🏾" despite the fact that he himself often shared his "feelings" on Instagram. And another post from Antoine in May said, "Niggas be in they feelings pouring they heart on the socials" which was just as much an (accurate) observation as any kind of critique.

Temporal Significance and Anniversaries

A death creates new events on the calendar that punctuate the boys' day-to-day lives. There were now not only birthdays to celebrate and remember, but also death anniversaries to mark each year and even by the month. "One month/year down, a lifetime to go" was a common refrain when posting online about a death anniversary, suggesting that the mourners believed they would feel the loss for as long as they lived. Death anniversaries, as well as birthdays, created opportunities for boys to openly share their continued feelings of loss as it was evolving over time.

[51] This was not the first time that his father had been displeased by Hazeem's online presence; a few months earlier, they had gotten into a big fight because Hazeem posted a video of himself at a party where others were drinking.

The one month anniversary of Jahsun's death fell right around Christmas and prompted a number of Instagram posts like Omari' which said, "Damn Today, Christmas Day Makes [One] Month Since U Been Gone. Gonna Be Even More Hard To Get Through This Day And All The Days Ahead. Rest Easy Bro❤️💯🙏. Da Guys Living Through You Bro." There was another flurry of digital acknowledgements on the three month anniversary in February. Several of Jahsun's friends screenshotted a post from one of them and reposted it on their own page, as if one person posting reminded someone else that they should also acknowledge the date.

Tyhir's seventeenth birthday also occurred in February and, for the second year, was acknowledged by a visit to the school from his mother, two younger sisters, and other family members as well as a balloon release at the basketball court dedicated to him and a visit to the cemetery by several of his friends. Carter (2019:189) refers to the way mothers of homicide victims continue to care for their children by marking their birthdays and death anniversaries as a kind of "*restorative* kinship, one that asserts the value of those who have been lost by restoring their position within the family and community, in this world and the next."

At Boys' Prep, a handful of teachers also took on the restorative kinship mantle, affirming the value of Tyhir's life by continuing to honor it on significant dates each year. Ms. Bloom, as she had the year before, printed invitations to the birthday gathering that she delivered to about 20 students in their homerooms. The invitations, on pink card stock paper, cut and folded like a card, said "You are invited to celebrate the memory of Tyhir Barnes on Friday, February 2nd in room 308 @ 2pm (8th period)."

The night before Tyhir's birthday, Hazeem posted a picture of Tyhir's casket being lowered into the ground – an image he had posted several times before (see Figure 2.1) – with the caption:

> *damn lil bro time fly you be 17 tomorrow ❤️💯 miss you brodie ⛽ yark [you already know] we turning up for you tomorrow 💪🏾 #QuilSquad ⛽ I still remember the day I got that call saying you got killed leaving the ball game shxt [shit] fucked me up dawg I still can't believe it just watch over me every move I make 🙏🏾#LLT 💔🕊️everything I do is for you my boy👌🏾*

The following day, on Tyhir's birthday, Kaliq offered a similar sentiment:

> *7/12/2016 was one of the worst Days of my life 😪! Seeing you in that casket was also the worst thing I had to witness. I never experienced [nothing] like that b4. We lost a very genuine friend and brother 💔. Today you would have been 17yrs old 😏 out here doing ya thing! I'm sure of it. Ty I miss you badly bro 😓. But I know you up there with Jah watching over us and knowing that I know I'll be ard [alright] down here💯. But HAPPY 17th birthday boy 🕊️❤️ I love you gang #LLTY 🖤🖤🖤 forever. We going [to] Turn up for you today my G 💯*

The emoji for the red gas pump referred, in this case, to get "turned up" or celebrating. And Tyhir's group of friends did, indeed, turn up that day in honor of their friend.

Tyhir's Birthday

Death also necessitates a new way to celebrate birthdays. For the second year now, Tyhir's birthday was an event at Boys' Prep. About 1:30pm, Tyhir's mother, two younger sisters, and aunt arrived at the front door and were ushered up to Ms. Bloom's classroom where the party would be held. Ms. Bloom had run out to pick up the pizzas and soda, while Ms. Kim and I waited in the room keeping an eye on the birthday cake with a printed picture of Tyhir in the center and the words "Happy Birthday, Tyhir" scripted in frosting. The picture, taken a few months before he was murdered, showed Tyhir standing on the sidewalk in his favorite red sneakers, looking down and off into

space, holding a single balloon. This brief moment, captured on film and now printed in edible frosting, showed Tyhir's youth but also a glimpse of the ways his face might have aged if he had gotten more years. It was an image often reposted by his friends in their Instagram messages of love and commemoration. Tyhir's family gathered around the cake, admiring it. Ms. Kim made a comment about celebrating 17 years and Tanisha looked up, without changing her expression and said, "I would rather go into his room and punch him 17 times than be here."

Dimere was the first student to arrive in the classroom; he was suspended that day, but made his way somewhat surreptitiously into the BP building in his street clothes and a hoodie. He hugged each family member and then sat down quietly at one of the desks in the back of the classroom. Mr. Donaldson walked into the room soon after to introduce himself to Tyhir's mother, Tanisha and seemed to make a point to pretend not to notice Dimere who technically should not have been allowed in the school building while suspended. While they waited for the other students to arrive, the family continued looking around the room. Ms. Bloom had dozens of photos of students hung on a bulletin board and Tyhir's mother seemed pleased to see several images of the various memorial events for Tyhir as well as pictures of him while alive. Meanwhile, one of her daughters noticed the markings and messages still on the wall from the party the year before. She pointed out her own name and called out, "it's still there," with a big smile. Tyhir's aunt, seated by now and leaning against the wall, despaired, "it's not getting any better."

They were interrupted by the bell which signaled the end of the class period. As the hallways flooded with students moving between classrooms, those who had been invited to the party began to enter the room, including at least two boys who no longer

attend BP. Most boys walked over to the family and offered greetings and hugs before taking a seat at one of the desks throughout the room or on the windowsill. As the next bell marked the beginning of 8th period, there were 19 boys in attendance – fewer than the year before, but the room still felt full and lively. Ms. Bloom and Ms. Kim signaled to each other that it was time to get started, and Ms. Kim opened up the space by thanking everyone for being there and noting that it was good for them to gather to remember Tyhir and celebrate him. When she asked if anyone wanted to share a reflection, Herc was the only one to do so. He spoke for a minute or two about Tyhir being "a good brother" to him, some of the memories they shared, and how much Herc still missed him. After a bit of silence when no one else spoke up, Tanisha took them off the hook thanking them all for being there and then asking the gathered teens how they were doing, and posing the question: "do you look at life differently knowing you could be here one day and gone the next?" There were a few mutterings from around the room, but no one offered to share a public reply. Ms. Kim closed out by sharing her thoughts that Tyhir's "spirit is still in this room. I can feel it…we're still spoiled by his love and presence" and she suggested that the boys continue to "love on one another."

Once these formal conversations were concluded, the boys were invited to eat pizza and just hang out. The celebration had been marked by being together – school friends and family members – and by sharing memories that would keep Tyhir alive in his community's minds. As others around him got up to grab slices and pour themselves cups of soda, Denzel, still seated at his desk, said wistfully and to no one in particular, "I can't believe it's been two years."

Fifteen minutes later, once most of the pizza had been finished, Ms. Kim invited everyone to gather around the cake to sing happy birthday. There was a discussion between two students about who had a louder voice to lead the singing, but eventually someone interrupted by just beginning the song and others joined in. The traditional "happy birthday" song was followed by "how old are you?" sung to the same tune – in between each line, a few of the boys yelled out "17!" – followed by "may God bless you." As they stood in a semi-circle around the cake, Tanisha, some of the teachers, and several of the boys videoed the moment on their phones. While some of the boys were actively engaged in singing with smiles and laughter, and arms wrapped around each other, others looked a little out of it standing, swaying, or pacing in the background hands pushed deep into their pockets. Some moved between these two states in the space of the song.

Ms. Kim cut the cake, careful to cut first from the perimeter to avoid cutting into the picture of Tyhir. Tanisha and her family stayed long enough for her daughters to eat a slice, and then they took a quiet exit. When the next bell rang, marking the end of the school day, Ms. Bloom and Ms. Kim and a few other teachers who had stopped by began cleaning up and rearranging the desks, but several students remained in the room to hang out. The usual excess energy of a Friday afternoon combined with pizza, sugar, and an event charged with such mixed emotions created an unusual scene. A few seniors started wrestling with each other, in one case rough enough to crack one boy's cell phone. Others were standing around the cake contemplating if they could eat any more of it before they would have to cut into Tyhir's face.

Jonquett and Latrell arrived in the midst of this and sat with Herc; Ms. Bloom had saved them pizza. As they ate, I tried to catch up with them on their lives since they had both left the school. I asked them if they missed Boys' Prep, and they both laughed in disbelief that this was even a question. Latrell proudly proclaimed that in his new school he was a star student *and* he got to "go to school later, leave earlier, and there's girls." Jonquett acknowledged that he was not getting the highest grades in the school, like Latrell, but he was definitely doing better academically than he had been at BP. Additionally, he was working at McDonald's and had a number of girls in a rotation.

When I asked what they were all planning to do later to celebrate Tyhir's birthday or otherwise, they told me matter-of-factly that they would go smoke (marijuana). Then they looked at each other, giggled, and asked if I wanted to smoke with them. Though I had not spent much time with students outside of school, I thought this might be a good opportunity to see how their behavior might be different beyond school walls and to continue to catch up with Jonquett and Latrell whom I no longer saw regularly since they left BP. I said I would join, but I would not participate. They rolled their eyes and laughed at me.

Once Herc, Jonquett, and Latrell finished eating, we all gathered our things and headed to the lobby. As we walked out the front door of the building, they asked if I drove today (depending on my other obligations that day, I would alternate between driving and public transportation). I told them I had opted for SEPTA that day and Herc promptly responded with a smile, "that's taking risk, there's Black people on the bus, ghetto people." He paused and then added, as if almost serious, "you strapped?" I laughed this off as we walked away from the school. When we reached the corner store a

block away, the boys realized they needed rolling papers and asked if I would go in and buy them. Luckily for me, since I was uncomfortable with this, we spotted other BP students in the store and I told them, for that reason, I could not do it. I waited outside with Latrell and Jonquett while Herc went in to make the purchase. Then we preceded up the block, and turned down a very narrow walkway between two houses leading to another narrow walkway that separated the fenced in back-yards of the houses on both sides – a spot the boys said they frequented.

Herc hooked his bag to the fence and reached into his pants to pull out his stash of weed, which he kept in a small white cardboard box (the kind jewelry comes in), wrapped in saran wrap and many layers of fabric softener (to disguise the smell). Jonquett also had his own stash and the two rolled one joint each. I started to joke with Herc that his method of storing weed was so clever and I wondered what would happen if he put that much energy into – but before I could finish my sentence, Herc interrupted me: "don't say 'school!'" The other two laughed and nodded, acknowledging that they also knew that was what I was about to say because I was so predictable. "School doesn't get me bread," he offered matter-of-factly while rolling the joint. "I mean maybe in the long term--" and then Latrell chimed in, "but we might not be here long term." The other two nodded in agreement.

As they smoked – passing the two joints between the three of them – I continued bugging them with questions. "What does it feel like for you to be high? What do you like about it? Herc tried to articulate it, "I feel like I'm married" and then paused extra long for effect, "…to weed, like I'm in love." They all laughed heartily and Herc was clearly proud of his joke disguised as an observation: "Write that down, that was good. I

just came up with that." Jonquett added that he felt like he was "floating." And then Herc, again, "I don't like myself when I'm *not* high."

After they finished the two joints, the boys promptly gathered up their things and headed back out of the alley to the street. Jonquett had to go to work and Latrell and Herc were going to hang out at one of their homes until it was time for Tyhir's balloon release at the basketball court in the early evening. As Jonquett and I waited together for the public bus, trying to stay warm in the frigid weather, he told me that he had decided it was not worth going to school that day since he knew he would have to leave early to make it to BP for the celebration. Instead, he had been smoking on and off since 8am. "I still think about Ty every day…but I'm not as upset anymore, I know how to control those feelings."

Coping Mechanisms

When there were no more formal or institutional outlets for the boys to make their losses public and share in them with others, they found ways to cope with their strong feelings alone or with small groups of friends like Herc, Jonquett, and Latrell. They often described strategies that included sports and physical exertion, music (both listening to it and making their own), distracting themselves with friends and laughter, sometimes using substances like marijuana or alcohol, and even retail therapy. In one conversation I had with Theo and Owen, both close friends of Jahsun, they shared back and forth a few of their favorite strategies to cope with grief:

> *Theo: Friends. Family. Or, like, I might just go play. Just go outside. Go play ball or something, get it off my mind. Go for a run.*
> *Owen: Smoke a L (laughing)*
> *Theo: (laughing) Or buy something.*

Like Theo, Kaliq also found that physical activity helped him deal with strong emotions. He posted a picture to Instagram of his shadow on an outdoor basketball court, with the caption: “Where I leave all my anger at.”

Other boys talked about making music as an outlet for their emotions. Ezekiel, Ramell, and some of their other friends wrote and recorded several rap songs together. Several dealt with themes of early death and gun violence, but one in particular was titled “Jah Anthem” and was dedicated to Jahsun, retelling their feelings about losing him. Owen, one of their other friends, noticed that for Ezekiel especially the music was a productive outlet for him. Owen said of Ezekiel: “He got more ambition and drive. Like even with the music, like he wasn't doing music as much. But like ever since Jah, he been like stepping up. Like his music got way better.” Similarly, Ramell acknowledged that, for him, his increased interest in music also came as a result of his friend’s death. He talked about the possibilities he imaged for the future: In addition to hoping that he made it to graduation, he also hoped to “make it in rapping. I got a passion for it, but I don't know. I'm stuck in between if I want -- if I really wanna take it serious or if it's for a right now thing. Because I really wasn't even gonna rap until Jahsun died. My first song was about Jahsun.”

Other peers who were not as close with Jahsun also found making music to be a helpful tool for coping. Senior Randy explained, “Nowadays I really don’t even get upset. I don’t know if I just holding it in and I don’t know it or something. I really don’t get upset. I just write music. That’s what I do. I go to school, do my work, do homework, and write songs. I think that’s how I cope, really.” Samir similarly told me that he “thought about therapy, but I found out music is my therapy. If I sit down and I start to make

music for an hour or I listen to music for an hour, I'll be fine." Some boys identified specific songs that help them. Matthew, now a junior, said, "I literally go to my two go-to albums when I'm feeling down or sad or something: J. Cole '2014 Forest Hills Drive' or Drake's 'Nothing was the Same' album….I don't know why, but…those two always just calm me down." For Messiah, listening to two songs by Philadelphia rapper Meek Mill about loss, "Lil' Nigga Snupe" and "Traumatized" helps him "turn that emotion and anger into motivation to push me to go harder."

Besides music, the most frequently and explicitly discussed tool for coping with their grief, however, was smoking marijuana. In conversations with me and in posts on social media, several boys discussed their use of marijuana as a strategy for dealing with unresolved emotions or emotional pain. Tameron, a senior, told me that he started smoking "heavy" after some challenges at home, including an eviction, as well as his grief after losing Jahsun and other friends: "So just like from close friends passing or whatever or if I'm feeling a little down sometimes then I--that's when [the smoking] get heavy….When it first happen, it was kinda affecting school, but that's when the heavy part came in, I was smoking and stuff." When I asked him if he had other strategies for dealing with his emotions, he said:

> *I mean, I could cope regularly without it, but with that it's just…more quicker…. Because, like, every day I still cope with certain stuff. But I just do it…to get in the right mindset, just succeeding….If you want to cry about a situation right now, [but] you not gonna get nowhere, basically. There's a point where you got out your feelings or whatever, and it's time for you to be serious now, really go in. …That's when I smoke though. That's kinda my way.*

Smoking was a "quicker" way to cope than other "regular" ways Tameron could imagine. Other boys described smoking, especially by themselves, as a way to honor their friends

and sit calmly with their memories. For example, Jai described how he would use some of his alone time to "smoke…and think about [my friend]. It would still keep me in a position where I don't gotta break out or just snap out about things, but then I gotta still think about them, you know. Just in a memory type way." Smoking calmed him down and allowed him to focus his thoughts on loss on memories rather than allowing them to become anger or aggression.

Online, many boys also wrote and posted images of themselves describing marijuana as a coping strategy for dealing with their emotions. Hazeem posted an image of himself holding a joint of marijuana with the caption "just to ease the pain" (Figure 6.7) and Ezekiel shared a message on his story, "I can't believe my brother Jah died before the deal game that's why sometimes I get high so I can't feel pain." Others periodically posted pictures of themselves smoking what appeared to be marijuana with captions about missing lost friends. Though drinking seemed to be a less frequent strategy, there were a few times when students posted about alcohol as a coping mechanism, like in Kaliq's picture of him holding a bottle of liquor with the caption: "I need a drink rn [right now]…I'm hurting."

Figure 6.6 Hazeem's Instagram story. Image of him holding a marijuana joint in his hand with a caption.

The boys' reliance on drugs or alcohol to "dull the pain" aligns with previous research on young men's coping strategies and self-medication after the deaths of friends or other forms of traumatic stress (Creighton et al. 2016; Rich and Grey 2005; Vaswani 2014) or as an alternative to talking to others or seeking professional mental health resources for a problem (Lindsey and Marcell 2012). Creighton and colleagues (2016:57) also find that for some young men becoming intoxicated or high "*facilitated* or excused expressions of sadness [about a friend's death] that might be considered outside masculine norms." Being drunk or high can provide cover for expressions of grief or other emotions that might normally be socially sanctioned by peers.

Brotherhood

An increased sense of brotherhood bonds also became more evident during the hidden hard period and as school life returned to relative normalcy in the winter and early spring. For Jahsun's friends, their loss brought them deepened bonds and brought previously peripheral friends closer together. One of Jahsun's football teammates told a news crew that came to film one of their games:

> *Losing Jahsun, it brought the team together because we realize we got to value the time that we have with each other. When I come out on the field, I know that he's out there with us, over top of us, he's paying attention to us. He's always a constant thought in my head.*

Other boys shared a similar sentiment, like junior football teammate Khiseer who said that the losses shared at BP "only make my boys stronger, like bringing more people together." He added that the worry in the back of their minds that one of them might die too makes them enjoy "our moments together. I feel like we're just building stronger bonds…like the brother-ship and bonds here."

Ramell, Jahsun's good friend who was often at odds with school staff over his behavior, also acknowledged a change in feelings of closeness across the school:

> *Before people start dying, we used to hear people say they wanted to leave [the school] all the time and all that, but…all these people dying just bring everybody closer together. It really makes us a brotherhood like how [the school] was trying to in freshman year. [It] really wasn't working, but now somebody died and it really bring everybody closer. So they got this brotherhood stuff that they wanted. They got it.*

For Ramell, the brotherhood that resulted from students dying was close to what he perceived that school administrators and teachers had been trying to foster within his senior class since their freshman year.

Another student who had not been part of Jahsun's tight circle of friends also found that the experience of shared loss helped him find connection with classmates he had previously not felt close to. Justin told me in an interview:

> *We should still celebrate the great times that we had with Jahsun and we should still celebrate that even though he died, it still brought us even closer as brothers. 'Cause now I'm friends with boys that I wasn't even really wanting to hang out with. But, I'm friends with y'all now and we here together. So, instead of ... y'all could still be sad and stuff, but we should still, at the same time, show that same celebration for him, because he was a great student athlete, he had a great effect on people. So, you know, we should still use that, celebrate on that and use that for us on our everyday lives. That way something like this won't happen.*

He went on to reference specific seniors with whom he had never really talked before, but now they had a more an amicable relationship brought together through this experience.

Peer groups, of course, serve as a crucial site of social and emotional support for youth. Studies of friendship among Black boys are relatively rare (Dimitriadis 2003) and those that do exist are often premised on assumptions that those friendships are gang-related or otherwise detrimental (Haynie, Soller, and Williams 2014; Way, Chu, and Kimmel 2004). Further, some of the research on friendships among youth of color in violent contexts proposes that violence heightens distrust among peers, limiting the emotional openness of relationships (Anderson 1999; Jones 2004; Tack and Small 2017). At Boys' Prep, I certainly heard many discussions of trust – who could be trusted, how to differentiate between a friend and an "associate," and that sometimes to know if you could trust someone your friendship had to be tested. However, in the aftermath of Jahsun's death, I saw many more instances of boys coming together than distancing themselves from each other.

Indeed, other researchers have found that boys' friendships can create space for emotional intimacy and protection from harm (Harding 2008, 2010; Way 2013). Even in violent situations, many young men refer to their friends (or fellow gang members in some cases) as family, suggesting that these relationships are strengthened rather than threatened by precarious situations (Jackson 2018; Oware 2011; Venkatesh 2008). Boys in violent contexts may make decisions to "stick together" to help each other avoid bad influences and pursue future goals (Brooms 2019) and young people who feel less constrained in sharing their thoughts or feelings about a violent incident with others are better able to recover (Ozer and Weinstein 2004). Further, in some cases, the idea of brotherhood can offer freedom "to violate some of the dominant cultural tenants of manhood [such as] emotional inexpressiveness and independence" (Jackson 2012:63).

In the case of Boys' Prep, adults also observed the new and strengthened bonds that emerged in the aftermath of loss. Jahsun's friends became "like family," Ms. Bloom observed. "They just got really close….They're together all the time, they're texting all the time." Students' parents also saw changes happening with their sons. In a focus group with three mothers, one shared what her son expressed to her after experiencing the shared loss of schoolmates:

> *My son said, 'Now I can't leave Boys' Prep because we've suffered this together and now, we're family.' And that's very sweet and it's very poignant until I realized he was 16 at the time. You shouldn't have to suffer at 16 to bond you, you should be able to play ball to bond you. So I think part of that is just him trying to figure out what box to put it in. He doesn't have the tools to deal with this level of grief personally. They know death, but they don't know grief.*

This mother acknowledged that although her son is now intimately experienced with death, he had not – and should not have to this early in life – developed the skills to fully

deal with his grief. She was moved by his feelings of closeness towards his classmates, but troubled by the source of those feelings.

Motivation

In addition to deepened social ties, boys also reported gaining renewed personal motivation through their experience of loss. Indeed, we know that it is often through social relationships that young men who are struggling are able to transform and reroute their lives (Jones 2018), though it is unclear whether the one-way relationship with a deceased friend has similar positive influences (Neimeyer et al. 2006). About five months after Jahsun's death, Theo reflected on the way losing him "motivated [me] more. Like knowing that it was more stuff that [Jahsun] wanted to do, it's like motivating me to do what I want to do. Make sure I get what I want to do, like, done. Like, achieve my goals and stuff." Khiseer similarly expressed that losing two friends he cared about "made me value life more and made me wanna work harder to get where I need to be and do what I need to do while my time's still here." While some students specifically referenced academic motivation and grades or athletic achievements as the target of their renewed motivation, others felt a more general sense of wanting to live more fully. Senior Tameron, who had lost other friends from his neighborhood during the year as well, had a mantra, "We took so many losses, I wanna shine like the bosses," which suggested that he saw a connection between the future success he hoped for and the losses and grief he was enduring.

On social media, many of the boys marked the moments when they followed through on their intentions to succeed on behalf of their friend. Boys would regularly post from, for example, the location of a basketball court that they were "balling for Jah" to

signal that they were dedicating their practice or game to their friend, or finding motivation in their memory of him (for example, Figure 6.7). In February, as the wrestling season neared its conclusion, Rajae posted an Instagram message directed at Jahsun:

> *Next week is the all pub tournament. Remember you bet me when I told you I was gonna go undefeated in the regular season and all pub tournament. I went undefeated in the regular season and the tournament Saturday. When I win [does your younger sister] pay me 😭😭😭 [?] But [for real] I dedicated this season to you and I'm gonna show out for you bro. Love you ❤️🚀. #TunnelVision*

Similarly, Khalil wrote in an extended post on Instagram that "after losing you to something senseless, the guys decided to do everything in your honor." He added a message about his own successful athletic season: "Jah you won't believe it I went to the 2nd round of states for baseball this year and even though we lost I knew you would be hype for me to hear that good news."

Jahsun's circle of friends in the senior class also acknowledged the motivation they got from him as they selected their colleges and made plans for the future. On College Commitment Day in May, Yaja posted the logo of his college with the caption "Excited for the next chapter of my life and ever senior life ‼️ #4Jah #4B❤️ #committed" followed by the name of the college he would be attending. The hashtags referenced Jahsun and his other close friend who was killed that year, both of whom he was dedicating his college decision to (Figure 6.8).

Other students found a kind of moral meaning in their loss. On the back of a card written to Jahsun after he died, one student wrote: "Side note: You told me to stop

cheating on my girl and that's exactly what I'm going to do." The death of someone who had offered him good advice became motivation to finally follow that advice.

Figure 6.7 Omari's Instagram story. Indication of his location at a basketball court and a caption and hashtag signaling that he is playing basketball in honor of Jahsun.
Figure 6.8 Yaja's Instagram post. The logo of the college he planned to attend with hashtags indicating that he was doing so in memory of his friends.

What Jahsun's friends said echoed much of what was said the year earlier by Tyhir's friends. They also reframed the loss to serve as motivation for their own actions, behavior changes, and future plans. Sybrii, for example, found that losing Tyhir made him more resolute in his future plans. He reflected:

> *[What has changed is] me getting tougher skin, and like, doing what I was supposed to do, like with my dreams and stuff like that. Like, now I have to do it because I'm going to do it for them. Honestly, like, before it was like, alright, this would be my dream so I hope I could do it, but* now *it's not hoping, it's like I* can *do it. I could do this, I could do that. Like I just got to put hard work in it, so I am going to do it to show [my brother] that I did it and I did it with him, and I did it for him.*

For Sybrii, his goals were now not only for him, but also for Tyhir – and aided by the memory of him.

Similarly, Jimmy told me that rather than talk about what happened to Tyhir, he just tried to "succeed for my bro." Kaliq also shared the sentiment that losing Tyhir gave him motivation to achieve his own goals:

> *Tyhir being killed, it motivated me in a different way. It made me think about the decisions I was making, and made me want to be a better person for myself and for Tyhir at the same time…. I mean, that's why I fell back from all the dumb stuff I was doing, going around just fighting people for no reason, stuff like that. I just fell back from all that because that made me realize a person my age can go like this….Now he can't do what he wanted to do. It was like, I got to do it for him and make myself better. That motivated me differently knowing that me being the age I am, I can get killed at any given time of the day just like Tyhir was….I know that's all [Tyhir] wanted to do with his rapping career [was be successful]. He wanted to be signed, have millions of dollars and all that. That motivates me. I see him trying, I see him really trying to make something of his life. He can't do that no more, so now it's like I got to step up.*

In the first part of his reflection, Kaliq acknowledged that Tyhir's murder gave him a different perspective on some of the "dumb stuff" he was doing. He realized that there were risks to picking fights with people the way he had previously and decided to "fall back from all that." Then he reflected further that because Tyhir was no longer able to accomplish the goals he planned for himself, Kaliq felt more motivated to "step up" and try to reach his own goals for his friend.

Caleer described a similar response, but was able to pinpoint more specific areas of his life where he found that memories of Tyhir and personal rituals he constructed to keep a connection to him helped push him forward:

> *Every time I listen to his music, I just zone out. Because hearing his voice will always give you that push to keep going and keep driving to success. Keep striving for success…When I think about him it motivates me. Every time before a basketball game, I always would think about him. Or I do what he used to do ... I wrote his name on my New Balances… and I just kiss that…and I polish my sneakers. School too. I think about him in school. He taught me how to actually write better. Because he used to write music, so he told me how to get thoughts on paper quicker and easier, and how to really express yourself or one's self period. He told me the key to it is while you're writing, try to clear your head of any bad thoughts or any thought of that kind and just write. So that helped me write a poem. It helped me write a 10-line poem in Mr. Gilbert's class.... I wrote it about basketball, and a game that we had where it was like 10 seconds left and we won off a buzzer. I wrote about that. I wasn't thinking about nothing, I just wrote and kept writing and it worked.*

In both sports and school, Caleer was able to find strength in his connection to Tyhir and draw on the specific skills that his friend had taught him while he was alive.

From the teachers' perspectives, their students' motivation was not always obvious. In a focus group, two teachers who had close connections with many grieving students discussed their perceptions of their students' emotional response to losing friends:

> *Ms. Wu: I think that it's almost become just this like commonplace expected thing that you're going to lose a couple of friends here and there throughout your time here and in school. And you just kind of keep going afterwards. So I think the majority of the students who I've talked to and I'm close with…it's not like oh I'm not going to do anything because what's the point, and it's also not, I have to do this for him, it's just like, I'm going to keep doing what I know is right and what I need to do for myself. …I like that they're using themselves as the motivators and not necessarily this traumatic experience.*

> *Mr. Gilbert: It seemed like in terms of their own self-preservation, they kind of put those hurts behind them as quickly as possible in a lot of ways, because what's the use of dealing with this, because it does happen enough.*

Both teachers acknowledged that their students had gotten used to the experience of peer loss, and had developed strategies to cope with a somewhat regular, expected experience. From Ms. Wu's perspective, these losses did not necessary provoke motivation or fatalism, but rather a refocusing on themselves. Mr. Gilbert saw students' behaviors of moving on quickly as "self-preservation." Though, because neither of these teachers actively or regularly observed their students' activities online, they may have underestimated the amount of continued public grieving, whether as a source of motivation or not.

There was, however, one student in particular whom several teachers pointed to as a prime example of how one could turn a loss into a source of significant life changes. In a focus group, Ms. Bloom described Matthew who was now a junior:

> *I look at Matthew…He is someone who took what happened with Tyhir and used it as motivation to improve in every single [way]. He was goof [before, and] he is still goofy [but] he is on the court and in the gym all day long. He then he does his work. He wasn't working at this caliber before….There's so many other guys that just shut down.*

Matthew himself echoed this in an interview conducted by some of his peers. He explained that aspects of his academic and athletic motivation and successes could be directly attributed to the friends he lost:

> *It motivated me better because like, when it happened, I had a lot of anger and stuff. Now, I just take it all out on the court and shit….I don't think I would have ever done some of the stuff that I did if I wouldn't have lost people. Like, that shit helped me strive and go harder for them people that passed.*

Matthew's words seemed to also match his actions and achievements. Though his average grades across all of his classes took a dip the first trimester back at school after Tyhir's death, he recovered quickly and was able to maintain a stable level of

achievement throughout the rest of years at Boys' Prep (Figure 6.9). Matthew had not known Jahsun well and, though he was impacted abstractly, like everyone at Boys' Prep, it was not as much of a personal hit as Tyhir's death had been. By the start of his junior year, Matthew's grades were higher than they had ever been and he had become an honor roll student.

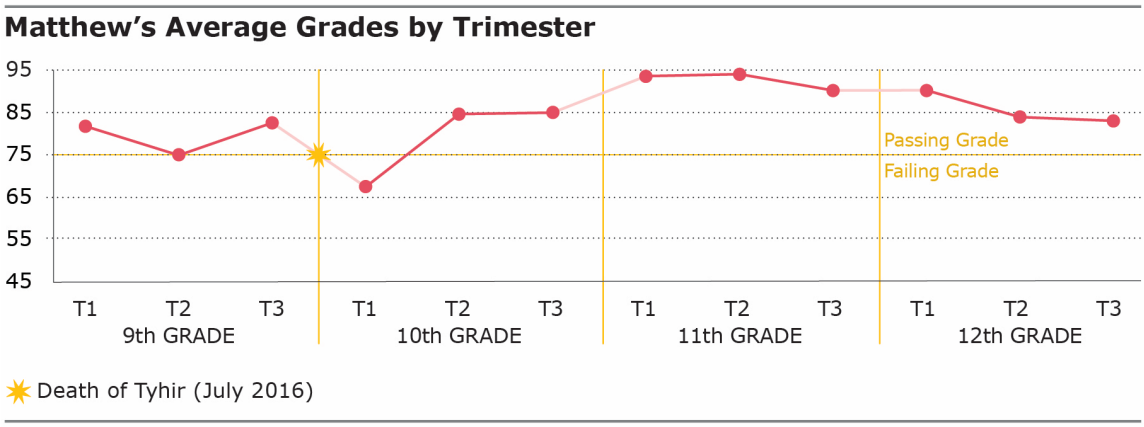


Figure 6.9 Matthew's average grades across all of his core classes for each trimester of his high school career.

For other students, keeping up the motivation they described in the immediate aftermath of their loss proved more difficult over time. Taj confessed that losing his friend "motivated me to do better at the time, but then it kind of wore off for a minute." Others who initially expressed determination to improve their academic standing might only be able to keep up new work routines for a few weeks or months before returning to their previous habits.

For example, Kaliq described his motivation as being stronger "at the beginning." Indeed, for months after Jahsun's death, Kaliq was adamant that he would play football the following year to honor his friend's memory (he had been periodically working out

with the team for years, but had never formally tried out). When the fall season rolled around the following year, Kaliq had yet to make any changes to the other obligations in his life that previously prevented him from having the time to play on the school team.

And his academic record, too, showed a waning motivation. Like Matthew and most of the students in Tyhir's circle of friends, Kaliq was a C student freshman year. After Tyhir's death, his grades took a nosedive to well below passing for the first trimester of the year (Figure 6.10). But by midyear, he rallied and got himself back to more or less where he had been before. At the start of junior year, Kaliq was already struggling academically; but this time, losing a friend gave him motivation to put in a little more work. However, his modest improvements were not enough to pass the majority of his classes and, by the beginning of senior year, the motivation had all but worn off. Ultimately, Kaliq's last ditch effort to improve his grades at the end of senior year was not enough to graduate on time.

Successfully making life changes, particularly ones that involve sacrifices (e.g., more time devoted to studying, less time for family responsibilities), often requires the delicate navigation of complex social networks and quite a bit of luck – someone happening to be there at the right moment for advice or an extra push (Jones 2018; Small 2017). For the majority of Boys' Prep students, this combination of good fortune did not occur and initial glimmers of motivated change would often lessen over time or fail to produce the full intended results.

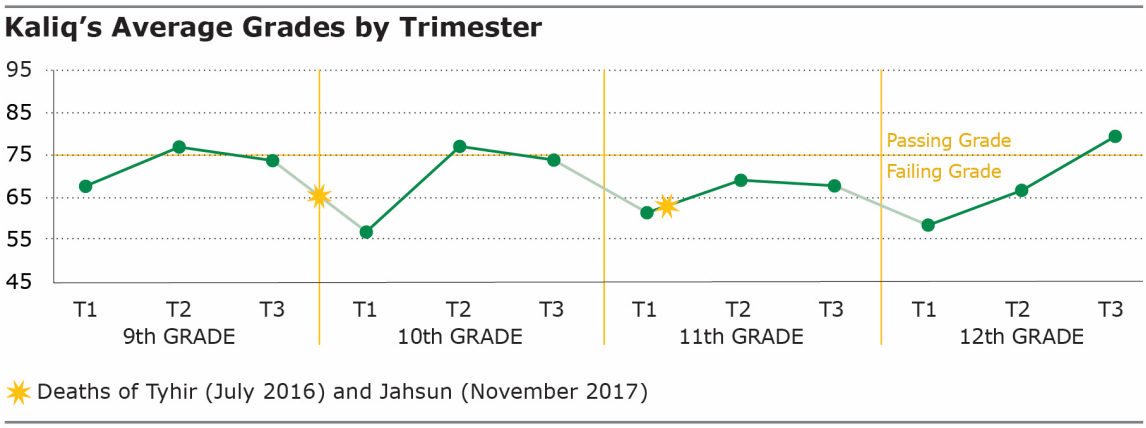
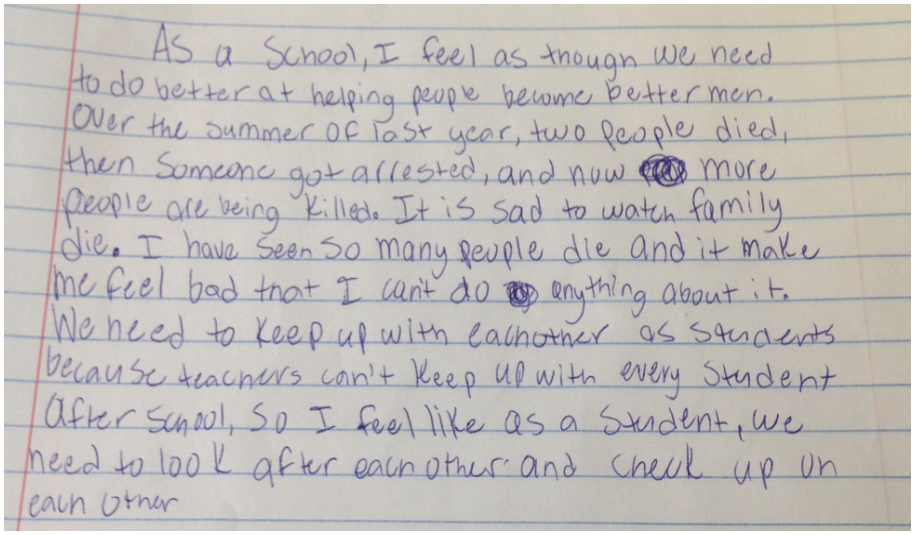


Figure 6.10 Kaliq's average grades across all of his core classes for each trimester of his high school career.

For other students, losses never produced motivation, but rather made it more difficult to find the energy to get through the day: Ramell shared that after all the things he had been through that year, "sometimes I be waking up, I just don't feel like getting out the bed and moving…I just don't feel like doing shit sometimes. I was never this lazy before this year. I just feel like all this, everything that's going on just make me not wanna do serious shit no more." What Ramell called "laziness" is practically a textbook definition of depression.

Community Commitments and Helping Others

Other students responded over time by thinking about how they could help friends or classmates who might be even more in need than themselves. One student wrote a message alongside the cards for Jahsun lamenting that "I have seen so many people die and it make[s] me feel bad that I can't do anything about it." He added the suggestion that students "look after each other and check up on each other" because teachers were not able to stay up to date on all students (Figure 6.11).



As a School, I feel as though we need
to do better at helping people become better men.
Over the summer of last year, two people died,
then Someone got arrested, and now more
people are being killed. It is sad to watch family
die. I have Seen So many people die and it make
me feel bad that I can't do anything about it.
We need to keep up with eachother as Students
because teachers can't keep up with every Student
After School, So I feel like as a Student, we
need to look after each other and check up on
each other

Figure 6.11 Letter written by an anonymous student after Jahsun's death, left with the cards to be given to Jahsun's family.

Other students, like Justin, found in their grief a drive to improve their community in the hopes if being part of a long-term solution for neighborhood gun violence:

> *[The loss] made me think, like, alright, now I'ma just try to not [succeed] for myself, but I'ma do it for my community. And I'ma make sure that I push myself and try to create certain opportunities and stuff for the community. Like, when I get older, I wanna make a program or organization for young Black men and women, so, they can succeed and they cannot get into situations like that.*

Justin's desire to give back to the community or support the next generation of youth was echoed by others, but it was by no means a full chorus in the Boys' Prep building. The main tenor of messaging from the school was more individualistic, with a focus on each student getting himself to college. In so doing, the school's messaging suggested, they would be improving the collective success of Black boys in Philadelphia, but there was less emphasis on direct forms of service or social justice pursuits.

The somewhat passive stance toward justice was reflected in the relatively low level of student enthusiasm for a series of political actions in the late winter and early spring. In the aftermath of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida on Valentine's Day of that year, local politicians tried to capitalize on the national sympathy to draw attention to all the young people being killed by guns in Philadelphia's inner city communities. Two weeks after the Parkland shooting, a Pennsylvania state senator organized a multi-sited press conference to be held at Boys' Prep and two other schools in the area.

That late February morning, the senior class gathered in the cafeteria to make signs, some with hashtags representing their dead friends, others with slogans like "we don't want to die" or "books not bullets." Four students – Kaliq, Yaja, Sybrii, and Theo – had been selected to speak and they were practicing their speeches while their friends giddily decorated poster boards. Outside, just in front of the main steps of the school, a podium had been set up with a microphone. Two camera operators, a photographer, and couple producers were milling about.

Eventually the boys came out – the seniors with their hand drawn signs and a handful of others who snuck into the crowd, telling me later that they had mostly just wanted to get out of class – and spread out across the steps forming the backdrop to the Senator's campaign-like speech. He then turned the microphone over to Dr. Stephens, followed by Jahsun's mother and the student speakers. The speeches were personal, focusing on the way gun violence has shaped "how we carry ourselves" or who can be "called a friend"; the students acknowledged that the victims were undeserving of their fate and they condemned those who pulled the trigger, but they did not talk about social

circumstances, policy, or politics. As far as I know, there was no formal follow-up in any classrooms later that day. And just a minutes after the event wrapped up, a group of Jahsun's friends were upstairs in one of their favorite third floor hangout spots playing shooting-based video games on their phones and were unamused when I pointed out the irony of this.

Two weeks later, on the one month anniversary of the Stoneman Douglas school shooting, schools across the country participated in a walkout and a moment of silence in solidarity with the Parkland community. Whereas at other Philadelphia schools students marched with banners and chants to City Hall (ABC Action News 2018), at Boys' Prep, the 20 minute walkout was optional; anyone not wanting to participate could spend the twenty minutes or so hanging out in the cafeteria. Only about 20% of students grabbed their coats or sweatshirts and went outside. Most walked out of the building in pairs or small clumps and chatted casually as they looped around the block of the school. I walked with Bashir, Jahsun's brother, who was in his usual perky mood. He tried a few times to start up a chant, "We ignite the fight," but he could not explain exactly what "fight" he was talking about. As we rounded each corner, he joked about whether he should just continue to walk and not return to school. When I asked him if he saw a connection between the school shootings and the kinds of gun violence that has affected him, he shrugged, "No real connection…just crazy people." Then, after a minute, he added, "the only connection is that felons shouldn't get guns."

When we got back inside, a few teachers were conferring about who was returning and one of them joked, "well, that's three quick suspensions" referring to three seniors who had apparently done what Bashir fantasized about and simply left school for

the day during the walkout. Both the rally and the walkout demonstrate an instinct among administrators at Boys' Prep to create opportunities for students to take action in response to injustice, but a lack of the full realization of this idea.

Ideas about the Future

In place of ideas about justice or pursuing political action, for many students at Boy's Prep the longer-term responses to loss manifested in worries about their own death and hypervigilance, which has been defined as "an intentional state of alertness and heightened awareness [in order] to anticipate and/or quickly react to danger" (Smith and Patton 2016:219). Though practicing hypervigilance might offer some protection from the threat of violence, it is not without costs, including diverting energy and focus from other activities or distracting from efforts to draw out motivation from the loss. For example, Samir described the way Jahsun's death made him worry about the possibility of more violence affecting him or other loved ones and how it led to him changing some of his behaviors: "It wakes me up more than scares me. I can't be out by myself all the time or just random times of the day without people knowing where I am. But it definitely scares me a little bit, because it could happen to anybody." Jason felt similarly, but also imagined that being a Black male from his particular part of Philadelphia made him even likely to be part of that "anybody category." He felt death was especially near: "I fear the presence of [death], how close it is to me, considering where I live and who I am."

Tymier, a freshman, echoed similar sentiments. Even though Jahsun's death was under very different circumstances, it triggered memories for Tymier of his friend in

middle school who died his sleep. Over a year after this loss, thoughts about Tymier's own death would still keep him up at night sometimes:

> *I could die too like the same predicament. I thought if I go to sleep I'm not guaranteed to wake back up, so I had the fear of that…Cause you could never know, if you're asleep death can just come at you. There's no stopping it, so that's the part that scared me….But when I get a chance to really lay down and think, I think the last thing I think about is what I want to do. I think about success and my future. He's still on my mind, but I think about my future at night. Because if I'm writing [poetry], yeah I'm still thinking about him, but at the same time writing is what I want to do in the future so that kind of helped me clear it up of being scared.*

For Tymier, focusing on writing poetry about his friend helped him connect his feelings of loss with his hopes for the future. But he could not fully escape the feelings of worry that he too could die young – whether from violence or while sleeping.

Prior research has shown that the loss of peers can prompt fatalistic thinking and diminished expectations or aspirations for the future (Bluck et al. 2008; Ens and Bond 2007; Florian and Mikulincer 1997; Smith 2015). Across all adolescents, contemplations of an early death are not uncommon: studies estimate that between 6 and 15% of all youth anticipate their own early death at some point during adolescence (Borowsky, Ireland, and Resnick 2009; Jamieson and Romer 2008) – meaning that many young people significantly overestimate their actual mortality (Fischhoff et al. 2010). But these feelings are more common among Black male youth (Warner and Swisher 2015), and are predicted by neighborhood poverty levels (Swisher and Warner 2013).

Anticipating one's own premature death, unsurprisingly, has been shown to have negative implications for youth's risky or criminal behaviors (Brezina, Tekin, and Topalli 2008; Caldwell, Wiebe, and Cleveland 2006; Haynie et al. 2014; Piquero 2014), attitudes toward school (Guzmán, Santiago-Rivera, and Hasse 2005), long-term health outcomes

(Borowsky et al. 2009; Duke et al. 2011), and adult socioeconomic status (Nguyen et al. 2012). In peer group contexts – of both neighborhood and school peers – where these ideas of early death expectancy or fatalism are common, the prevalence of risky behaviors among all members of the peer group is even higher (Haynie et al. 2014; Harris, Duncan, and Boisjoly 2002).

Among the BP students, there were clear connections between their experiences of peer loss and their fears about their own early death. Herc told me, frankly and poignantly,

> *When you little, you got a lot of stuff to look forward to. But, like, how can you look forward to a lot of stuff when you got friends dying left and right? Then you start to question you[rself], like if I'm gonna make it to 18, if I'm gonna make it to graduation, if I'm gonna make it to 21, if I'm gonna have kids and a family.*

Ramell shared a similar sentiment in a text-based story he posted to Instagram: "All these close deaths got me thinking when my time gone come I really live every day like it's my last, I'm not even 18 yet smh." The image of his words was screenshotted and re-shared by multiple friends representing a community of young people grappling with the same question. Kaliq also pondered his future, seeing incarceration as an alternative to death if he continued down the path he believed he was on. In the middle of the night, he mused on Instagram: "Where the hell Ima be in 5 years 🤦🏾‍♂️ at the rate I'm going, dead or wishing for money on my commissary." Others, like Matthew, worried less about themselves and more about the possibility of losing more friends: "I'm afraid of losing somebody else or losing multiple people. I don't want to lose nobody else."

In order to stay focused on what they wanted for themselves in the future, boys like Tony had to work very intentionally to challenge their own grief and push aside their

worries. There were moments when he felt overcome by loss, he explained, but "then I think about myself. I have so much, I think I want to do so much stuff, like I got life to live. I want to have kids, I want to be able to live." Those thoughts would help Tony get through. For Tymier, who was repeating his freshman year, when his mind wandered the prospect of dying young, he worried that "being left back is holding me back from doing what I got to do. So I got to hurry up and get through school to try to accomplish all the goals I got, because tomorrow isn't promised to anybody."

Similarly, Herc grappled with accepting the possibility of dying young, but also simultaneously looking ahead to the future:

> *I've had people tell me they had a dream of me dying recently…getting killed…I mean I started thinking, like, if it's my time, it's my time….I mean I'm not going to make it my time unless I know it's my time. Like if I can prevent it or you know what I'm saying, I'm going to do it….I just want a good sixtieth or something…Yeah, I don't really care after sixty…ain't no point [if you] always got to be helped and stuff like that…One day I can see a couple of my grandkids so, I'm still cool….I just care about that.*

He had defined views of the parameters for his life, wanting to live to about sixty, by which time he expected that he would be able to meet a few of his grandchildren. Beyond sixty, he worried that he would require too much assistance from others and instead accepted that that would be a full and complete life.

Herc was not the only one who could not imagine old age for himself. In a conversation between Tyrese, Dimere, and Matthew, they disagreed about the ideal life expectancy, going back and forth in a playful argument. On one side was Matthew and Dimere: Matthew first suggested 95, then revised his hope: "I would love to live 'til one hundred and one, or two maybe. But I don't want to lose my life early." Dimere suggested "two thousand hundred" was an ideal life. But Tyrese had a different view. He

waved off all these wishes for old age, sharing Herc's view that a long life was not necessarily to be expected or hoped for,

> *I don't want to live that long….They talking 'bout they wanna live to a hundred…What Black guy lives to a hundred?...I want to live to, like, a good age. Like sixty-five is a good age. …Sixty-five years, that's a long time to live…What am I gonna do when your body starts to mess up. You're not gonna be able to do everything you want to do.*

At once Tyrese equated Black men with shorter life expectancies and imagined that our bodies begin to "mess up" at sixty-five. Dimere and Matthew pushed back hard: "Imagine all the stuff that you could do, stuff you never did before, throughout your life you do all of that stuff…when you done all the stuff that you want to do, that you never did before, you gonna wanna do something else." But Tyrese was adamant; he countered, "by the time I'm done with everything I'm doing, I'm gonna be like forty-five." After some more back and forth that did not seem to change any of their minds, Matthew shut down the conversation because Tyrese was "getting on [his] nerves." "That's dumb early," he added, with a flourish, referring to Tyrese's life expectancy wish for himself.

Adults in the Boys' Prep building recognized that students' perceptions of ideal and expected years of life were likely shaped by their exposure to so much off-time and unnaturally early death. Reflecting on the way his students might have experienced peer loss in relation to wealthier white students, the Principal Donaldson shared:

> *[White students] have a sense of safe distance from [early death]…where it's like, "That's never really gonna happen to me. …It's so sad that it happened to him, and I'm sad that I lost my friend, but I don't ever feel any like …" …Whereas, with our students, it's like, "that's something that happens to anybody and everybody that I know." …And I think what's hard is, like, our kids are mourning the loss of a friend, but also I think grappling with their own mortality and fears that they could easily become the next one. That's a whole different level of thing to grapple with.*

In teacher focus groups, the school faculty expressed similar sentiments. One teacher theorized:

> *I just think with all the tragedy that happens, it's too close, right? …When it's outside of your house, it was just too close, right? "That's where my family is, or my friends are. The kids that fell victim are good kids who were just doing normal kids things and it happened. It wasn't like they were putting themselves in bad situations." I think there's that underlying "well this can just happen to me if I'm walking home from a basketball game or if I'm on South street, or if I'm visiting my sister". How do you- there's nothing I can say [because] it's true. They weren't doing anything wrong. This is their reality that it could be them. You have to understand that maybe school is not going to be so important today. Or, "I'd rather be bonding with my friends because I don't know if they're going to be here tomorrow." You know what I mean?*

Another teacher chimed in: "It's hard to have that college talk when you have a friend just died." And then the first added: "Or like 'am I going to make it to there?'"

Parents also speculated about how peer loss was impacting their sons' ideas about their own futures. One of the mothers I interviewed said that her son was insisting on going out of state for college reasoning that "if I stay here, I may not make it until 25." She acknowledged that, as a parent, that hurt her.

Similarly, for several BP boys, fears about the future were tightly linked with ideas about neighborhood and location — the future was uncertain if they stayed where they were, but if they were able to get out of the neighborhood or out of Philadelphia, then they had a chance. Tyshiem described being "motivated" by his loss to "go somewhere better where violence isn't as big. Violence is basically everywhere, but somewhere were violence isn't an epidemic right now." Khiseer described his motivation to work hard in school and on the field in order to get a football scholarship for college: "Now it's really like, I gotta do this. I don't wanna be in Philly the rest of my life. I'm trying to get out of here." For Jai, losing friends "make me think about [how] going on

now and going forward, like I need to -- something's gotta change in order to stay around, moving forward in the future." Similarly, Quartell, who believed that if he remained in Philadelphia he would never advance his own life, had to will himself to feel hope:

> *I'm always going to be hopeful for the future cuz like you can't– I'm not gonna allow myself to…be stuck down here or stay down here forever. I'm not going to allow myself to do that. I can't do that. Ain't no way. I can't do that it. It's no way. 0% chance that I'm going to do that.*

These sentiments echo previous research from Brooms (2019) showing that some boys are successful in reframing neighborhood violence as a temporary challenge and using it as motivation to pursue long-term goals.

Herc's Up and Down Winter

As school routines gradually returned to normal in the winter, students were being encouraged to refocus themselves on academics and their own futures. But this message did not work for Herc – he seemed to sleepwalk through the winter, continuing to miss a lot of days of school (94 class periods during the winter trimester) and generally feeling despondent about whether his life could turn around. He reflected back on this time later saying that experiencing so much loss put him "on a 'I don't really give a fuck.' That's the type of mood I was really in…like I didn't really care. None of that. That's why I stopped going [to school]." He was mourning not only Tyhir and Jahsun, but also other friends whose memories were not shared by the Boys' Prep community.

During this period, Herc smoked nearly every day, periodically sold marijuana in small amounts, and reunited with the "three musketeers" (Latrell and Jonquett, his closest friends who had now both left Boys' Prep) a few days a week at the McDonald's where

all three worked just outside the city. Some days I would find him standing in the hallway outside of a classroom from which he had either just been kicked out or walked out of his own volition. On one of these days, I came upon Herc standing just outside a first floor classroom, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and staring at the ground right in front of him. His face was contorted and he did not respond when I asked him what was wrong or if he needed anything. When he was ready to talk later on in the day, all he could say about the class he had left was, "I can't be bothered." So much missed class meant that his junior year grades were plummeting.

But there were also many positive things happening in Herc's life. During this period, he reconnected with his older sister who lived on her own just outside the city. He would often go stay with her when he was arguing with his mother, usually about her new husband whom Herc often fought with and referred to as his mother's "roommate." In November, just before Jahsun's death, Herc's brother had a baby, his first niece, and this brought Herc great joy. When I saw Herc in school on certain days, I could almost tell if he had spent the evening before with his niece – his mood was so much lighter and he seemed to have hope. During these moments, he was able to reset and catch up on his schoolwork.

Over winter break, Herc worked a lot, saving up about $600 which he was trying not to spend. As he put it, "I just like money. I don't want it to go nowhere…I don't like being broke." He had made a deal with his father, who agreed to match everything in his savings account for a year. During the break, Herc also got to spend time with his four older brothers who were all at different colleges – ranging in prestige from the Community College of Philadelphia to the University of Maryland. They encouraged him

to refocus in school so that he would not end up like some of his other brothers who were involved in street life and "always got to watch [their] back…got to be on point 24/7."

In early January, Herc told me that he had made a commitment to himself to be more focused on school: "I need to start coming on time, coming to school, do more than what I am doing in work…[not] showing up late and sleeping through classes, like I did in the beginning [of the school year]." But already, during the first week of the new year, he missed one day of class because he did not have uniform pants he could wear. He had given away two of his pairs to friends who did not have any, but then realized that his only remaining pair had a hole in it. That Wednesday, he went to buy himself three new pairs in the morning, but by the time he finished, it was already almost noon when the half-day school day was over.

While pursuing his half-formed plan to improve his grades and refocus on school, Herc was also working five six-hour shifts a week at McDonald's. He spent about an hour commuting for each shift since he preferred to work at a location far away from his neighborhood to avoid any drama.

In early March, as the third trimester of the school year was beginning – the final chance to reset and perhaps recover passing grades for the year – the Boys' Prep staff devoted a few periods of one school day to one-on-one meetings with all students about their grades and to set goals for the remainder of the school year. Herc's meeting was with his academic advisor Ms. Estevez, a math teacher in her mid-twenties (the only Latina teacher in the school). She had herself been very shaken by Jahsun's death and was generally understanding of the way her students were impacted. The five minute meeting between Herc and Ms. Estevez began with her placing a sheet of paper between

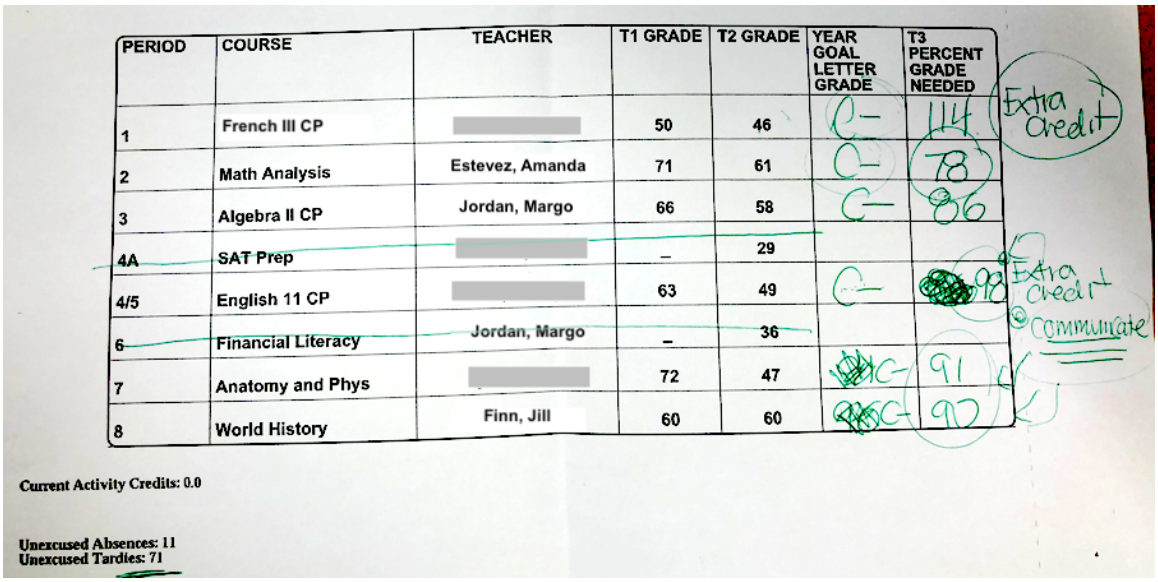
them. This worksheet (Figure 6.12) listed his grades in each class from trimester 1 and trimester 2 and blank spaces for them to fill in his goals for trimester 3. While Herc sat straight-faced and mostly silent, Ms. Estevez punched the numbers into her computer to calculate what grade Herc would need in each class to pass for the full year:

> *So the way it looks right now is French, here, you would need, to get a C-, you would need to get 114 points. But that's something you would need to talk to [the teacher] about, because if you get over an A+, that would make sure that you go into the final with a C-. So I would talk to her about extra credit, see what you can do, so that way we would go in and make sure that you get credit for that... Now, for my class…you need to aim to get a 78, which I feel like is feasible for you. If you get the 78, that'll make sure you go into my final with a C-. And at the end of the day, these two grades have cushion in them, like a range of a couple points, so that's still a feasible goal. Do you think you could do that? ... Probably right? You can do that....*

She continued, without waiting for a verbal response from Herc, to go through each class and calculate his possibility of squeaking by with a passing C- overall. Essentially, the calculations were meant to show him how high his grades this trimester would have to be (e.g., "over an A+) to balance out all his low grades from the rest of the year in order for him to have even a chance to pass (e.g., to go into the final exam with an overall C- for the class). Ms. Estevez emphasized that in order to get these grades, Herc would probably need to get his teachers to agree to accept extra credit work or make another individual arrangement:

> *The more you communicate, especially when you're in this position where you just want to get credit for this course. Like I don't want to put you in a position where you're going to have to retake this course....like I know you've had to take courses over, and you don't want to do that your senior year. So communicate, that's the best thing you can do. Because nobody here is against you. Remember when I sat down here with you and mom, same thing, the school wants you, we want you here, so I want you to communicate so we can make sure that you're not in that situation.*

As she said “the school wants you here,” she banged the table with each word for emphasis. Herc did not crack a smile. Ms. Estevez added, pointing to the number of tardies at the bottom of the page (71), that he had to start getting to school on time. Then Ms. Estevez offered to “blow up [his] phone in the morning” to make sure he was awake and on time for school. She said she had done this before for other students and was happy to do the same for him. Herc said he would think about it, took the paper, and went back to his desk a few rows behind where Ms. Estevez was holding these meetings.



PERIOD	COURSE	TEACHER	T1 GRADE	T2 GRADE	YEAR GOAL LETTER GRADE	T3 PERCENT GRADE NEEDED
1	French III CP	[redacted]	50	46	C–	114
2	Math Analysis	Estevez, Amanda	71	61	C–	78
3	Algebra II CP	Jordan, Margo	66	58	C–	86
4A	SAT Prep	[redacted]	–	29		
4/5	English 11 CP	[redacted]	63	49	C–	98
6	Financial Literacy	Jordan, Margo	–	36		
7	Anatomy and Phys	[redacted]	72	47	C–	91
8	World History	Finn, Jill	60	60	C–	90

Extra Credit

Extra Credit

communicate

Current Activity Credits: 0.0

Unexcused Absences: 11
Unexcused Tardies: 71

Figure 6.12 Herc’s grade report at the start of Trimester 3 of his junior year. This document was used in a meeting with his academic advisor to help him develop plans for passing his courses by the end of the year (green handwriting are his advisor’s notes from that meeting). Crossed out courses were one trimester courses that did not continue into Trimester 3. All grades are out of 100.

Once alone at his desk, Herc looked despondent. I scooted a chair over, and he stared at the paper in front of him. Slowly, Herc pointed to a few classes in which he thought the goals were doable, but others which were definitely not. Then, without a word, he got up and walked out of the room. When I found him a few minutes later in the

stairwell walking up from the bathroom, he said he was tired and thinking about transferring schools. During his next period, World History with Ms. Finn (which he was repeating from sophomore year), he was in a terrible mood according to his teacher. Ms. Finn explained that he was "doing worse this year than last year...he just has his head down or comes late."

But, as usual for Herc, he found a way to bounce back – even that very same day. The following period, he had math class with Ms. Jordan, who, though new to the school that year, was quickly becoming his favorite teacher. In the teacher's lounge later that afternoon, Ms. Jordan beamed telling me that Herc had been a "star student" in class that day. He had figured out a trick to solve the math problem they were working on that no one else had gotten. He also chastised one of his classmates for goofing off and asked for the work he had missed from the day before. Ms. Jordan added that she was gradually learning that Herc's mood would change day to day: "he's either in really good mood or super down and tired, I never know what I'm gonna get from him…[it's like he] needs a pep talk every day." Ms. Bloom also had her eye on Herc and set up a separate meeting to see how she could help him make a plan for getting back on track academically.

By the end of March – about three weeks after the grade report meeting – Herc seemed to have turned a corner. In the teachers' lounge one day, Ms. Jordan told me that Herc was working really hard, that he was always in her room during free periods, lunchtime, and sometimes after school doing schoolwork. Two other teachers were sitting at the table with us – the student teacher for his French class and another math teacher who had Herc the year before. The French student teacher explained that he had gotten a 3.5 out of 20 on their most recent test even though she believed she had given him every

possible way to earn extra points. The three teachers all expressed genuine and earnest interest in trying to figure out which classes Herc would be able to pass; though they were supportive, they were not optimistic that he could transform his grades enough in the time remaining to pass and move on to senior year. They worried that he would be demoralized if he had to repeat the grade.

But that spring Herc felt hopeful because he and felt a change in his attitude toward school and believed he was in control of his future. He described the beginning of the year as a period when he was "chucking" everything, meaning just throwing it to the side and not caring. Now, as he entered the final stretch of the school year:

> *I'm just more focused now…Like my attitude changed…I don't chuck anything no more. …[For example,] Math, this math concept class, I got a 96% in that class [up from an F]….just from doing my work….I know I'm going to have to go to summer school even if I keep doing good right now, I'm still going to be a senior and go to summer school….It's better than being held back.*

Even though his grades were improving, the challenge remained in simply getting himself to school on time. He was still working at McDonald's, there most nights until 11pm. Even if he went straight home afterwards, he struggled to get enough rest to wake up at 6am to be on time for school. This problem was exacerbated when he smoked marijuana before bed because it would put him in a deeper sleep and he would sometimes sleep through his morning alarm. He told me that if he could not pass enough classes by the end of the year and in summer school to move on to senior year, he would surely transfer out of Boys' Prep.

Normalization of Loss

Perhaps one of the more troubling patterns to emerge in the interviews with Tyhir's and Jahsun's friends at Boys' Prep was the sense that, for some of them at least,

death had become a normalized part of their young lives. Hakim, for instance, did not want to use the word "normal" to describe the experience of losing a friend to violence, but could not think of another way to put it: "I mean, it's like a normal experience though, like one of your friends die, like something like that. It's... I'm not going to say it's *normal*, [but] I mean, it's like a normal thing to happen and stuff." Others expressed this sentiment more concretely: "it's just becoming a thing where everybody's getting shot and killed…It's a bad thing, but I'm getting used to it, even though I shouldn't be." For some boys, the repeat exposure to murdered friends meant that the second time around it "wasn't as sad."

Some of the boys described experiences in their childhood when they had been devastated by the loss of a loved one, often a grandparent, but they now found themselves feeling numb to other losses. Kaliq, for example, earlier described his grandfather's death as the "last time I got emotional." By the time he attended the memorial service for Jahsun, he had been through the routine several times. He told me that at the service he was in "good spirits" and not crying. When I noted the self-control it must have taken for him to hold himself together in a situation like that, he responded: "Yeah, 'cause it happened twice. Not the first time [I lost a friend], this [is] the second time. …It just took all the fear out of me."

This was a common refrain for Kaliq. He used similar language about being "all out of fear" after Tyhir's death and in several social media posts. In an interview, he elaborated on his current philosophy:

> *Whatever happens just, like, it happens. That's how I am right now. If something that was terrible wasn't happening like this, I'd just be like, 'damn.' Like that's how I feel. …Honestly [these losses are] helping me, like I'm still moving*

> *forward. I ain't still stuck in that same spot. I knew other people, like, that's not as mentally strong as I am. So taking back to back hits like that, some people probably fall out and you know started doing things they wouldn't normally do….like somebody started doing drugs, started selling drugs, started wanting to kill people, other stuff like that. All that other, like, going the wrong way type of stuff, because of losses people took….But me, I'm using it as motivation, and I'm still going forward.*

For Kaliq, mental toughness was what kept him from being overtaken by his back-to-back losses and instead able to find something positive for himself in the tragic experience.

Quartell also described a similar experience of having a strong emotional reaction to the death of his grandmother when he was a child, but then his feelings becoming more muted as he lost more people, particularly friends, over time:

> *After my grandma died, I was sick about that. And one of my friends died, another friend died, another friend died, another friend died. And everybody kept dying. Everybody still dying. So I mean I just don't have no feelings toward it no more. I ain't sayin' I don't care when people die, but I ain't going to keep, keep having the same reaction to the same thing. Just gonna to keep happening every month, every week, every day. No point.*

For Quartell, once it became clear that the deaths of peers was going to keep happening, he realized that there was "no point" in having "feelings" about it each time. Herc spoke in a similar way about the numbness he felt when he heard about Jahsun's death:

> *After having a couple, a lot of friends pass, like I try to cry when he died but no tears is coming up….I lost too many people, it's like I'm used to it now. …[It's] horrible. He's still not here. [But] you got to move forward regardless. Like I said, I'm used to it so I don't really cope with it no more….Yeah, I feel like I'm just used to it….Everybody loses somebody. That's how it is…It's like the same thing, and I know they not going to be the last one.*

Herc estimated that he had already lost five or six friends in the last two or three years, and he knew there would be more to come – "that's how it is." Though Jahsun's death

was "shocking" because "it's not like he made his own bed…I knew he don't get into shit like that," Herc still did not really cope with it because he was so used to loss.

What the boys describe is different than the numbness of a typical initial reaction to news of a death; a "prolonged extension of the phase of numbing" would likely be concerning to a clinician (Bowlby 1980:137), and becoming numb to grief can also lead to the dulling of other kinds of feelings, including positive ones (Sandell and Bornäs 2017). For some boys, a habituated numbness led to them losing interest in activities they used to love. Herc played basketball with Tyhir during their freshman year, but after his death, Herc no longer wanted to play and found that he no longer had any productive activities outside of school to occupy his attention. Similarly, Jai also played basketball "heavy" when he was younger. His friends

> *used to always come to my games, they used to always be around. And I feel like as soon as…they start passing, I was just like, I ain't even got a feel for just playing. Because I was just too down, was just thinking about it too much. That's when the crying and all the snapping came to be [and] me wanting to be in my own space.*

Like Herc, Jai associated his basketball days with his close friends; once they were gone, he found no joy in the sport. In place of the game he used to love and share with his friends, Jai found himself "snapping" and seeking solitude.

In addition to boys' interests changing as a result of loss, some described their temperament evolving and becoming more negative. A few months before Jahsun's death, Yaja lost another close friend whom he'd grown up with in an incident of road rage gun violence: "When I found out B died, when I tell you I didn't care about nobody – I didn't care about not one person. I didn't care about who was my friends. I came into this year like, 'Fuck everybody.' I didn't care about not one person." This echoed what Kaliq told

me soon after Tyhir's death – that losing Tyhir made him not want to care about other people.

Additional Losses

As the year progressed, several boys experienced additional losses of close friends to gun violence and other causes. Senior Allen lost his best friend since middle school to an asthma attack just a few days after Jahsun's death. "Stuff has been happening so fast...it's gonna take me a long time to get over this," he told me as we sat on the floor outside one of his classrooms one afternoon after he had stepped out of the room for some air. "Sometimes it just hits me." I asked who he talked to about his loss and he said that he preferred to deal with these issues himself, but he was learning that some people really do care and it was not always good for him to hold it in because then others might think this silence was about them. He added that he felt he just needed to check on his friend's mom: "if she's ok, I'm okay." Then Allen got lost in his own thoughts about his friend and whispered, "now he isn't dealing with Philly anymore…at least he's safe, out of this mess in Philly."

Theo also shared his story of multiple back-to-back losses. In an interview in the spring, he told me: "When I actually, like, thought about it, I lost four people [in] less than, I'ma say six months. So it's like, 'Wow'... Then you see other people, like, 'Happy 93rd birthday' and stuff like that. Like…my friend didn't get to graduate. My cousin never seen his daughter born." Here Theo compares his experience of multiple off-time and premature losses with other communities where people might live happily into their 90s.

On social media, a post about one loss frequently triggered the sharing of other losses, almost like a roll call of names or hashtags. Boys like Hazeem and Kaliq would

regularly post messages that included hashtags referring to both Jahsun and Tyhir as well as to a third personal loss – for Hazeem, his grandfather, and for Kaliq his "old head," a mentor from his neighborhood. In other posts, boys would list out multiple hashtags with #LL, for "long live," followed by an initial representing each person's name. A post might have two to five of these hashtags for that many people, suggesting that boys drew connections between their losses and processed them collectively as a set of like emotional experiences.

New Fictive Kinship Connections

New sources of kinship connections emerged from the shared loss almost immediately and continued throughout the year and beyond. Many of the boys used familial references to describe their reactions to the loss; they connected to what they believed others must be feeling by imagining how this would affect their own family. For example, Kaliq described his discomfort seeing Tyhir's and Jahsun's mothers and siblings cry:

> *They was really tearing up….I didn't know what to say or do or nothing. That's hard for other people when you seeing somebody your age family going through it. They just lost they son….I was just looking like damn, she really going through it. I don't know what my mom would do if I was to go, somebody was to take my life.*

Tony also connected seeing Jahsun's mother cry with how he felt seeing his own mother in tears:

> *I think about the saddest part was like seeing [his] mom crying. It was like my mom crying – even when I see my mom sad, it's like, it's different cuz my mom fully, full of life. She always chillin'. And then, like, when I do see her sad, it hurt me. I mean, it hurts seeing her cry. I saw her cry like three times in my life. So then, I'm like, I see [Jahsun's] mom at the candlelight thing. It was hard.*

Tony continued the thought by finding a personal connection with Jahsun's siblings as he imagined how he would feel if he lost his own sister.

Indeed, for a while, Bashir became a "little brother" to many of Jahsun's friends, even though most had not even known of their relation before his death. Coincidentally, the first time several people in the school, including myself, even knew the two were related (half-brothers, with different mothers) was just days before Jahsun died at a Thanksgiving celebration at school on the last school day before the holiday. In one teacher's classroom, dozens of students gathered to eat pie and celebrate the holiday. Before the feast began, we all stood in a circle holding hands and going around sharing what we were thankful for. Bashir introduced himself and shared that he was "thankful for my brother being okay after his football injury."

After his death, many of Jahsun's friends made public promises to support and protect Bashir. For instance, Herc posted on snapchat a message to Jahsun about his brother: "You have a strong lil bro, it's gonna hit him hard but when it do we got him." Hazeem also sent me a long message explaining that Bashir "is going to need a shoulder not just to cry on but to motivate him and bring him up." He then suggested that he and Kaliq could "keep him on the right track and with us doing that I know it would come naturally to us will start doing good in school and just naturally will motivate us." Hazeem believed that supporting Jahsun's grieving brother might have the added benefit of providing more motivation to him and his friend to improve their own academic records. And, certainly for the first few weeks at least, many of Jahsun's friends followed through — often checking in on Bashir, wrestling him in the hallways, giving him a

couple dollars here and there, and inviting him to join them at their lunch table, or sitting with him early in the morning as he ate breakfast in front of Jahsun's decorated locker.

Familial-like relationships also developed between Jahsun's friends and some of their teachers. Though several teachers had always been viewed by students as semi-parental figures or "best friends," there were many more references to specific (female) teachers as "mom" in the weeks following Jahsun's death. Particular teachers' classrooms became safe spaces and students might just wander into a favorite teacher's room and sit there gaining comfort from closeness, even without talking. Ms. Finn described this phenomenon: "They just come into your room and sit, but they don't know how to ask for anything. But they just know I'm here if they need anything." Then she added, with a laugh, "It's like being haunted."

Ms. Bloom, especially, expanded her maternal nurturance of the boys following the loss. She took a group of them bowling a few days after Jahsun's death and often gave them rides home after they stayed at school late into the evening some nights. Matthew felt that Ms. Bloom cared about him and his friends "like our mom, like our second mom…I talk to her every time I got something wrong." And Dimere added that it was Ms. Bloom's "trustworthiness" that made their relationship so special: "you could just tell her stuff and know that she not gon' go behind your back and tell other people or tell other teachers…And she take care of us like we her children." Ms. Bloom also helped facilitate Jahsun's friend group's evolving relationship with Jahsun's mother.

Jahsun's mother, Maxayn, became a mother figure to many of Jahsun's friends. She had known several of the boys in her son's friend group before his death, but their relationships deepened after. Two months after Jahsun's death, Maxayn created an

Instagram account in memory of her son and several of his friends began interacting with her through the account almost immediately. They referred to her as "mom" in their posts online as well as in person[52]; a few of them even saved her phone number in their phones with some version of "mom" as her name — and she called them her "sons" in return. While the idea of Black women becoming "play mothers" or "othermothers" to young people in their extended non-biological networks is well documented in Black feminist and family studies literature (Chatters et al. 1994; Collins 2000; Spruill et al. 2014; Stack and Burton 1993), the "othermothering" of gun violence victims' mothers to their child's friends has not, as far as I know, been discussed in prior research.

Maxayn would text with some of the boys individually and through group chats, and for a long stretch of the winter and spring, Jahsun's crew made regular trips every other Sunday to her house to hang out. Usually, Ms. Bloom and Ms. Wu would carpool to bring the boys to Maxayn's house and the teachers ordered pizza. Sometimes the boys hung out with Maxayn in the living room, chatting and eating and looking through Jahsun's things; other times, they would go to Jahsun's room to hang out without adults. At one point when the roughhousing was at its peak, the boys broke a hole in the wall of Jahsun's room while playing around. Ezekiel, in particular, found these visits especially meaningful, though he came into school one day after being there the night before with the knuckles of one hand taped up because of a rug burn he got from wrestling with his friends at Maxayn's house.

[52] At least one student (Caleer) also described using "mom" to refer to Tyhir's mother.

Through these visits, Jahsun's 10-year-old sister, Amyah, also became a surrogate younger sister to many of his friends. A year after Jahsun's death, Khalil included in a long online post written directly to his friend that "our little sister Myah is doing good and now she has about 10 brothers watching over her." Rajae continued to make surprise visits to the family home for years to check up on Maxayn and Amyah; he even earned a nickname from his surrogate little sister – "cupcake boy" because would eat up all the sweets in the house whenever he came over.

In addition to Maxayn's "othermothering" of Jahsun's friends, and the relationships they formed with her other children, the group of boys also did what I call "othersoning" work for Maxayn, perhaps filling some very small part of the void left by Jahsun's absence. Jahsun's friends were committed to making sure that Maxayn was doing okay. Khalil explained, "we all talked to his mom, seeing her happy [was important]. After that, I just like, I became more comfortable, because I knew that she's happy…so it basically forced me to be stronger and be happy." On Maxayn's birthday, Khalil posted a picture of the two of them together with the caption, "Happy birthday to one of the most strongest women I know on this planet. You know I will help keep Jah name alive. But enjoy your day and love you mom❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️." Kaliq wrote a post promising Jahsun that he and his friends would look out for his mother and also acknowledging her own strength to get through the loss: "we surely promise to make sure…your mom is okay, even though she's the strongest woman [I've] ever met."

A few weeks after Jahsun's death, Ms. Bloom observed that Maxayn "seems to be holding it together for everyone," gaining strength through her relationships with the

boys and learning more about her son's life by getting closer with them. She frequently wrote messages on social media referring to Jahsun's friends as her "extended children" and with phrases like "y'all stuck with me now." In one post, she theorized that "Jah knew what he was doing when he brought us all together." In another post, during the summer after many of the boys had graduated, she reflected on their continued role in each other's lives:

> *Even though most of you are going away to school I just want to say you guys will always be my extended children. The love and support you all have given me kept me going. Continue to thrive for yourselves, for Jah and for me. I love you all so much #Jahworld #ForeverFamily*

Maxayn also reposted images from the boys about Jahsun, including one that Owen shared of a memorial poster he had made for Jahsun and brought with him to college to hang on his dorm room wall.

Even two years after Jahsun's death, on Mother's Day and Jahsun's birthday, the boys continue to reach out to Maxayn, still referring to her as "mom." And she honors many of them with birthday wishes and congratulatory messages when they reach important milestones. Additionally, Maxayn has organized an annual bowling fundraiser each April to celebrate Jahsun's birthday and raise money for a scholarship fund and mentoring program in his honor. Jahsun's circle of friends have continued to return from college for the weekend to attend and "dress up" in clothing that honors him.

The Hidden Hard Period

During this period I have identified as the *hidden hard*, grief became the wallpaper of Boys' Prep school life, a backdrop in front of which the events of the school day proceeded. Spaces and dates came to hold new significance in ways that were

sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not. Bodies and clothing were marked by grief, but often hidden under the school uniform.

The return to a relative state of normalcy at Boys' Prep pushed students' ongoing grief into peer-driven contexts like social media, where they continued to share their covert expressions of complex emotions out of view of many adults. Online posting offered a welcome avenue for (mostly unpoliced) emotional expression and a kind of emotional freedom that would be surprising to observers who only witnessed their in-person interactions with peers, during which they often abided by typical norms for masculine emotional stoicism. Online they shared openly about their pain and their fears, and they documented their coping practices. Some also incorporated their losses into their online identities. The quantity is telling too: postings of grief are not compulsory expressions or formalities shared once and then the obligation is fulfilled; for many boys, they represent and communicate regular, persistent engagement with the emotions of grief.

Without institutional outlets or an abundance of formal avenues of therapeutic support, many students developed a numb or desensitized attitude toward their losses as a way to get through. Losing friends and peers to neighborhood violence had come to be viewed as a "normal" or expected adolescent experience, and even something they imagined or worried might be their own fate. To cope with this reality, some boys relied on drugs or alcohol; others found physical or artistic outlets, like sports or music. The "constant" presence of loss in their lives materialized for some students in a drop in their academic performances, while others were able to draw out a certain kind of motivation or new vision for the future.

Despite the lack of explicit attention to loss and grief during this period in many of students' social and institutional interactions, I witnessed an increased sense of care and community among friends as well as the formation of new family-like connections – especially between the mothers of victims and victims' friends. These examples of "othermothering" and "othersoning" should be explored further in future research.

Finally, it is important to note that for many of the boys at Boys' Prep, and those who grow up in similar social and economic contexts, off-time and early death is "constant." Whereas for teachers, Jahsun's death may have represented their first (or second) experience of losing a young person close to them, for most of their students this had become a normalized part of the social milieu. Though I have described the *hidden hard* period as the stage of institutional grief that came months after a major loss shared by the entire school community, it may be more accurate to think of this period as a perpetual state throughout the school year for so many students whose losses are generally not recognized nor memorialized by their school.

PART III | The Death of Bill

CHAPTER 7 | The Next Hard: A Repeated Cycle, the Accumulation of Loss, and Academic Decline

Death is in the air here.
Irell, senior

In 2018 at Boys' Prep, the long-awaited Spring Break was set to begin on Friday, March 29th – which made the day before full of frenetic energy, anticipation, and perhaps for some, dread. Students were excited for the freedom, the break from schoolwork, and the warming weather, but there was edge to it, an important qualification. I still vividly remember the time nearly a decade ago when, as a first-year teacher on the West Side of Chicago, I was made aware by a colleague the day before the school's first long vacation that not *every* student would be eagerly anticipating the time away from school. For some, the regularity and relationships of school made it the place where they felt most safe and cared for. They did not necessarily look forward to a week without school routines, and sometimes their feelings of trepidation in anticipation of a break might come out in strange or disruptive ways as it approached.

On this Thursday in late March, during the lunch period, I wondered what to make of the high energy in the room: how much was eagerness for Spring Break and pent up vigor after months of the winter slog, and how much might have been apprehension or worry about the time away? During the second of the three lunch periods, I was about to join a table of seniors – the circle of Jahsun's friends with whom I had become much closer over the last few months – when I realized a food fight was brewing at the table.

As it happened, two small food packages were part of the standard school lunch that day, both easily convertible into airborne missiles: one a bag of mini carrots, the other a pouch of bite size crackers.

The fight began tentatively as at first. A few boys lobbed carrots, one at a time, at friends across the table. None of this aroused the attention of the teachers and the SSOs who were tasked with monitoring the cafeteria. But the flying fistfuls of carrots or crackers, sometimes even a whole bag, at unsuspecting targets inspired a table of younger students to challenge the seniors to a full-scale throwing match, and soon a barrage of carrots and cracker bags was whistling across the cafeteria.

Of course this instantly stirred the distracted monitors. In a flurry of yelling and snatching of bags of food, the fun was halted. Within minutes, Mr. Pratt was in his windowless monitoring room next to the cafeteria kitchen reviewing the surveillance videos from the lunch period lividly determined to identify the culprits who started the mayhem and take disciplinary action against them even if it had to wait until everyone came back from spring break ten days later.

But ten days later, no disciplinary action would be taken. Cafeteria mayhem is the stuff of the stereotypical high school day, and the trademark conflicts between frisky adolescents and irritable disciplinarians. But for the third time in less than two years at Boys' Prep, over the break a far more lethal and horrific script of mayhem would be set off, with far more lasting consequences than the little punishments that Mr. Pratt was contemplating.

The Next Hard

Less than five months after Jahsun's death, Boys' Prep lost another young student to gun violence. Bill, a sophomore who had been at the table involved in the lighthearted pre-Spring Break food fight, was well-liked and respected by both peers and adults and considered a "good kid" for whom involvement any kind of violent event was unexpected and shocking.

Bill was shot in the middle of the afternoon on Easter Sunday, three days into Boys' Prep's spring break. He had been hanging out with some friends on a relatively busy downtown street, when an argument broke out with another group of teenagers. One 17-year-old pulled out a gun and, allegedly aiming for someone else, fired four shots hitting Bill in the lower back once.

The initial news to the Boys' Prep community was that Bill would survive. Although he was in and out of surgery for two days following the shooting, the odds seemed to be in his favor. Months later, his mother would tell me that at one point the doctor came out of surgery and announced that, "Bill's a lucky boy. He's going to be okay." A hopeful message went out to BP faculty and families that Bill had been shot, but that he was hanging in there.

But late Tuesday night, his conditioned worsened. Unable to stop the bleeding, doctors had gone through at least six hundred bags of donated blood. Every time Bill went back into surgery something else seemed to go wrong. As the family talked through what to do next, his heart stopped beating.

Wednesday morning, I woke up to the news in numerous Instagram posts from Boys' Prep students spanning all grades and social groups. Some students were posting as

a way of sharing information, others posting about their grief. Some of the boys, after they posted about Bill, reposted memorial messages to Tyhir and/or Jahsun as a way of signaling that this loss reminded them of other losses.

The news, of course, also reached the Boys' Prep staff. As he told me later on, the Principal was deeply shaken by this turn of events:

> *I had some dark moments with Bill where I was like, I can't do this. I was just praying so hard that he didn't pass away, and then when he did, I was just like, "I can't. How is this happening to me?" You get this focus on yourself. This is supposed to be my first year as principal. I can't do my job. Now, I've got all this. You get over this dark place, and then you sort of like get some perspective in there. His mother just lost her kid. This is not about you. Get your head out of the--Get back in the game and figure this out.*

It took Mr. Donaldson the better part of the day to gather himself and work up the courage to share the sad news with the school community. He sent an email to the entire Boys' Prep network that afternoon, followed by additional emails to school staff about plans for a gathering at the school on Thursday and a faculty meeting planned for Monday morning.

A Gathering for Collective Grief

I arrived at the school at 11am on Thursday, what should have been a day still solidly in spring break mode. There was no formal program planned, but stacks of pizzas had been ordered and dozens of students came just to have a place to be together. The cafeteria was impeccably clean: on one set of tables were pizzas, neat rows of plastic water bottles, and small bags of chips; around the perimeter, several tables were covered in different kinds of paper – colored construction paper, white poster paper, white index cards and small posters with glittered borders – as well as boxes of big thick red sharpies.

At least two other times that year – for Jahsun's memorial and the anti-gun violence rally – the cafeteria had been set up with these supplies.

Students began trickling in. Many came alone – some sat at tables by themselves immersed in whatever they were playing through their headphones. Some sat on the steps leading down to the cafeteria as if they were not fully ready to commit to being there. Surprisingly, very few students were eating. Eventually, eight of Bill's closest friends arrived all together and this seemed to break the ice as students began to gather in small groups and talk to each other. Bill was part of the first class at the Boys' Prep Middle School to progress through sixth through eighth grades and then enter the high school. His friend group was tight-knit because they had already been together for nearly five years and had, according to many of their teachers, collectively and successfully bought into the mission and culture of Boys' Prep.

Mr. Marker, a sophomore English teacher was sitting alone at one of the lunch tables. As I joined him, he looked calm, but very unhappy, and was holding on tightly to a brown rosary laid out in front of him on the table. He told me that this was his first student, his own student, whom he had ever lost. He acknowledged that he and Bill had not been particularly close, but they had always had mutual respect for each other. "I liked him," Mr. Marker repeated several times.

By noon, more students had arrived. One walked in holding a pair of sneakers already adorned with "RIP Bill" in sharpie. A few other students came in smelling of marijuana. Ezekiel walked down the steps, wearing athletic pants and a backwards BP baseball cap, with some other seniors and immediately asked, "is the grub free?" pointing to the pizzas. Ramell, headphones in, joked, "I didn't even know the school got money."

They each grabbed a few slices and sat around a rectangular cafeteria table, joined by a few other guys and two teachers. Once seated, Ezekiel shared that Bill had been a good friend: "We had class together last year, we used to bid all the time. He was one of the last hands I shook before break."

Throughout the rest of the cafeteria, there were many small clumps of people — some mostly students, some mostly adults, and some more mixed; the gathering felt familial and organic. By 12:15, there were about 60 students and 10 adults. Teachers were floating, seeming to make the rounds checking in on the kids they knew. Ms. Jordan was walking around with her baby, just a few months old. She thought to bring him to offer "baby therapy" for her students. A larger group of students was congregating on and around the steps. A few were trying to find out what they were waiting for, whether someone was going to talk or if there was some structure for the day. Eventually, a few boys decided to break the ice with the crafts area at the perimeter of the room. They chose the poster board with the glitter boarders and drew signs with text like "#LLB" or "Long Live Bill" and drawings of footballs or boxing gloves.

I sat down with Deron, a sophomore I had come to know pretty well. He said that he and Bill had gone to the BP middle school together and were "close friends." Deron had not really wanted to come to the school that day, but he felt like he should be there to check on his peers and make sure they were doing okay. He told me that it makes him so angry that he "can't control what happens to people, can't protect them." He seemed worried about his anger — "there are two different people I could become" – especially as he reflected that among the numerous losses he had already experienced, this was the

first person he was close to who was his age. Deron was finding it hard to accept that he might never know what really happened or why Bill had been killed.

Around 1pm, the crowd in the cafeteria started to thin out. The baseball team, in full uniform, had come and gone, grabbing pizza before heading to their spring break game. The track team also had a meet and some students were trying to coordinate rides from each other and a few teachers to get there. As the gathering was winding down, some teachers began congregating at a table to brainstorm plans for Monday. Mr. Marker said that he definitely did not intend to run class on Monday like normal. He had heard about Ms. Kallum's idea of having the cut up football with notes for Jahsun and so he was planning to do the same thing in his classroom for Bill with boxing gloves. Ms. Wu told her peers that she was trying to distract herself by being around kids, so she had gone to the lacrosse game the day before and was heading to the track meet shortly. Ms. Gordon, the chair of the English department, came over and asked me and the group for advice about books she could add to the summer reading list about grief and loss to support students in processing what they had gone through this year.

The Easy Hard Repeats

School resumed the following Monday, as it had five months earlier after Jahsun died, and the teachers gathered for an early morning faculty meeting to prepare themselves for what they knew would be a challenging day. Principal Donaldson started out with this acknowledgement: "it's going to be a tough day here, there's no other way around that." He talked for about eight minutes, mostly sharing information about the availability of resources for students and logistics. He asked teachers to help him identify

Bill's closest friends and then shared that Bill's best friend's mother had reach out to him that morning to ask about getting her son into counseling.

The feeling in the room was a little different than when teachers had gathered back in the fall to prepare for the Monday after losing Jahsun. Though a handful of teachers were visibly distressed, there was a more matter-of-fact tone to the discussion. This could have been attributed to Bill's relative young age and the far fewer number of teachers who knew him personally, or to it being the second time this year, or perhaps to the different circumstances.[53] Mr. Donaldson concluded the meeting by encouraging teachers to "be present with each other as well as focused on our students…It's not going to be an easy day, week, school year conclusion for any of us."

Across the school, teachers passed along the message of latitude and support in many concrete ways. Mr. Donaldson had written a script for Bill's teachers that they could choose to read to their class, and at least one teacher did so. It read, in part: "let's allow each other the freedom to process in a way that feels true for each of us." Another teacher offered his class four options for how to use class time: write a reflection, do regular classwork, "take a personal day," or finish a project. Ms. Finn who taught sophomores, whom she knew would be the most affected group, kept the lights off in her room and made tea for her students. Student volunteers refilled the water heater in the bathroom several times to produce enough for the whole class.

[53] Mr. Hopkins reflected, "There's a big difference between getting a phone call that says, 'Your student has been murdered,' to getting a phone call that says, 'Your student has been shot and all recover,' and then ends up dying."

Where these offerings of support were somewhat haphazard or spontaneous in November, this time it seemed that many teachers had been more intentional about planning what to do, and some had learned "best practices" or explicitly revised their strategies from the fall. For example, Ms. Kallum reflected that she had learned from the last time how to respond best to students: "I think I was a little bit more in tune to things that they might be experiencing. So I talked to guys individually and asked them if they knew [Bill] and then how they were feeling and stuff." Ms. Finn borrowed the strategy her friend and colleague, Ms. Cain, had used in November of creating a mini survey for her classes to get a sense of what each student individually was feeling and what he might need from her in the coming days. While some teachers might have winged their remarks to their classes last time, this time many had scripts or at least notes written out. Students also noticed an improvement in the adults' handling of their emotions. Tameron, a senior, compared the school's response to Jahsun's and Bill's death and observed that "basically, [the school] handled it well, but with Bill they found some different things that didn't work from the first time."

In Bill's English class, his teacher offered some introductory remarks, again offering students multiple options for how they could spend the class period:

> *So…it's a day. I want you guys to decide for yourself what you need to do. I'm not going to force anything on you guys. If you need to work on your outline, you work on your outline. If you need to look at the backs of your eyelids, you can look at the backs of your eyelid. If you want to listen to music today, you can listen to music. Whatever it is you need to do, you can self-assess that inside. Your outlines are going to be due at the start of class tomorrow though.*

Some students looked up at this moment, pleadingly, and the teacher conceded that she would still give students full credit for their essay outlines even if they were not completely finished – as long as they looked like there had been some effort.

In the hallways, once again, the usual demands on students' behavioral and sartorial compliance were temporarily lifted. It was the first day students were allowed to wear the school's spring uniform – a short-sleeved white polo shirt with the khaki pants and the usual belt, black socks, and black shoes combination – instead of the button-up shirt, tie, and blazer. There were kinks to be worked out: missing uniform components, untucked shirts, incorrect socks. But on this day, these mishaps were forgiven. Likewise, there were no penalties for the students who defaced school property by writing messages in sharpie on Bill's locker and the ones surrounding it or those who skipped classes to hang out by the lockers and reflect.

Despite adults' sensitivity to what they were going through, many students still had a hard time in the classrooms where Bill had been. In homeroom, his classmates were glassy-eyed as they stood for a moment of silence. In computer class on Monday, one of Bill's close friends sat in the back row. Ignoring the instructions being offered by his teacher, he had found a piece of blank printer paper and began writing on it. When he finished, the teacher still talking at the front of the room, he walked up the aisle of computers to one of the middle rows and put the paper down across the keyboard of the computer closest to the wall, which had been Bill's seat. His message included several hashtags referencing his friend's death as well as the phrase, "Love you Bill" (Figure 7.1). In Bill's art class, Denzel was seated across from Bill's empty seat, headphones in

his ears and staring off into space. “We all hide our emotions,” he told me. “It wouldn’t be good to show them in this environment.”

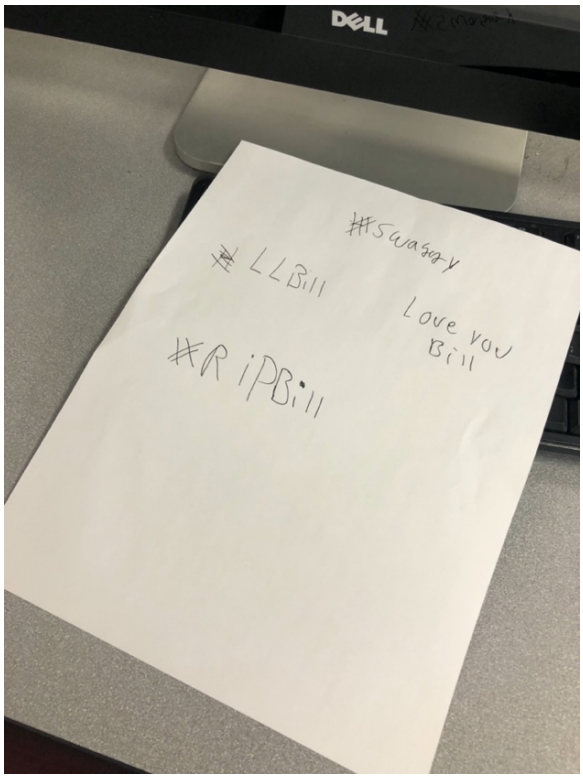


Figure 7.1 A note at the computer station Bill used to use left by one of his classmates.

As before, some students also felt territorial about their grief and possessive over the memory of their fallen friend. Freshman Trayvon, a close friend of Bill’s, was frustrated that some of his peers were using social media to express grief that he felt was unwarranted given their relationship with Bill. He told me, angrily, “I’m just sick of all these guys pretending they knew my mans, posting about him, looking all sad….All these niggas posting like they knew my mans…they posting ‘RIP I love you,’ but did you ever tell him you love him when he was around.” This echoed a sentiment he had expressed

several times over the previous few days on social media. In advance of the Thursday informal gathering at school, he had posted, "please if u didn't know him don't come cause we don't want none of that fake shit." And then again, on Sunday night as Trayvon prepared to return to school Monday and sit in classrooms and at lunch tables that no longer included Bill, he wrote a post on Instagram:

> *Just cause y'all met my homie once or twice don't mean y'all tight[.] where was y'all at when we was walking home in cold weather to the L everyday after school or sunny days getting water ice and pretzels or them L rides after detention[.] y'all can't relate to our pain* 💯.

While students like Trayvon were suspicious of others' grief, other groups of boys leaned on each other and seemed to appreciate not having to go through their mourning experience alone.

Similar to the Monday after Jahsun's death, there was an outside counselor brought into the building to be available to students; but most of Bill's friends preferred to hang out with the social worker from the Boys' Prep middle school who spent the day at the high school in the same designated "counseling room." Since Bill and most of his core group of friends had been together sixth through eighth grade at the middle school, they seemed to appreciate seeing a familiar face in their former social worker. A large group of students gathered in the designated counseling room throughout the day. The energy ebbed and flowed between lively and upbeat and somber. Sometimes, in the middle of an energetic group conversation, one student would pull back from the group and burst into tears or curl over with his head in his lap; within seconds, someone would notice and go over to rub his back or engage him in conversation. At one point in the afternoon, a group of about six sophomores had gathered in a circle. They were playing

around by rapping and making up new verses to popular songs until one interjected to the group, "Are we going to get wristbands for Bill?"

Though the counseling space seemed to work well for Bill's closest friends, other students who had not attended the middle school or were not part of this core group of friends, may not have felt as welcome there. For example, one senior had observed that he had never even heard about any rooms available for students who needed support after Bill's death. He contrasted this with the days following Jahsun's death when there was much public discussion of where students who needed extra support could go.

The Hard Hard Returns

With Monday's disruptions to standard school protocols more streamlined and practiced, the return to relative normalcy in school day routines by Tuesday seemed faster. The *hard hard* stage of varied student needs, mixed messages about discipline and academic expectations, and the institutional policing of grief had a reprise. By Tuesday, even Bill's closest friends were expected to be in class – there was no additional room for them to take time away this time. Renewed disciplinary attention to the uniform and students' use of their cell phones could be felt and heard in the hallways.

Even as they remained focused on Bill's friends, the administrative team responsible for discipline at Boys' Prep remained concerned that Jahsun's circle of senior friends were not bouncing back well enough from their loss months earlier. Mr. Hardwick expressed concern that the boys did not have the "maturity" to "put certain things in perspective." Without that, he theorized, their grief "becomes systemic. One thing happens and it tears down everything." Mr. Hardwick reflected that in the months after Jahsun's death, he and his team were working hard to

> *get back on our bicycle again, to lift these guys up. They [were] falling apart. You got to pick them back up. …So we have to get back on our [uniform] shirts, blah, blah, blah. This again and jump right back into cycle. ….back into the swing of things and then boom. Bill. All the way back down. This time, it wasn't the seniors. It was the guys in 11th and 10th. So now we have to deal with seniors falling apart, whereas now we got to go back down to the 11th and 10th grade. Aw man, they going through it, man. …So we just trying to juggle all these different things.*

Juggling multiple groups of grieving students with different needs, on top of the usual disciplinary battles, was a challenge. After reflecting on the disciplinary choices they had made in the fall and winter, the administrative team decided that it was important that they return more quickly to disciplinary normalcy, especially for the groups of students they perceived to be less acutely impacted by Bill's death. As Mr. Hopkins explained,

> *We did put in some things in place that were a little bit different [than the first time this happened], just seeing that perhaps the ways in which students were grieving after Jahsun's death really had a huge impact on how they were doing academically and socially. For some of those seniors, some of his friends, they were able to bounce back. For others, there wasn't. It really was the end of their senior year. There was some negative stuff that was already going on. They really just turned sour.*

Mr. Hopkins and others were committed to trying to ensure that Bill's friends were able to move back into their academic routines quickly and smoothly.

But across the school, adults expressed more awareness that the quick return to normalcy might be difficult for some students. For instance, in a focus group of teachers, Mr. Gilbert, a veteran English teacher, wondered:

> *What do our boys do when they go home and everyone's getting back to normal and they're like, 'Well, why are you acting like this? Why are you still--are you still upset about this, seriously?' …So I don't know that there's that safe space to be able to do that, to work through what they're going through.*

This teacher imagined that students may be getting messages from many people in their life even beyond the school building that it was time to move on before they were ready.

Students like Quinton, a sophomore, described being in school without Bill feeling "weird…because I've been going to school with him since sixth grade. It's like, I seen him every single day, and not to see him is like I went somewhere else, like I went to a different school or something." Teachers, also, noticing that their classrooms felt different, wondered how much they should adjust their curricular plans as they moved toward the end of the school year. Mr. Gilbert, freshman English teacher, was unsure whether to go along with his scheduled plans to start reading *Lord of the Flies* with his class since it was "a weird thing to talk about now," but ultimately decided to stay on schedule. In his classroom, "there's always questions about who you are and how you're feeling, it's just a natural part of the class because we're always trying to connect to the literature," so that made it possible for him to keep the curricular plan going while also monitoring how potentially grieving students were doing. In contrast, Ms. Wu, who taught science, acknowledged that she found it especially hard in her classes, and presumably in math classes too, to figure out how to acknowledge what had happened "because there really isn't any space for you to sit down and be like okay let's talk about our feelings unless it's like we're going to chuck the lesson and just talk."

In an elective class on Race and Ethnicity on Tuesday, English teacher Mr. Kahn tried to use Bill's murder as a way for the class to talk about racist stereotypes. He shared on the projector some headlines and quotes from newspaper articles about the shooting and Bill's eventual death. One quote from the police department, stating that Bill "had no priors and came from a good family," generated conflicting opinions. One student thought it was "good to mention that." Another hedged: "it's a double edged sword." Someone else called out, "It's never fair, [but] it's just natural." And another student

added that he believed that if it had been a white kid killed, the articles would have focused on mental illness or addiction as the cause. While some students seemed ready to engage and draw out larger sociological meaning from this incident, others did not feel like participating. Sybrii leaned back in his chair pulling at his eyelids. Kaliq was also quiet, sitting with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. Later, he put his head on the desk and fell asleep.

Because Bill's circle of friends had been smaller than Jahsun's and they were only sophomores, there seemed to be a more definable group of those presumed by school leaders to be most deeply affected students on which the administration could focus their efforts. Several teachers observed that although the closeness of Bill's friend group meant they offered strong support to each other, because they had entered the high school as a clique carrying over from their middle school years, they had failed to develop close relationships with teachers. "They had each other, so they didn't need me as much," reflected Ms. Bloom. "With other groups of freshmen, they don't know anyone so I can get to them before they make friends and then we're bonded for the rest of their time in high school," she added referencing how she had formed closer connections with both Tyhir's and Jahsun's circles of friends.

Ms. Rivera invited in a counselor from a local organization, the Center for Grieving Children, to run a short-term weekly group for Bill's friends to give them a designated space to work through their feelings about his death. And Wednesday's assembly for sophomores was intended, by design, to help the sophomores transition from their grief back into their end-of-year school goals. The program began with reflections on Bill, but moved quickly into other updates, congratulations to sports teams,

and then some fun and games. The strategy of acknowledging the sadness students were experiencing and then guiding them into other emotions seemed to work. Dr. Stephens, who had been pacing around the sides and back of the group of kids, looked up at me as this shift began to happen and said, "It's good to see them laughing."

Yet, still, there were some of the same tensions and conflicts that emerged during the *hard hard* period after Jahsun's death. Both teachers and students struggled with how to move forward in their classrooms in the days and weeks that followed. The monitoring and policing of students' grief by both teachers and peers also reoccurred. And there were disagreements about how much students should be disciplined for behaviors that might be connected to their grief, especially as Jahsun's friends continued to struggle as they moved toward their graduation.

Memorial Events

Bill's funeral was scheduled for the following weekend, which was already packed with other events for the school community: a Boys' Prep school dance/mixer and Jahsun's birthday for which there had been a previously planned memorial football game and evening fundraiser event for Jahsun's memorial fund.[54] Earlier in the week, some of Jahsun's friends were talking about this stacking of events: Khalil shared that he had heard that school officials "are talking about rescheduling the mixer because of the funeral." The friends he was standing with expressed annoyance and wondered out loud when there would even be time to reschedule before the end of the year. Tony, who had

[54] Jahsun's mother worked with the Boys' Prep football coach to organize a memorial football game for Jahsun's first birthday after his death, in April. She also hosted a fundraiser at a bowling alley to raise money for the scholarship fund she was launching in his memory.

been deeply impacted by Jahsun's death, suggested, "Bill dying doesn't pertain to us." Khalil then added, "I feel sorry for the family, but it's not our business." Although these boys may have wanted more schoolwide attention paid to their suffering after Jahsun's death, they now wanted to move on unencumbered by others' grief. Ultimately, the mixer was canceled and, as they boys predicted, never rescheduled. Jahsun's football game was rescheduled for the summer; and the bowling fundraiser event in the evening organized by Jahsun's mother went on as planned, the same day as Bill's funeral.

Bill's funeral on Saturday marked the end of the first week back at school after spring break. It was one of those days that teased spring in the midst of what had come to feel like an endless winter. The church was only a few blocks from the school and nearly all its pews were full by the time the service started 10am. Dozens of students and teachers attended. The boys were mostly dressed casually, some with RIP sweatshirts embellished with Bill's face. As at other services I had been to in this community, the majority of boys appeared to attend without parents or other family – though one teacher noted that at this particular service she saw many more students there with their parents than she had at previous memorial events. Still, most students came alone by bus or car, or they carpooled with each other; several students texted favorite teachers to ask for rides to or from the services or cemetery. In the sea of mourners, the students from Boys' Prep found each other upon arrival, greeting peers and teachers with warm hugs, and then sat together for the service – teachers, school administrators, and students all mixed in together. Mr. Kahn and a group of sophomores performed the Boys' Prep pledge in front of the casket, and many of the mourners who offered eulogies mentioned Boys' Prep or Bill's school friends as part of the story of his life.

The repast after the funeral service was held at the Boys' Prep middle school. For Mr. Hopkins, it was important that the school was able to offer something meaningful to the family, but he reflected that in comparison to the memorial service for Jahsun which was also held at the school, the event for Bill "wasn't quite the same thing as all teachers coming together and being part of it. But we all need different things after," he added. Indeed it was a smaller crowd of folks from the school community; heavier on Bill's family, neighbors, and friends from non-school contexts. Most of the BP students who attended got their plate of food from the cafeteria and then gathered outside in the parking lot leaving the grown-ups and Bill's non-school mourners to fill the decorated tables inside.

Although the football game in honor of Jahsun's birthday had been cancelled because of the funeral, the fundraiser bowling party went on as planned that evening. A handful of students who had been close to both Bill and Jahsun attended both events in a single day, some changing their clothes in between to materially mark each loss appropriately.

Challenges for Teachers

After Bill's funeral, I joined a handful of teachers for lunch at their favorite spot in the neighborhood. They had decided not to join the family for the burial so needed to occupy themselves until it was time for the repast where they intended to greet the family and be a support to their students. While we were waiting for others to arrive at the restaurant, Ms. Gordon, Ms. Wu, and I talked about what had happened. For Ms. Wu, Bill was the fourth student she had taught or been closely connected to who had died in her five years of teaching. "After the first one, I was a wreck. Now I think I'm

desensitized. I'm starting to understand what the kids feel," she reflected. Ms. Wu went on to tell us that her mom had begun advising her to quit teaching, and so she was finding it hard to talk to her family about what she was going through because they did not understand, which was especially painful for her.

The next week, Ms. Gallo, the college counselor who sometimes provided guidance counseling as well, shared a similar feeling. She said she had been talking with a few other teachers and they all agreed that the experience of losing Bill felt different for them than Jahsun. They believed they were becoming desensitized, even numb, to the deaths of their students, and this upset them. It was as if the normalization of early death that students took on as a survival mechanism was rubbing off on them and on the school as a whole. They felt, on the one hand, less intense sadness after Bill's loss than Jahsun's because it was not the first, but, on the hand, more feelings of being overwhelmed with the number of students they wanted to care for and the depths of their needs. Teachers were aware of this happening, and concerned, but unsure of how to push back against it *and* retain enough of their own sanity and well-being to continue to teach and support their students.

This hit Ms. Bloom perhaps hardest of all. Soon after Bill's death she told me during a quiet moment in the hallway that she worried she was becoming "desensitized" to all the death. She was noticing that she did not feel much anymore: "After Ty, I was barely functional. With Jah, I think I was in survival mode — just for the guys. Now, I don't know. I'm just worried about the guys." She explained that although she never taught Bill and did not know him that well, she was close with many of his friends and she was especially worried about a few of them. "I just don't know what to say to them,"

she added. At the same time, Ms. Bloom was struggling with how to handle her own emotions:

> *I just feel like this year I haven't had a minute to breathe. I've taught more classes than I ever had with a class that's been the most challenging class I've ever taught. On top of it, I have a lot of kids who lean on me. I feel like I haven't really had a minute to process everything or take care of myself. And there's so many of them. I leave sometimes, with guilt. [One student] is in my class today just sitting there. Maybe he needed to talk to me and I just was so busy that I just walked out. It's just a lot.*

Ms. Bloom's classroom had become a space of both joy and mourning since Tyhir's death and she the go to person for so many students when they were struggling, but she worried that the amount she was giving was not sustainable and wondered what to make of her own emerging feelings of numbness.

For other teachers – especially those who grew up in circumstances quite different from their students', or who did not share their students' racial and class backgrounds – experiencing multiple losses in one year gave them more insight into what students generally went through and unfairness of how much loss they experience. This, in turn, impacted their approach to their teaching. For Ms. Cain, for example, the events of the year fundamentally shifted her sense of the school building as a space safe from death:

> *For a long time, it's like all that stuff happened outside of school and you can come here and be silly and this was a place that was untouched by that. And it's not that way anymore. So [students] seem kind of, not mad at that, but I don't know if it's like a mask dropping off or what, but it's like, it's just another place where you're going to have to anticipate losses. …I know that they used to have…peers and family who were killed, but we could just openly talk about death as though it was this abstract thing in the classes I taught. Now I couldn't even imagine the same approach that I used to do and it used to work because this place is no longer death free.*

Though Ms. Cain acknowledged that her students were *always* experiencing losses outside of school and carrying that emotional weight, she had previously perceived the

space of Boys' Prep as "death free," as a place where death could remain an "abstract" concept and boys could "be silly" and free and perhaps almost forget about the other stuff for a few hours a day. Now that death had directly hit the school, however, she felt that it was no longer a safe space for students but another part of their life where they would "have to anticipate losses." And, in turn, Ms. Cain realized that she would have to think about her teaching differently, particularly in the philosophy class she taught which often dealt with big topics like life and death.

The Accumulation of Death

Among students, even those who did not know Bill well, many experienced his death as additive to their prior losses. They would speak of their losses as an accumulation or accrual of like events that were not the sum of their parts, but something more devastating. Some students were able to articulate the way their emotional reaction shifted as they grappled with the second classmate lost within a single school year. Jason, a senior who had been friendly but not close with Jahsun and had barely known Bill, reflected on how the school losing a second student made him think about Black men's longevity in general:

> *Jahsun, his death made me mad and sad. But I felt like Bill's death, it made me more mad than sad. I didn't know Bill very well. He was two grades below me, but it was a sense of hopelessness. Why we gotta keep dying? That's how I felt. Why? Why can't we just live to where we're supposed to live? Get that 80 years, that ripe old age. But we don't even have the privilege for that, because of where we live, and how we live, stuff like that. It just seems hopeless at times. There are some good times to brighten it up, but sometimes the reality, it hits you. Yeah. It's just bad. … No one is exempt from death. But I feel like as Black men, we're already prone to death and then to kill each other, it's counter intuitive.*

Jason described feeling more hopeless. One death of a peer might be written off as a freak accident or bad luck, but two was starting to be a pattern. And put in the context of all the other premature deaths in his vicinity, the "reality" was hitting him and make him "mad" at the injustice of it. Though there is some evidence of an "inoculation effect" from repeated exposure to trauma, other researchers have found that experiencing multiple traumatic events "can sensitize individuals, creating vulnerability to enhanced psychological and physiological distress following future adversity" and that even *indirect* exposure to collective traumatic events can be just as distressing to individuals (Andersen et al. 2013:1, 2).

Multiple losses and the crowding of loss-related events in the spring created a sense of the increased presence of death in and around the school. Senior Irell reflected on this feeling:

> *I still feel like death is in the air here. …It's like a feeling that right now the school is attracting death towards it. Not to say, like…just because you go to Boys' Prep people are targeting you on the street, but Jahsun died. Bill died. I have personal friends that died. It's just, I don't know, every time I come here, you're reminded. Even the [mural of one of the school's early supporters, now deceased, painted on the wall of one of the school's hallways]. That you're reminded of everybody that's no longer here with us, making it forever a reminder that you're not going to live forever. You're not really here.*

The constant presence of death in Irell's life, and even on the walls of the school building, was a reminder for him that he, too, would die and perhaps that he's "not really here."

The sense of an accumulation of losses could be seen in the boys' activity online. As I noted in the last chapter, when posting about the death of a friend, many boys took a roll call approach following up the most recent loss with a list of the other significant

people they had lost in the past. In Figure 7.2, I track the references to Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill in my participants' Instagram posts and stories during the 2017-2018 school year. In November and April, the months when Jahsun and Bill died, there is a spike in the online memorializations of the previous Boys' Prep loss: there were more posts about Tyhir in November than in the month before or after, and more posts about Jahsun in April than the month before or after (though April was also the month of Jahsun's birthday). This offers some credence to my observations that the loss of a peer might reopen old wounds of previous losses, perhaps making it more difficult to heal from each one (Grinage 2019).

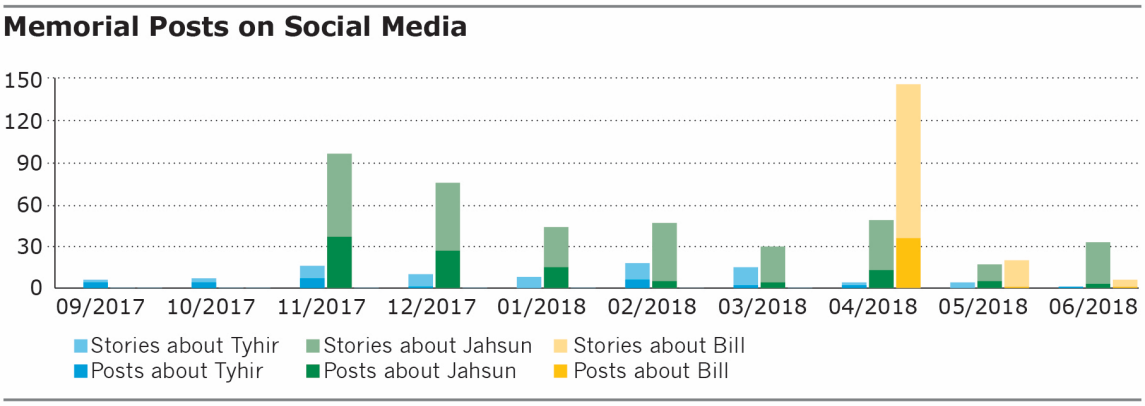
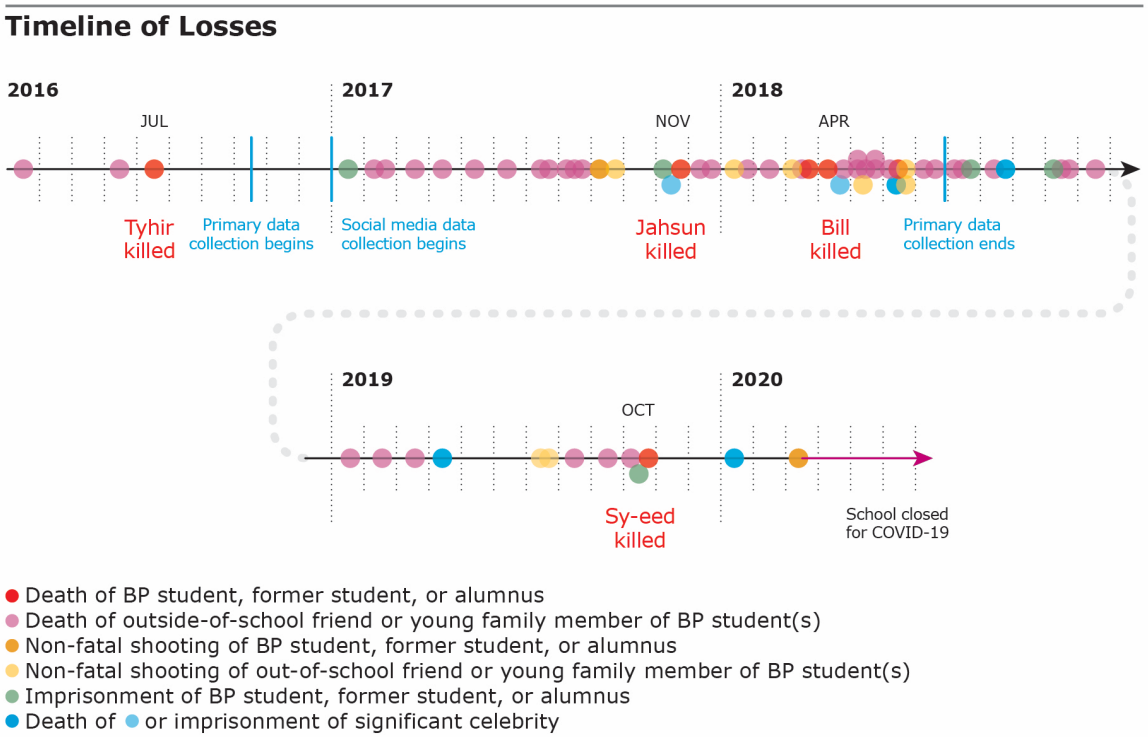


Figure 7.2 Memorial posts about Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill by month during the 2017-2018 school year among those participants whose Instagram accounts I had consent to follow.[55]

[55] By the end of my research, I was following a total of 75 consenting Boys' Prep students on Instagram and screenshotting their posts daily; however, I did not get to know some of these students until later points in the 2017-2018 school year. Some students also closed their accounts and opened new ones so there was sometimes a lag in my observations before I caught on to the change. Therefore, the number of students whose posts were observed in any given month was not consistent. Additionally, there were some students who posted to social media at rates much higher than their peers. Future analysis might be aided by removing the anomalous excessive social media users to get a better sense of the general use across the group. Despite these inconsistencies, this chart can still be useful in offering an overall sketch of the ebbs and flows of online memorializing. It is also notable that there is not a single month since the death of each boy when he is not memorialized in at least one post among my sample.

Despite the year's tragic record of the deaths of current students, these were not the only losses to impact the BP community. With the weather warming, there were an increasing number of other incidents of violence in Philadelphia. Among them, at least two other young men who were marginally connected to the Boys' Prep community were also killed that spring: One young man who had briefly attended Boys' Prep a few years earlier and was remembered mostly by long-time faculty and several upperclassmen, was murdered the same weekend as Bill. And the following month, on the night of the BP senior prom, another young man who had previously attended the school was killed. A group of friends, neighbors, and family members had gathered at Quartell's house, just around the corner from the school, to see him off for his senior prom. After he and his date left for the event, the party at his house continued, but was interrupted less than an hour later by gunfire which took the life of Quartell's best friend. In the chart below (Figure 7.3), I show how the deaths and gun violence injuries of both BP-connected young people and others in their social network punctuated nearly every month of the year for students at Boys' Prep. Add to these losses the incarceration of school peers, as well as the deaths and incarcerations of celebrity role models, and the picture is even bleaker.



March 2016: Friend of several BP students dies of meningitis. **June 2016:** Friend of several BP students killed in Pulse Nightclub shooting. **July 2016:** Tyhir killed. **January 2017:** BP senior imprisoned (temporarily). **February 2017:** Jahsun's friend killed; Latrell's friend killed. **March 2017:** Herc's cousin killed. **April 2017:** Kaliq's uncle killed. **May 2017:** Jahsun's friend killed. **June 2017:** Herc's mentor/'old head' killed. **July 2017:** Yaja's friend killed; Jahsun's friend killed. **August 2017:** Jonquett's friend killed; Hazeem's cousin killed; Herc's friend killed. **September 2017:** BP alumnus shot, survives; Hazeem's cousin shot, survives. **November 2017:** BP alumnus imprisoned (temporarily); Jahsun killed; Philadelphia rapper Meek Mill imprisoned. **December 2017:** Allen's friend dies of asthma attack; Antoine's uncle killed. **January 2018:** Hazeem's friend killed; Hazeem's friend shot, survives. **February 2018:** Friend of several BP students dies. **March 2018:** Kaliq's friend stabbed, survives; Herc's friend killed; Former BP student killed. **April 2018:** Bill killed; Owen's friend killed; Bill Cosby convicted and imprisoned. **May 2018:** Denzel's friend killed; Khalil's mentor/'old head' killed; Quartell's cousin killed; Tameron's friend killed; Herc's friend killed; Friend of several BP students shot, survives. **June 2018:** Former BP student and Quartell's best friend killed on prom night; Kaliq's cousin shot, survives; Herc's friend shot, survives; Female friend of several BP students killed; Rapper XXXTentacion killed. **July 2018:** Larry's friend killed; Friend of several BP students killed. **August 2018:** Herc's friend killed; Friend of several BP students killed; Former BP student arrested for that murder. **September 2018:** Kaliq's friend killed; Rapper Mac Miller dies of overdose. **November 2018:** Ezekiel arrested and temporarily imprisoned while in college; Larry's friend killed; Latrell's friend killed. **December 2018:** Ezekiel's friend killed. **January 2019:** Herc's friend killed. **February 2019:** Jonquett's friend killed. **March 2019:** Bashir's cousin killed. **April 2019:** Rapper Nipsey Hussle killed. **July 2019:** Two of Herc's friends shot, survive. **August 2019:** Quartell's friend killed. **September 2019:** Friend of several BP students killed. **October 2019:** Sy-eed killed; Emmet's friend dies; BP alum arrested and imprisoned for murder. **January 2020:** Kobe Bryant dies. **March 2020:** BP senior shot, survives.

Figure 7.3 Timeline of losses experienced by the Boys' Prep students in my sample. Each dot on the timeline corresponds to a person killed, injured, or imprisoned and is documented in the monthly list below the timeline. Data were collected primarily through observations of posts on social media, and confirmed through interviews and in-person observations. Data during primary data collection period are most accurate, though all months are likely an under-estimate of actual losses experienced within my participants' social networks.

Herc's Tumultuous Spring

Herc's story provides the clearest example of how multiple peer losses can bear down on a young person. Herc returned from Spring Break with more than just Bill's death on his mind. The day Bill finally succumbed to his gunshot wounds was Herc's seventeenth birthday, and the following day, another of his friends who did not attend BP was killed. When Herc reflects back on his junior year, what he mostly remembers are the losses and the way they started to accumulate and build on each other:

> *I started losing people back to back. I lost my man, Kyle, in August. He from my hood. Then we lost Jahsun like two months later after that. Then I lost Bill, then Murak like the next day. I lost Bill on my birthday, and I lost Murak like the day after my birthday. That's why when I came to the school [for Bill's memorial gathering during spring break], I was like, "damn." Because at first, they said Bill was going to pull through. But he didn't. That's why that shit shocked me.*

After losing a second friend in two days, Herc shared an Instagram story with the caption "R.i.p. to da guys ❤️🕊️" referencing eight fallen friends, including the two most recently added to his tally at the top and bottom of the list (Figure 7.4).

On Monday, back at school, Herc was a wreck. Ms. Jordan, the first-year math teacher who had increasingly become his favorite confidant, "had a moment with Herc" that day. As she explained to me the following morning, "he seems to have progressed from angry to sad. I told him yesterday that he needs an outlet, he can't keep it all inside, even if it's just by himself. Finally he just broke down and started crying. He was saying, 'No matter what I do kids are gonna keep dying and I could get shot just walking home.'" Herc similarly described the conversation with Ms. Jordan as him "breaking down." Then he added, "She's helping me get my grades up. I felt better after talking to her."

Figure 7.4 Herc's Instagram story. Memorial to eight deceased friends and family members including Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill (other names have been blacked out).

After "breaking down" with Ms. Jordan on Monday, Herc was still in bad shape on Tuesday. Ms. Jordan had decided to give him some space – "I don't want him to feel like he always has to talk about it, but I'll check back in later in the week," she told me. But in the afternoon, as I turned the corner on the second floor hallway, I saw Herc sitting on the floor teary talking to Ms. Kim. A few minutes later, he was bawling. Other students walking by started to stare and pepper him with questions, so he and Ms. Kim moved downstairs to an empty conference room in the main office where they could have privacy. Ms. Kim texted me, "Herc having a breakdown in main office conference room." When I joined, Herc was crying, bent over with his head in his hands. He was not

interested in our usual hug. I caught up on the specific events that were upsetting him as he and Ms. Kim continued to talk. One of his friends was in a bind and was asking Herc to join him to fight some other people from their neighborhood; Herc worried that the conflict could turn deadly and he really did not want to get involved, but he was feeling tremendous pressure.

Eventually, Herc pulled himself together enough to go to his afterschool job at McDonald's, for which he was already running late. Ms. Kim offered to drive him, and I tagged along, knowing that it was a 30 minute drive from the school and then Ms. Kim would have to come back alone. Herc went up to his locker to get his stuff before we all headed to Ms. Kim's car. In the car, we alternated between silly conversations – I let Herc scroll through my Instagram feed which he though was boring, as I scrolled through his – and the pressing matter at hand. Ms. Kim and I helped Herc brainstorm texts he could write to his friend to get out of the request.

By 5pm, we made it to the McDonald's just in time for the start of Herc's shift. Without the ride, he would have had to take two buses and a train to get there, since this place was definitely in the suburbs, off to the side of a small highway. The inside also felt suburban: the tables and seats were new and comfortable. The floor and bathroom were impeccable clean. Some of the tables were even adorned with small vases of flowers. Herc went into the back to change into his uniform, a blue polo shirt with a subtle "M" logo and a black visor. He explained that he had been assigned to work in the back today, but he had permission to take our orders for fun. Ms. Kim and I each ordered a snack, getting a kick out of seeing Herc in a new context, and Herc delivered our food to us at our table. After we ate and spied on Herc for a few minutes, we rushed out and back to

the University of Pennsylvania's campus since we were both late for class – Ms. Kim was working part time on an MSW degree. We left Herc looking happy and joking around with his diverse crew of co-workers. We were relieved to see that not only did he have a team of Boys' Prep teachers looking out for him, but it seemed that Herc also had peers at work to lift his spirits.

Unfortunately, Herc lost his job at McDonald's about a month later. He got in a fight with his boss and was fired mid-shift; Jonquett and Latrell had met the same fate just a week or two earlier, and none of them seemed particularly disappointed. Being out of work gave Herc more time to focus on his schoolwork for the final push of his junior year. Despite his loss of income and the murder of another friend in May, the commitment Herc had cautiously made in March to try to get back on track was having some effect. And Herc continued to seek out and receive individual caring support from several Boys' Prep teachers.

Boys' Prep was a small enough school that a student like Herc could develop a reputation relatively easily. Despite him being known for often being absent and/or high, most adults in the building – even those who did not teach or interact with him directly – had very warm feelings toward Herc. He was described as sweet, thoughtful, silly, and hardworking when he wanted to be, and several teachers took a special interest in trying to support his progress. In the late spring, a few emails went around on the faculty listserv documenting and praising Herc's personal growth and commitment to his work. One of these emails, with the subject line "Mad props to Ms. Jordan," praised the teacher's mentorship of Herc with an attached photo of him gleefully reading. Another email included a teacher's own humble brag about her classroom being hard at work during 8th

period (the last period of the day, which was often a struggle across the school) with photos of several students, including one of Herc dutifully writing at the whiteboard. Teachers were rooting for him and Herc was taking advantage of all the care he received to make it through his junior year.

Bouncing Back and Finding Motivation

Other students also struggled over time to bounce back from their loss and making lasting changes to their behaviors or commitments. Dean Hopkins worried about a pattern he began to observe that those students who committed themselves to particular life transformations in honor of their friend would then experience tremendous guilt if they were unable to follow through on their goals. Mr. Hopkins noticed this throughout the winter among Jahsun's friends and then saw it play out more intensely among Bill's friends in the spring. He reflected that in many of his disciplinary meetings towards the end of the school year with Bill's friends and their parents – for example, the required reinstatement meetings that happen after a student has been suspended and before he can return to school – Bill's death was a topic of conversation. As parents were trying to push their sons to get back on track or refocus on school, they might say to their sons a version of: "Bill died, [but] get on with it…Time to move on. You can't keep having this doubt, this fear, this depression." Or something like, "You should know better than to be saying these kind of things. Don't you know that's what got Bill killed." Mr. Hopkins hoped these parental pep talks would be effective in improving school achievement and promoting students' prosocial school behavior, but he also worried that they might demoralize them even more.

Indeed, several students reported to me on the complexity of finding motivation in their loss. The lessons they took from their friend's death were not necessarily the same ones their parents or teachers hoped they would. For example, during the first week back after spring break, I caught one of Bill's best friends, Trayvon, in the hallway. When I asked how he was handling his friend's death, he told me that he was sad, but also feeling motivated: "I'm gonna go hard with my music now." He had written and recorded a new rap song the day before, shared it immediately, and was already getting some attention for it from a few "Philly famous" rappers who expressed interest in collaborating. "Bill always supported me, told me take [my music] more seriously," he added as we walked toward his classroom. When we got to the door, I signaled that he should probably go inside since the period had already started. "I don't mess with her," he said flippantly about his teacher. "I don't care about school, never did. I could say I would focus on school more for Bill, but he knew I wasn't on that school type time. Not gonna lie." The motivation Trayvon got from losing Bill was limited to the specific domains in which he believed Bill knew him to care about.

Another student, Irell, made a similar argument after Jahsun's death about his choice not to adjust his coping style from what it had been before. Though he recognized that there might be approaches to grief that were healthier than how he was presently handling things, he believed it would be "disrespectful" to his friend to adjust his response from what Jahsun would have expected of him based on how they had interacted during his life:

> *You didn't know me as somebody who talked it out…who calmly thought out all his answers [or] actions…so why would I calmly think about your death?. . . It*

> *would feel disrespectful to Jahsun if I was like "aight…let me calmly compose myself to try to properly wrap my head around everything that happened with him" when that's not how he will remember me. [Jahsun] will remember me as somebody who did him, [who] just acted out in a way that he felt was right at any given moment, at any given time. That would be the way Jahsun would remember me. That would be the way I would honor him….You would want people to honor you in the way that they were introduced, in the way that they've interacted around you.*

Irell went on to the build the argument that he if had always been someone who smiled, it would "darken the image" of his late friend if he lost his smile over that person's death. As Irell's and Trayvon's examples show, over time – and especially as students experienced more losses – their ability to bounce back and recover would depend on the specific domains of motivation they felt from the memory of their friend.

Varied Academic Trajectories

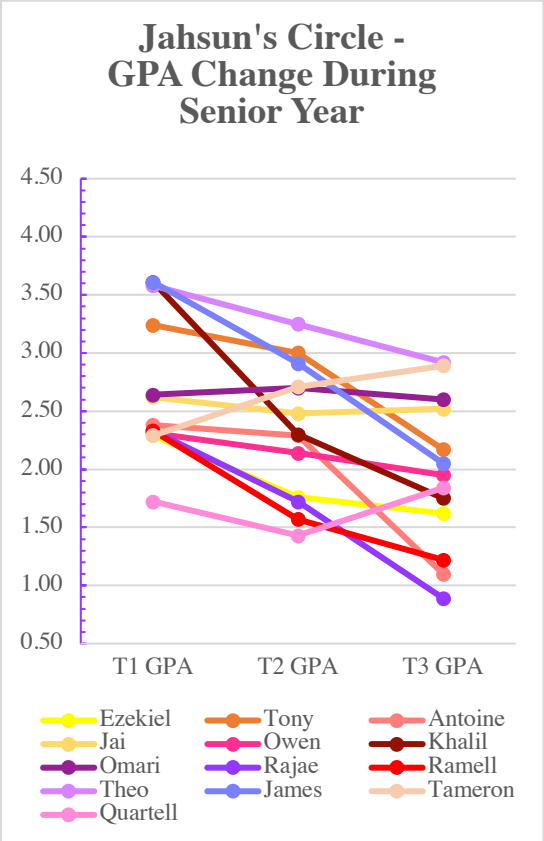
To say it had been a hard year would be an understatement. Many students struggled to recover academically after set-backs in late November, December, and, for some, into January. As I have previously mentioned, the Monday Boys' Prep resumed after Jahsun's death was, coincidentally, the first day of the second academic trimester. This created a natural experiment: all students' Trimester 1 grades are pre-loss and all Trimester 2 and 3 grades are post-loss. Among the seniors who were part of my research, and who consented to me accessing their grades (n=25), there seemed to be three common patterns of academic achievement throughout the year (see Figures F.2-4 in Appendix F).[56] There were nine seniors who more or less maintained consistent grades

[56] Two important caveats must be noted: First, grades are not objective measures of student learning, achievement, or intelligence. They often depend on individual teacher-student relationships, subject measures of behavior and class participation, and embedded in them are additional variables like attendance. Second, I do not have a control group of seniors who were unaffected by loss to determine whether this spread of patterns is common across all senior classes.

throughout all three trimesters, some even improving slightly over time (Figure F.4); four whose grades declined during Trimester 2, but then bounced back by the end of the year or least mitigated Trimester 2's damage in Trimester 3 (Figure F.3); and twelve whose grades dropped precipitously between Trimester 1 and 2 *and* 2 and 3 (Figure F.2).

These achievement trends were not evenly distributed across the various senior friendship circles at Boys' Prep. Among the Class of 2018 seniors – or at least the socially outgoing ones – there were two distinct social circles: the group I am referring to as Jahsun's friends and the group of boys affiliated with the "Freedom to Speak" club, which meant twice a week at lunch as a kind of informal peer counseling space (see Friendship Map in Appendix A). In a stereotypical high school social hierarchy, Jahsun's circle might be considered the "cool" guys: many of them played football, several of them were regular marijuana smokers. By the same token, the other group included students who might be seen as more "nerdy," more likely to be in honors classes and involved in student government. The seniors socialized on weekends within these circles, and sat within their own groups in the cafeteria at lunchtime. They converged in classrooms and on the baseball team; they generally got along in these contexts, but there were periods of tension between the two groups of seniors that led to a handful of fights in school. But the groups shared many characteristics too: boys in both groups expressed interest in college, and both circles included academically high-achieving students (though no one in the Freedom to Speak circle began senior year with a GPA below 3.0). Both groups also had mixed social class dynamics with some students coming from middle class two-parent households, and others who lived with much more modest means.

When the two groups are compared by their senior year academic trajectories, clear differences emerge (Figures 7.5 and 7.6). Jahsun's cohort of closest friends took a major academic hit after his death. Most of his friends' GPAs dropped during the second trimester, and then continued to fall in Trimester 3. In contrast, the boys who were not close with Jahsun and who spend their time socializing in other circles and likely experienced grief to a different degree, generally maintained strong grades throughout the year, with a few exceptions.



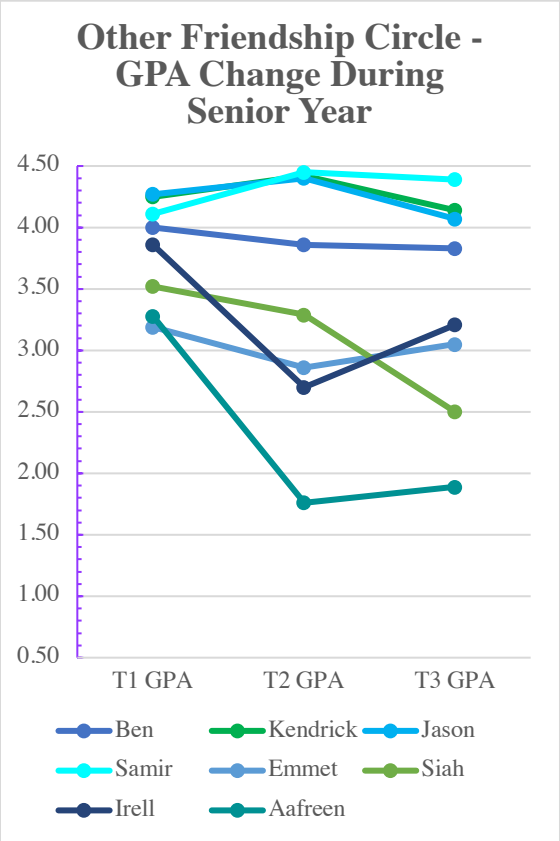


Figure 7.5 Jahsun's Circle – GPA Change During Senior Year. Overall GPA at the end of each trimester for thirteen of Jahsun's closest friends. With some exceptions, they exhibit an overall downward trend.
Figure 7.6 Other Friendship Circle – GPA Change During Senior Year. Overall GPA at the end of each trimester for eight other seniors, part of the same graduating class, but not close individually with Jahsun. Their GPAs are higher overall and generally stay relatively stable, with a few dropping or rising.

Of course, the differentiation between friendship groups is not clean. At least four student who more closely associated with the FTS group also considered Jahsun a good friend. They expressed their closeness to him, and their grief over his death, in interviews with me as well as publicly at school and on social media. In terms of their academic trajectory during senior year, they look much more like Jahsun's circle than their own social group (Figure 7.7). Three of the four of these social circle straddlers experienced a drop in GPA over the year, while the fourth, Randy, boosted his grades Trimester 2 during the acute period of grief, only to see them fall again toward the end of the year.

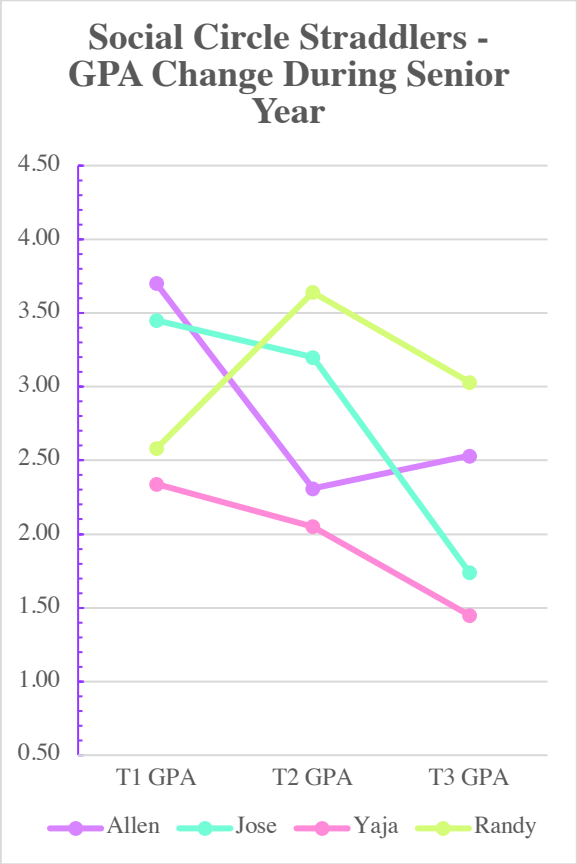


Figure 7.7 Social Circle Straddlers – GPA Change During Senior Year. Overall GPA at the end of each trimester for four seniors who were close with Jahsun, but generally did not socialize with his core circle of friends. All experience a major decline in their GPA during at least one of the grading periods after Jahsun's death.

Hidden Hard Becomes Harder

With the end of the school year in sight, there were many distractions for the Boys' Prep community. There were final exams, capstone projects and internships for the seniors, and many celebratory events to plan for. As had happened in the winter, gradually the intensity of feelings around Bill's death began to lessen. But now the *hidden hard* period was somewhat less hidden, especially for the seniors who were still grappling with both peers' deaths and, as we saw above, struggling to keep their grades up to be able to graduate. Now major school milestones, like graduation and prom, took on new meaning; they were bittersweet because they brought up questions of what would or could have been.

This time, more adults were attuned to the particularly meaningful days. For example, in early May on the day the seniors were supposed to clean out their lockers and prepare to spend their final month of high school out in the city doing senior internships, one teacher sent out an email to the full high school faculty list with the subject line, "Senior emotions heads up." She wrote:

> *Please be aware that this is an emotional day for many guys, especially Jahsun's friends. As they look at his locker, they see a stark reminder that he is not moving on with them. Thanks for your understanding as they are spending some time in the hallways reminiscing.*

A few weeks later, at the Boys' Prep senior prom, several of Jahsun's friends memorialized him in tangible ways. Rajae and others hung banners with Jahsun's name or the hashtag #JahWorld at their pre-prom house parties. Omari had two large patches sewn into his suit jacket with Jahsun's initials and showed them off all night. Ezekiel

shared a post the morning after prom: “Had a brief talk w/ Jah before prom last night. I know he proud.”

Similarly, Jahsun’s death was acknowledged very publicly during the graduation ceremony that June. His circle of graduating friends each decorated their caps with memories of him and ideas about the future (e.g., Figure 7.6). In anticipation of this bittersweet graduation day, Omari shared an Instagram story expressing that he “can’t wait to hear ya name at graduation so all the GUYS can turn up for you” (Figure 7.7). During the ceremony, both student speakers referenced Jahsun in their speeches, and the CEO Dr. Stephens invited up Jahsun’s parents to accept a diploma on his behalf. Dr. Stephens began his special recognition of Jahsun by acknowledging the strong sense of “brotherhood” he witnessed among Jahsun’s friends and across the school during this difficult year. As Jahsun’s parents arrived on stage, about 20 of Jahsun’s closest friends gathered around them showering them with hugs and roses.

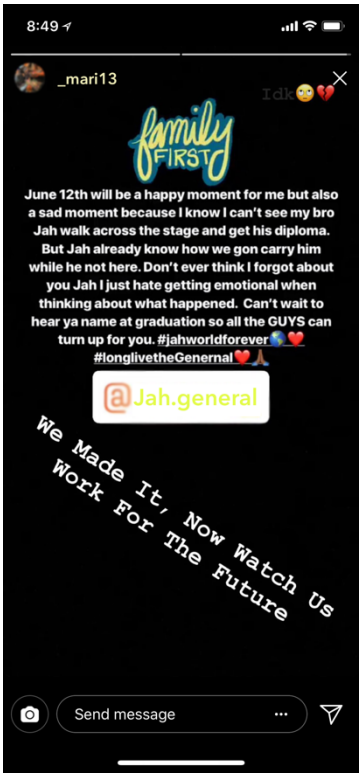


Figure 7.8 Rajae's Instagram post. Image of him with his family at graduation showing off the cap he decorated in honor of Jahsun.
Figure 7.9 Omari's Instagram story. Text commentary about his upcoming graduation.

CHAPTER 8 | The Aftermath of the Year and Cleaning the Slate

It very quickly became survival…Solve the problems in front of you today.
Principal Donaldson

Once the school year ended and there was time for reflection, teachers and administrators shared their challenges, wishes for do overs, and hopes for the coming year. In focus groups, most teachers reported that this was their most difficult year in the profession. The combination of Jahsun's and Bill's deaths combined with a new principal, changes to the disciplinary team, and a particularly challenging freshman class led to feelings of chaos, a sense of inconsistency, and a perceived lack of support for teachers. One staff member who had been at the school nearly since its founding described the year as "probably the worst year I've had…it's just a lot less pleasant to be here than it's ever been before. And that includes the year that we had no principal whatsoever."

The administrators also felt overwhelmed. In a candid moment with the principal as the school year wound down, he told me, "I'm constantly stressed. I think I had trouble eating the first couple months because of stress…Like I just couldn't get food down. …When you're in a classroom, you're controlling only that classroom. When you're in charge of the school, I feel the weight of everything that happens." He went on to describe how his transition from working as a teacher to becoming the principal required him to work more reactively despite his idealized plans for big changes he wanted to make at the Boys' Prep:

> *I had this extensive notebook of everything I wanted to accomplish, and all this stuff. Then it quickly gets thrown out the window because it's like this job isn't even remotely what I thought it was gonna be. It very quickly became survival. Like, you survive this, figure this out, you get through the day. Solve the problems in front of you today. The ones you can't solve, try and get to tomorrow. It's so hard with the amount of daily work that you have to be able to see things big picture because you just get so pressed into the day to day of what's happening. Then something happens, a pipe busts, and then the next five hours are gone. So whatever you were planning to get done is not gonna get done.*

Mr. Donaldson's observation of being in constant "survival" mode echoes decades of research on urban schools which are so often short on resources but long on needs. The excessive burdens placed on these schools can include being housed in old and poorly-maintained buildings, relying on books and supplies that are outdated or insufficient, receiving less funding per student than schools in suburban districts, and, increasingly, being held to standards of "accountability" which limit the flexibility and creativity of teachers and put added stress on principals like Mr. Donaldson (Anyon 1997; Darling-Hammond 2010; Noguera 2003a; Ravitch 2011).

Added to the typical challenges, and the adjustment period for a new administration, was the unexpected deaths of Jahsun and Bill and the trauma they induced for the entire school community. As the principal explained,

> *It was hard. I hate the fact that I learned this year the process in place for when somebody dies. I don't like that that's a skill set that I developed this year. You know? I hope I don't ever have to enact it. I guess the reality is in any high school, in anywhere, kids that age things are gonna happen. In high school, where we are, it's gonna be something that at some point comes into play again. It's crazy to think before Tyhir we had never had that experience.*

The "reality" that, as a Principal, one of his jobs would be managing the response to the death of a student – and more than once – was not something Mr. Donaldson began the year knowing. But it had now become clear that it was not an unreasonable expectation.

On top of the emotional toll and the time spent on and lost to managing grief at Boys' Prep, there were also significant financial resources that were redirected after the deaths. Money was spent on the gatherings for students, the memorial services and repasts held at the school, and each family was offered direct financial support to help with funeral expenses. The principal told me that he was not always sure where in the budget this money came from: "it's one of those, where it's like, you just do it. You'll figure it out later, and if it means something else doesn't get covered, it doesn't get covered." In addition to those unexpected larger expenses after students' deaths, the school budget also included a line representing about 10% of the principal's own discretionary funds intended to cover flowers for students and alumni who experience a loss in their family. He explained, "It's [called] just, like, 'miscellaneous expenses' because…I felt like it would be crude to be, like, 'the death budget.' But as I was thinking through the budget, that's what my thought was." He added that unlike in wealthier communities or schools where people are "much more insulated from" death and family losses are often handled privately, here "death is such a part of life [and] the community deals with it as a community."

Summer Memorials

Indeed, throughout the summer, there were several community events to continue to memorialize the lost Boys' Prep students. For the second summer in a row, Tyhir's friends gathered on his court in July for a basketball tournament in his honor. Around the same time, the Boys' Prep football coach, in coordination with Jahsun's mother and the school administration, commissioned a mural to be painted in the small shed adjacent to the school which served as a weight room for the football team. It was a portrait of

Jahsun in his Boys' Prep football jersey with the captions "Champs Don't Quit" and "We Work in Your Memory." A dozen students attended the mural's unveiling alongside Jahsun's family. Denzel, who had changed his Instagram profile picture that spring to a picture of Bill, posted a video of the dedication. Once again, multiple losses converged in one moment.

Preparations for the Next Year

As the administrators regrouped after a long year, they had some big decisions to make about the next year. One of the first things on the list was the annual deep cleaning and minor renovations of the school building. Though it did not always happen every year in every room, this summer the school was to be repainted. This meant Ms. Bloom's room too: the red chalkboard wall with messages to Tyhir and Jahsun would be covered over. And what was to be done with the two decorated lockers – Jahsun's and Bill's? They had become make-shift memorials, "places of shrine [and] memory" as one administrator described. The school leaders decided to do as they always did: the two lockers were thoroughly cleaned so that the sharpie messages were only visible in the faintest way when one looked closely at them. Jahsun's locker was offered to his brother, Bashir, and Bill's to his collective of friends to decide who would have it; they eventually settled on one boy who would use the locker for the remainder of his time at Boys' Prep. "Those will be powerful totems for them next year and for their friends," Mr. Hopkins explained, adding that his team was also still trying to determine what other permanent physical memorial in the school might be appropriate. Mr. Hopkins, in particular, expressed the feeling that it was important that the school find a way to "commemorate" the boys' lives "as a school community, [to show] that we're not saying that just because

it was last month or last year that we're done with it, but this is all part of the story of what it means to be at Boys' Prep."

In addition to the preparations of the physical school building, school leaders were also hard at work considering other ways to improve school life. Part of the preparations for the following year included reorganizing the daily and weekly schedule to get rid of the half-days for students on Wednesday but make every other day of the week an hour or two shorter. Though there were important administrative motivations for this change, many teachers were concerned that this would create more time for students to be out of school which could put them at risk. One of the few Black women teachers in the school complained that it did not seem like "anybody really thought about [the fact that the new schedule] increases the time that the kids are going to be outside on the street, interacting with people. I know we don't have control over a lot, but at least when we had them in here until 5 o'clock, we knew that they were safe." Other teachers and students acknowledged that the fact that the two student deaths occurred during school breaks, made it seem like "when we're not here, shit can go wrong" or "every time we come back to school from an extended break, somebody is dead." With the new schedule, as Ms. Wu put it, "now we're creating more time when the kids are not in school, and if you have the mindset [that] this stuff happens when you're not in school, now they're going to be not here more."

For many teachers, the combination of administrative and disciplinary change and the specific emotional challenges of the year, had them feeling worn out and wondering how long they would last. The head college counselor, who had been at the school since the year they had their first senior class, was concerned that Boys' Prep was "at a real

critical point right now, and I think there's about one more year in a lot of people in this building. I think if we have another year like this year, I think we'll lose a lot of teachers next year." Mr. Kahn, for his part, noted that he was not planning to "run away at the first sign of trouble," though he admitted he had considered leaving. But "it's no secret," he explained, "if the school continues to approach discipline the way they've approached discipline, I don't think this is going to be somewhere I want to be for the long term." Similarly, one of the founding teachers, a die-hard supporter of Boys' Prep, also recognized the critical juncture the school was at:

> *I'm just not going to let this place fail. …I've invested my life here, and it's just not going to fail. I'm going to make it, I'm going to do what I have to do in my own little part. I don't know what that is. It's too much sometimes. …I'm going to give grace to the new people in power…just because I believe in it so much and I think that their vision is right on, but I don't know. I just hope that it works and they'll be more responsive next year. But again, I might be crazy.*

She seemed to lose confidence in her own conviction as she said the words out loud.

For his part, Mr. Donaldson also had big ideas about how he was going to improve every area of school life moving forward. Still, he could not escape the devastation of losing two students and the fear of more: "We could talk for hours about all the things I'm planning for next year. I don't know. It sounds dumb to say, but I just hope we don't have any more losses. That's all I can think. I just want us to not have to lose anybody else."

CHAPTER 9 | Epilogue: The Stages of Institutional Grief and Long-Term Trajectories

This school is cursed.
Many students

Herc's Senior Year

The following year, 2018-2019, would be the senior year for Tyhir's circle of friends – the sophomores I had originally met when I first came to Boys' Prep. For Herc, despite his heroic final push, by the end of junior year and after summer school and online courses, he was still *one class* short of being able to move on to 12th grade. However, by this time, he had become more comfortable telling adults in his life what was going on with him. Through a series of frank conversations throughout the summer, he was able to negotiate a compromise with the administration that involved taking both 11th and 12th grade English at the same time. During his senior year, Herc would have no free periods and no room for error, but, assuming he passed all his classes, it would put him in a position to graduate on time.

With the prospect of graduation now, and perhaps for the first time, fully in sight, Herc came into senior year feeling more motivated. Things were also a little more stable at home and, with most of his closest friends now gone from Boys' Prep, he had fewer distractions. He still met somewhat regularly with the therapist who visited the school, and he had been learning to share more with his teachers about what was going on in his personal life and what he needed to be successful in class. And it began to pay off. Senior

year, Herc was more focused, coming to school more regularly, and getting better grades. Herc continued his strong academic showing throughout the year, earning the highest grades he had throughout high school (Figure 7.8). Despite two years of average grades well below passing, Herc's credit recovery during the summer and senior year grades in the 80s was enough to earn him a diploma.

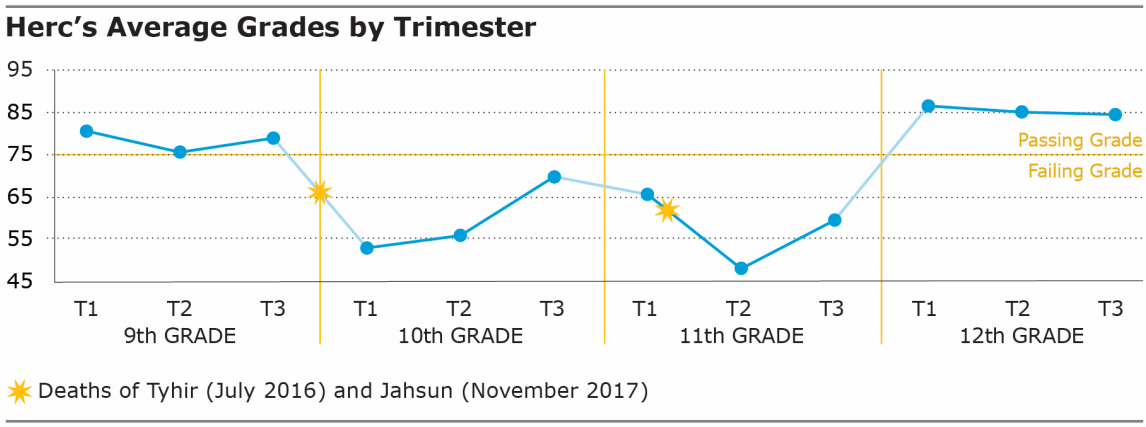


Figure 9.1. Herc's average grades across all of his core classes for each trimester of his high school career. (See Appendix F for Herc's, Kaliq's, and Matthew's average grade trajectories side-by-side.)

June 11, 2019 was the Boys' Prep graduation, held in a large auditorium on the local college campus. The stage was decorated with overflowing flower arrangements and chairs were arranged in rows for the approximately 70 graduating seniors and the school administrators, board members, and speakers who would preside over the ceremony. Despite the excitement of the day, it was heavy on many of the school leaders' and teachers' minds that the class of 2019 had the fewest number of graduates in Boys' Prep's history.

A couple hundred parents and other family members made their way inside, some carrying balloons or fans with their son's picture on it. A little bit after 4pm, the boys

processed from both sides of the auditorium to their designated seats on the stage, clothed in purple robes and many in gemstone-encrusted loafer-style shoes. Herc was graduating, surrounded by about 20 cheering family members and many adoring teachers. He was joined on stage by Matthew, Tyrese, Khiseer, and Shawn, also graduating.

But Herc was the only one to finish on time from Boys' Prep of his original sophomore lunch table of five. Though Kaliq had made a strong effort in the final months of the school year, it was not enough. He would need to take several classes during the summer and return for a few more the following year in order to complete his high school requirements. Hazeem, Jonquett, and Latrell were also not at the graduation ceremony, having left the school the year before. All three still planned to earn their diplomas through online coursework or alternative schooling programs. So many other boys from the original lunch tables of Tyhir's friends also left the school before graduation or were unable to fulfill the graduation requirements at Boys' Prep: Caleer, Denzel, Hakim, Tyshiem, and Dimere (who was just a few credits shy of graduating).

Tyhir's family *did* attend the Boys' Prep graduation ceremony. Though, as a student, Tyhir had not had the chance to move past his freshman year, at the 2019 graduation his mother was called to the stage to accept a diploma on his behalf.

Looking back on his high school years, Herc needs more than two hands to count all the friends he lost to gun violence – 11 – on top of the other friends who were shot, but survived with injuries. He reflects on this when he talks about graduation; losing friends is part of his narrative of getting to that point. In an Instagram post, a photo of him with a stack of cash and his high school diploma, he wrote that he had been through it all the last four years, including "losing homies left and right," but that he was still

"standing tall" and "will never lose" (Figure 9.2). And as he walked across the stage, in his purple robe, he wore a pin with Tyhir's face (Figure 9.3). He graduated with ghosts beside him.

Figure 9.2. Herc's Instagram post. Image of him posing with his high school diploma and a stack of money, with an extended caption and a comment from Hazeem.
Figure 9.3. Herc's Instagram story. Image of his graduation robe with a pin commemorating Tyhir.

Herc credits his success to his support system of teachers, family members, friends: the "three musketeers" (Jonquett and Latrell) for whom he could turn to for anything, his older sister who took him in when he was on bad terms with his mother, and the team of Boys' Prep teachers who rallied behind him and would not let him fail. The summer after graduation, he told me,

> *I just got a lot of people in my corner. That's just what just helped me. That's what's still helping me to keep motivating, to keep pushing, beyond like. I'm not really doing it for myself, I'm doing it for everyone that invested in me. There's plenty of times they could have kicked me out of [the school], but they kept me in there, and I came out on top at graduation. That was like one of my biggest moments.*

The same people with whom, just a few years earlier, Herc had not felt comfortable talking about his problems, now were the ones motivating him and helping him push through struggles.

Despite the support and encouragement, Herc's rocky high school trajectory impacted how he thought about the possibilities for his future. He had told me a few times over the years that he loves writing and he might be interested in being a journalist one day, but when I would press him any further on it, he could not seem to imagine how that dream could ever actually come about given his rough road through high school. One time when I asked him whether he was still considering college, Herc swung the question right back to me: "Have seen my grades? I'm not getting no scholarships."

The summer after graduation, Herc began a four month training program at a local hospital in instrumental processing – the preparation and sterilization of medical instruments. He graduated from the program in November 2019, and last I heard, was waiting to schedule interviews for his externship. He has connections to one hospital through his mother, who works there, so he is confident he will find a job. He does not have any other regular employment at the moment, but still sells marijuana in small amounts. He is part of a small team of students working with me on a documentary film project about Boys' Prep, gun violence, and grief.

The Faculty Fallout

The 2019 graduation ceremony was followed by what can only be described as a mass exodus from the school of faculty. It included several long-time teachers who had been central to the life of the school and to the support systems for many of the students I had come to know – among them, Ms. Bloom, Ms. Cain, Mr. Kahn, Mr. Marker, and Ms. Finn. In fact, of the 36 teachers employed by the high school, departures after the 2018-2019 school year totaled twelve who, between them, had spent 64 years at Boys' Prep. The mass desertion from the school was a source of some sadness, even guilt for Mr. Marker, who confided to me at the faculty party following graduation that with his first child on the way, he had decided to leave teaching altogether, at least temporarily, to be a full-time dad. Others, like Ms. Bloom and Ms. Finn, were trying to salvage a waning long-term commitment to the teaching profession by moving, at least temporarily, to suburban schools where they expected to be less overwhelmed by students' experiences of trauma.

Of course the story is more complicated. High faculty turnover is endemic to low-income schools; and, certainly, many well-loved and talented teachers chose to remain at Boys' Prep. But this unusually high number of faculty departures hints at another hidden impact of the sudden epidemic of student fatalities and the turmoil they caused for the school. If social cohesion and a sense of group solidarity constitute much of the social capital that can help a school environment to thrive, then perhaps another long-term secondary effect of neighborhood gun violence at Boys' Prep was the disintegration of the teacher core. As Mr. Gilbert had put it the year before, "there's been a lot of changes [at the school] that have been difficult, but I think if we all stay here, we win. We'll work

that out. There's no choice in the matter. But if people start leaving, then it becomes an 'I'm not sure' [situation]."

Long-Term Grieving

Sociologist Lillian Rubin wrote of her research on working class family life, "some topics lend themselves to conclusions; they have a beginning, middle, and an end. This one does not. For it is about life and the people who live it. And life is a process that, until death, does not lend itself to endings" (Rubin 1992:204).

What Rubin observes about life, I observed at Boys' Prep about grief. This study briefly opened a window onto the inner and outward-facing lives of a group of boys whose experiences converged at Boys' Prep between 2016 and 2018, as well as the adults with whom they interacted at school. It is no more than a snapshot of a short interval in what I hope will be, for each of these boys, a thick album of a long and complex life. Sadly, their lives are likely to include many more losses, along with, one hopes, many advances, moments of personal growth and insight, and relationships that bring meaning, connection, and joy.

Two and a half years have passed since Jahsun died – and nearly four since Tyhir's murder. Still, many of his friends (along with his mother and other family members) continue to post messages to and about him on social media. Many of them concern the final Instagram post Jahsun made before he died, a picture of himself in his Boys' Prep football uniform. "I miss you bro," wrote one of his friends recently below the picture. Another shared, "up at 3am thinking about you." Other boys regularly post longer narratives about things going on their lives that remind them of their friend or that they wish they could share with him. In June 2019, Kaliq wrote in an online post

alongside Jahsun's picture, "crying harder than ever I swear you don't know how much I miss you dawg 💔." Around the same time, Ezekiel shared a picture of his close circle of friends with the caption: "All my siblings in a nutshell. Those guys [are] my brothers *jahworld* we taking this shit to the grave 🖤." And just before the three year anniversary of Tyhir's death, Herc got a tattoo of Tyhir's name on his wrist and shared a picture of the "three musketeers" – himself, Latrell, and Jonquett – who have remained close even though all have now moved on from Boys' Prep, along with this wish: "I just wanna see us get older 💯🖤."

Grieving changes over time too and past experiences, both personal and institutional, influence how boys see new losses. In October 2019 when Boys' Prep lost senior Sy-eed, whose murder I reported in the Introduction, many students and alumni expressed a sense of resignation that such tragedies had now happened enough times to be almost commonplace within this school community. It was not unusual to hear comments from students like "this happens every year," "BP can never catch a break," or there are "too many funerals." The phrase "this school is cursed" was posted on Instagram more than a dozen times in the days following Sy-eed's death.

There was also, around that time, a flurry of offers of support and brotherhood. Deron, generally a bit of a loner and not known for his school spirit, offered himself up to his classmates for support:

> *For all my brothers I just wanna say y'all know I care deeply about my bonds rs [real shit] 💯. Y'all know who I'm talking to and if y'all ever need me I'm there for all you no matter what it may be cuz y'all like blood to me 🔗🔪🍃💪. Stay strong and be safe out here. I love you all.* 🖤

Similarly, a BP alum who had graduated two years earlier shared on Instagram that he was available if any student "need[ed] someone to talk to." Jahsun's little brother, Bashir, now a high school junior, was struggling to figure out how to respond and was trying to draw on his past experiences. In a private message through Instagram, he told me, "I don't want to be sad but last time I tried that it just was not good at all." He was determined to figure out another way to grieve besides masking his sadness.

The Stages of Institutional Grief

2016 to 2020 brought the Boys' Prep community tremendous heartache. The student body was diminished by four in as many years, a sign of the accelerating epidemic of community gun violence in Philadelphia. For those four beautiful boys, who had so much to look forward to and could have given so much to their communities, there is no more catastrophic or final fate; no school effort, no personal memorial, no piece of writing can bring them back. For their friends, the experience and devastation of loss was both acute and sustained.

By documenting two years of life at Boys' Prep in the aftermath of these losses, I have identified three stages of grieving among adolescent boys and schoolwide. The stages are simultaneously institutional, group-level, and personal. In this way they diverge from classic clinical stage models for individual grief (Bonanno et al. 2002; Bowlby 1980; Jacobs 1993; Kübler-Ross 1969; Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2014; Maciejewski et al. 2007; Parkes 1972). The *easy hard*, *hard hard*, and *hidden hard* stages illuminate how a community, a school community specifically, collectively processes, responds to, and recovers from – and also how they might overlook the full impacts of – a

death in their midst. And the stages make visible the way that students' grief interacts with school-level academic, disciplinary, and relational processes.

During the *easy hard*, the grief at Boys' Prep was public and shared, and adults throughout the building worked in unison to support their young students. School rules and standards were temporarily relaxed and students seemed to benefit from the warmth and leniency. But, very shortly thereafter, the behavioral expectations and emphasis on academic achievement returned, creating divisions and tensions throughout the school building. During the *hard hard* stage, while most teachers attempted to return to normalcy in their classrooms, many students found that their grieving did not easily fit within imposed timelines. Over time, their grief became more *hidden* – pushed out of school and into peer-driven spaces like social media. To cope, many boys took on postures of numbness, some became fatalistic; but many also found motivation and deepened bonds, becoming brothers in grief.

In the aftermath of each death, a similar pattern of institutional grieving was reprised – although to some degree of variations in time of year, particularities of the most affected friends, and other variables made each instance a little different. The timeline of my research meant that the year following Tyhir's death, 2016-2017, functioned as a baseline year – a window into the "typical" routines, interactions, and forms of emotional expression at Boys' Prep. It was only after repeated exposures to the same responses that I began to glimpse and process what had occurred more analytically. For me it was during the months following Jahsun's death – from the end of November 2017 through March 2018 when Spring Break began – that the three-stage pattern of articulated responsiveness began to clarify itself. Bill's death that April offered a

somewhat abbreviated version of the same stages: both the *easy hard* and *hard hard* stages took shape, even while so many members of the school community were at the very same time still experiencing the *hidden grief* of their previous losses.

This past fall, after I had packed up my locker and left the school, Boys' Prep lost another student, Sy-eed, a senior and member of the same class to which Bill belonged. Numerous accounts that I have been given both by faculty and students suggest that the three-stage cycle of institutional and student grief repeated itself. My understanding from these accounts also has been that a kind of institutional numbness has begun to take hold at Boys' Prep. While I cannot speak about this with certainty, it appears that as the deaths of students has become normalized, the commitment of the school as a community to the collective healing process has waned, while the pressures to maintain a focus on academic rigor and compliant behavior have intensified.

During the five years I have spent planning, carrying out, and analyzing this research, I have also received and read anecdotal accounts from schools throughout the country. Many of these narratives of institutional mourning indicate that the high level of collectivity, understanding, and support of even the *easy hard* that I observed at Boys' Prep may not be universal. Could it be that in these contexts, the *hard hard* for the students has been that much harder? Could it also be that for these children, as is likely for many of the boys at Boys' Prep, the *hidden hard* is a perpetual state as students experience death and other losses that receive no acknowledgement or consolation within their school communities.

Certainly more research is needed in this area to understand the prevalence of the problems I have observed and to evaluate their impact on students' long-term

development. In the next and final chapter, I make a brief foray into recommendations for Boys' Prep and similar schools based on what I witnessed. I propose another dimension of grief – grievance – which, I believe, with intentional efforts by the school, could be harnessed to mitigate boys' feelings of fatalism and powerlessness and promote their healing.

CONCLUSION | What if Grief Became Grievance?

We are grieving, we are furious, and we are using our words fiercely and desperately because that's the only thing standing between us and this happening again.
Emma Gonzalez, Marjory Stoneman Douglas student and school shooting survivor

Our pain makes us family. Us hurting together brings us closer together to fight for something better.
Alex King, Chicago high school student and March for Our Lives speaker

In February 2018, less than three months after Jahsun's murder and two months before Bill would be killed, a high school 1,000 miles down the East Coast in Parkland, Florida was forever changed by a school shooter and a tremendous loss of young life. Our country and the national conversation about gun violence were also radically transformed. Within weeks, a group of teenage survivors – friends of victims – emerged on the national stage activated both by their grief and their desire to prevent this from happening again. They had grievances about gun laws, school and community services for troubled and mentally ill young people, and the ineptitude of the government to protect its citizens from harm. People listened. Though their impact on legislation has been limited, the grieving teenagers of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School started a movement which continues to leave an indelible imprint on conversations about American gun violence.

Indeed, throughout history, "courageous grievers" have discovered strategies through which to become "energized by grief" and turn the depths of their pain into a powerful force to spur political protest and social action (Heffernan 2018; Jakoby 2012). But this process is not easy. As Sam Fuentes (2019), one of the teenage Parkland

survivors, reflected, "trauma is a gift, but it's probably the worst wrapped gift in the world." It takes time, support, and intentionality to channel trauma into activism that can make a difference. This transformation of grief into grievance – "from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury" (Cheng 2001:3) – is complex, rarely linear, and risks opening grievers up to further pain.

Harnessing Grief

Unlike at Stoneman Douglas, the murdered friends of Boys' Prep students were not universally viewed as innocent victims; some lives are considered more "lose-able" to society at large (Butler 2009:1). As Black teenage boys who join hundreds of others each year in Philadelphia to be killed on the streets or in the residences of their inner city neighborhoods by other Black boys and men, they are subject to numerous stereotypes, assumptions, and slurs. Journalists reporting about their deaths would often go to great lengths to describe Tyhir, Jahsun, Bill, or Sy-eed as "a scholar athlete," "college-bound," or mention that he had "no prior contact with the police" or was "doing the right thing" – all seemingly to defend the worth of their lives. When lives themselves are devalued, their mourners' grief "is likewise illegitimated," made to "feel invalid," or disenfranchised (Bindley et al. 2019; Cacho 2007:183; Dutil 2019; Lawson 2014; Ralph 2015:33).[57]

In this context, grieving itself can be a radical act and a political resource (Butler 2004), and *collective* grieving "a method for resistance" (Grinage 2019:247). When the senselessness of loss is so immense that there is no way to rationalize it or accept it,

[57] Mourners are further silenced when their grief is medicalized or stigmatized as mental illness (Ralph 2015).

communities can find "purpose and meaning…in the continued public expression of intense grief that reminds [them] of the power of love and the horror of devaluation" (Patton et al. 2018:17). The key to finding the radical power of grief is a sense of collectivity and publicness – a "social community that shares the outrage and pain of a premature death" (Patton et al. 2018:3) or the "racial melancholia" of racialized injustice more generally (Cheng 2001; Grinage 2019). At the right moment, it is this kind shared grief that can be harnessed productively for political purposes.

Many successful political movements "draw on the power of emotions" as "collaboratively constructed terrain" (Boler 1999:5–6). Strong emotions can motivate citizens to get involved in politics, or to break out of the stagnation of the status quo (Groenendyk 2011). Some scholars have argued that particularly in social justice movements, emotional engagement is a strength, not a weakness, since it makes political thinking more sophisticated and clarifies the interdependent relationships between the components of a complex society (Miller 2011).

Becoming Aggrieved

The poet Robert Frost has famously written that grief is a form of patience, while grievances represent *impatience*. His words have often been interpreted as a reminder that we ought to be more patient with our own grief, and perhaps with others'. And often – perhaps too often – Frost's call for tolerant acceptance is the prevailing tone of public responses to the murder of innocent youth and school shootings. How often have we heard it said that this is 'not the time for public outcry' or for 'talk of policy' or for 'political battles,' but a moment for personal healing (or, worse, 'thoughts and prayers')?

But Frost was not writing about situations of mourning that are linked to deep injustices. In such cases, we may indeed be entitled if not impelled to feel *impatience*. When it comes to the premature and violent deaths of children and teenagers, perhaps as a society we need to be far more impatient than we are. Perhaps, too, our young people need to be guided in how to productively channel their own impatient grief – their sadness, their confusion, even their rage – toward pursuing justice and change.

What does it look like to become *aggrieved* instead of just to grieve? Laurence Ralph, in his study of Black mothers and others in a Chicago community experiencing punishing violence, shows that the community developed a shared belief that "one's anger can be a critical asset when it is directed at the very social problems that exacerbate mourning, madness, and many other manners of grief" (Ralph 2015:40). This process of "becoming aggrieved" is not only about "mourning the past—it is also about developing a communal framework for care." (Ralph 2015:38). Community members show their care for each other by rejecting patient forms of grief and harnessing their own emotions, anger included, to pursue social action.

Education for Social Change

At first blush, a school may seem neither suitable nor qualified to teach youth how to channel grief into grievance productively. After all, schools are normative institutions, tasked with the business of inculcating conventional and civic behavior – not civil disobedience and protest. And yet, there is a long and rich history of radical educational transformation movements that have argued just the opposite: that schools are, in fact, *uniquely* suited for the challenge of political and social justice training.

Some education scholars and reformers have argued for a pedagogical model which prioritizes the development of students' *critical consciousness*. The term critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, coined by Paulo Freire (2000) in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is meant to encompass both reflection and action as necessary components for social transformation. *Conscientização*, as Freire (2000:109, 119) describes it, is the "deepening of the attitude of awareness" and a preparation "for the struggle against the obstacles to… humanization." Within this framework, by developing a deeper and more critical understanding of their social circumstances, students (whether youth, as in this case, or adults in Freire's case) are able to, not only imagine and work for better futures, but also become more fully human in an unequal society that has dehumanized them.

For Freire, *hope* is an essential component of the kinds of dialogue that lead to social action in the face of oppression. More recent scholars have built on this to argue for teaching youth to have *radical* or *critical hope* – that is, a hope that recognizes the barriers to its achievement, but also the "cracks in the concrete," and pursues an agenda to break through those cracks collectively (Duncan-Andrade 2009). For youth marginalized in contemporary American society plagued by structural racism, poverty, and violence, "hope, in and of itself is an important form of resistance, both political and personal"; even when the hoped for cannot be presently realized, hope "reaffirms what is possible, and worth fighting for" (Ginwright 2016:2).

Seider and Graves (2020) begin their recent book, *Schooling for Critical Consciousness,* with the basic premise that schools can and should be spaces of consciousness-raising. They argue that developing a curriculum that instills a critical

orientation is all the more important for youth marginalized by race and class. In doing so they cite James Baldwin's little-known 1963 essay, "A Talk to Teachers," in which he encourages educators of Black children to "try to make each child know that [his environment is] the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him [and] that if he intends to get to be a man, he must at once decide that he is stronger than this conspiracy, and he must never make his peace with it." For Baldwin, and the education scholars who draw from him, it is the responsibility of schools to guide students toward developing a *critical consciousness*. That is, the skills to understand the (racial) injustices of the world, "resist [their] negative effects[,] and challenge [their] root causes" (Seider and Graves 2020:3).

Doing so requires "transformative teaching" that pushes back against the individualizing posture of educational conversations around grit and resilience (Ginwright 2016; Goodman 2018), and "connect[s] the moral outrage of young people to actions that relieve the undeserved suffering in their communities" (Duncan-Andrade 2009:182). In their work, Seider and Graves (2020:8) studied five urban charter schools, each with a different educational model but all with "youth civic development as a core part of their missions." They propose that the development of critical consciousness involves three components – social analysis, political agency, and social action – at least one of which they find at play in each of the schools. The schools in their study employed curricular models like a year-long Social Engagement course for freshmen, a Sociology of Change course, Civics courses, African American history and literature courses, culture circles and community meetings, exhibition nights for students' to demonstrate their 'habits of mind,' community improvement projects, explicit instruction in activism and participation in political demonstrations, formal invitations to suggest school policy

changes, and senior projects and internships. Such activities reframe Black youth not as "civic problems" but as "civic problem solvers, and their grievances as political not personal" (Ginwright 2007:416).

When successfully imparted to marginalized youth, critical consciousness predicts many positive outcomes, including "resilience, mental health, self-esteem, academic achievement, high professional aspirations, and civic and political engagement" (Seider and Graves 2020:3). Critical consciousness also gives youth feelings of increased control or agency over their lives and their surroundings, a sense of membership in a collective with a common purpose, a critical – rather than false – hope for the future, and a pathway to *radical healing* (Duncan-Andrade 2009; Ginwright 2016).

Missed Opportunities at Boys' Prep in the Aftermath of Loss

The structural and ideological strengths of Boys' Prep – its small size, its emphasis on strong and individualized student-teacher relationships, its lack of district level oversight (too often stifling and paternalistic), its interest in developing its students' emotional capacities – positioned it to respond well to the immediate challenges it faced after the shooting deaths of its students. Not shackled by district-wide, sometimes excessive, restrictions, teachers communicated directly with students via text to offer support and warm consolation. Administrators could nimbly change the school schedule and contract for local resources without the constraints of the city's red tape. The initial collectivization of grief – the Easy Hard – at Boys' Prep was genuine, generous, and imaginative: rich with candles, cookies, and cards, along with plenty of hugs which seemed to be what the boys needed most.

But after that comes what? Feeling at all times the tremendous burden of

compensating for an unequal education system that has already put their students far behind, the school leadership at Boys' Prep rushed anxiously to get back to the standard curriculum and the business of education. Compulsively, they doubled down on their quixotic embrace of respectability politics, particularly in the school's fixation on the student uniform (Clonan-Roy, Gross, and Jacobs Forthcoming; Gross 2017; Oeur 2017), effectively deporting students' sorrow and grief to the online world, and to catch as catch can student-teacher relationships (Gross and Lo 2018). At the curricular level, without a schoolwide orientation towards issues of Blackness or justice, teachers had few tools to draw on to help students interpret their grief or contextualize it into a fuller understanding of their lives. Lost was any opportunity to generate positive feedback loops between personal experience and deep analysis, leaving students to the state of numbness they widely reported. Instead, the adolescent boys were faced with the double curse of experiencing the deaths of peers as a normal event in their young lives, and multiple incentives to suppress their strongest emotions as a means of coping.[58]

Numbness, as has been noted by scholars, can be depoliticizing (Sandell and Bornäs 2017). Suppressing sad feelings for the sake of survival can also blunt, even stunt, other responses to wrongdoing that are necessary to the struggle for social justice (Demmer 2007). The psychological void around gun violence as a phenomenon larger than these specific incidents was especially apparent to me during the handful of school-

[58] In my analysis to date, I have not explored much the possibility, as Hochschild (2002) warns, that continual engagement with restrictive feeling rules might have the long-term effect of stunting *real* felt emotions. That perhaps adherence to institutional feeling rules over the long term might require "deep acting," the actual changing of felt emotions in order to guide emotional expressions to fit the social situation. The numbness boys discuss could be an indication of this. While more research would be needed to address this question, it does raise some important considerations about the possibility of transforming emotion into political action.

sponsored political events (walkouts, marches, and rallies) described in Chapter 6. To me it seemed the participation was mechanical and tepid, oddly from some of the most outspoken, emotionally expressive students I had met.[59] While both Jahsun's and Bill's mothers responded to their sons' deaths by developing grassroots efforts that have redefined their personal grief into causes to help others, to date there has been no such outgrowth from the school or the students.[60]

Alternative Approaches

Over the very same 2017-2018 school year, the high school students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas were making explicit connections between the gun violence they survived and the gun violence that Boys' Prep students and other Black and Brown youth in urban neighborhoods face every day, and they were doing so on a national stage. They were also joined in these efforts by peers from at least one school, not dissimilar from Boys' Prep, in inner city Chicago (Diavolo 2018). Students from both schools took the stage at the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. in March in front of a crowd of well over one million people. They spoke passionately about their own gun violence losses *and* the legislative changes that were necessary to prevent more.

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[59] Though social media is one area where "youth are able to document, historicize, share, and reflect on their experiences with the deceased in a way that supports adaptation to the loss" (Patton et al. 2018:3), I also rarely saw allusions to the political implications of loss (e.g., #JusticeForJah) online.

[60] One exception to this was a brief, and largely superficial, collaboration with a local college which included a visit from several of Jahsun's senior friends to the school to meet with a group of faculty who do work related to gun violence and poverty. The visit was meant to provide resources and supports for the boys' work on their senior projects, many of which focused on related topics; but the boys reported leaving mostly uninspired. (Their reflections on the day centered around the food – "fancy" sandwiches when they would have preferred pizza – and a racially-charged incident with a college security guard as they arrived on campus.) Following this visit, one of the professor's undergraduate classes "sponsored" Boys' Prep to raise money for small scholarships for Jahsun's friends in his honor.

That these particular schools were energized by the cause, while students at Boys' Prep remained passive and indifferent, is no coincidence. Each engaged school had, already in place, a curricular or extracurricular program to fall back on when trauma hit. It was through these programs that students could both process what had happened to them individually, and in the same breath see the bigger picture.

Florida, perhaps surprisingly, had a comprehensive statewide curriculum for civic knowledge and engagement as a result of the Sandra Day O'Connor Civic Education Act passed in 2010. Middle school evidence-based civics courses were mandated across the state, and students were tested in civics at the end of seventh grade. Further, the state promoted "teacher-led discussions of current events and controversial issues [and] extracurricular activities—particularly those requiring teamwork and collaboration; student participation in school governance; and, simulations of democratic processes such as mock trials" (Islam and Crego 2018).[61]

In Chicago, at North Lawndale College Prep (NLCP),[62] the Black teenage students from high-poverty West Side neighborhoods were trained to be Peace Warriors. Both as a method for promoting non-violence in their communities and as an avenue for personal and communal emotional healing, the Peace Warriors learned to break up fights in school, mediate altercations between classmates through "peace circles," and offer emotional support to peers who had experienced loss. The students and the teachers who trained them drew on Martin Luther King Jr.'s principles of non-violence as their guide

[61] Additionally, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas School, and across Broward county, their robust debate program had, just that fall, practiced their debate skills by exploring issues of gun control (Gurney 2018).
[62] Coincidentally, this is the same school where I was a teacher from 2008-2010, as I describe in the Introduction.

(Haga 2011; Irvine 2018). Almost immediately after the mass shooting in Florida, the two schools connected in their activist efforts.

While these in-school civic engagement programs prepared some students to enter the simmering national conversation about gun control, the students in the school I was observing remained unprepared – and therefore unwilling – to make the therapeutic-political connection. Nor were there any adults at Boys' Prep with the time, resources, or top-down encouragement to promote an authentic or sustained activist response.[63] I am left to wonder whether the boys' overwhelming responses of fatalism and disempowerment in the face of loss would have been any different if Boys' Prep had a cultural and curricular focus on civic or critical engagement with societal issues beyond the walls of the school.

Developing Political Commitments in an Institution Focused on Personal Responsibility

Boys' Prep is unusual in many ways, but in lacking a commitment to civic education and a contextualized analysis of racial injustice, it is not. This is a common story, particularly for schools who see as their mission remedying the academic achievement gap or promoting equal educational opportunity. In an increasingly market-driven educational system, test scores (or college admissions statistics) are king; many schools serving poor and minority students tend to prioritize students' *individual*

[63] The lack of critical or political consciousness, or feelings of being part of a larger society, was not limited to the students' responses to the deaths of friends. I have vivid memories of visiting Boys' Prep – one of my earliest visits to the school – the day after the 2016 Presidential Election of Donald Trump. I heard barely a murmur in the hallways or classrooms about the momentous, and largely unexpected, election outcome.

academic achievement over any other metric. Golann (2015:103) argues that this approach to schooling, and its attendant emphasis on compliance with behavioral standards, leads to the development of "worker-learners—children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners." The strict forms of control around interaction and expression in these schools limit the opportunity for students to develop the kinds of social skills that are essential to full democratic participation (Ben-Porath 2013). One study of a "no excuses" charter school found that even though there were a range of ideas among teachers about what kind of "ideal citizen" they were trying to produce, only those who sought to develop "personally responsible" citizens concerned only with their own behavior – in contrast to "participatory" or "justice-oriented" citizens – felt able to enact their ideas (Sondel 2015).

The conflict between an emphasis on personal responsibility and the quest for collective racial or economic justice played out clearly in one of the schools profiled in Seider and Graves' (2020) study of critical consciousness development in schools. At Harriet Tubman High School (a pseudonym), a "no excuses" charter school, academic achievement was framed "as a form of personal social action [in contrast to *collective* social action] that pushed back against societal stereotypes about [students'] capabilities" (Seider and Graves 2020:82). The school supported students in learning white middle class norms and navigational strategies rather than trying to counter or resist them. As a result, students internalized "message[s] about the importance of striving for academic and professional success within an unjust social system, but [they did not engage in] reflection about other approaches to fostering change" (Seider and Graves 2020:103). Tubman students' biggest gains from their school's approach to a critical consciousness

curriculum were in "social intelligence," a measure of *personal* confidence in navigating a range of social interactions.

In schools like Harriet Tubman and Boys' Prep, collective hope is often deferred in favor of small individual wins – since the latter seems much more attainable. Duncan-Andrade (2009:184) reports that:

> *Many teachers feel overwhelmed by the challenges urban youth face in their lives and consider themselves ill-equipped to respond with a pedagogy that will develop hope in the face of such daunting hardships. They are liberal-minded enough to avoid "blaming the victim," turning instead to blaming the economy, the violence in society, the lack of social services, the "system." These teachers have a critique of social inequality but cannot manifest this critique in any kind of transformative pedagogical project…They "hope" for change in its most deferred forms: either a collective utopia of a future reformed society or, more often, the individual student's future ascent to the middle class.*

When bigger structural change is too daunting, the fallback is to focus on individual students' advancement or escape. But without an eye towards collective change, students may fail to put their own experiences in the context of larger struggles. On top of losing their closest friends, are our youngest citizens at risk of losing a sense of agency, a belief that change for the better is possible, and a hopeful orientation towards their future and ours? Could this be an even greater collective loss?

A Different Approach: From Grief to Grievance to Healing

We know that adolescence is a critical period of human development. It is the period during which we develop our identities and hone our worldviews beyond the perspectives of our families and home communities (Erikson 1994). It is an especially devastating time to lose a friend, let alone multiple friends. The trauma of loss, compounded by a prolonged period of mourning in private, can destabilize an adolescent's hopes for the future, as we have seen.

What would it look like to support the teenagers at Boys' Prep, and at other schools where students experience the death of a friend, in developing a more reflective orientation toward the anguish of loss? How could an institution tasked with educating young people also hold sacred their tender emotions of grief, while simultaneously helping them to voice their warranted grievances about their unremitting losses and the larger culture of injustice within which their lives are embedded? Would such a reorientation help young, vulnerable boys heal?

Curricular and programmatic changes need not be big or reinvent the wheel to be successful. In just the last two years since the Parkland shooting, we have seen youth making their emotional responses to gun violence public through activities ranging from an op-ed in a newspaper (Fair 2020) to a local town hall with city officials in Philadelphia (Brod 2019) to a national march with broad coalitions of youth (Minutaglio 2018). Other approaches in schools and youth-serving organizations that have been shown to work consistently and effectively to foster the development of young people's critical consciousness and orientation toward social action include youth participatory action research (often, but not necessarily, developed through partnerships between K-12 schools and university researchers) (e.g., Bautista et al. 2013; Sandwick et al. 2018); collaborative and participatory visual art projects, including documentary filmmaking (e.g., Goodman 2018); service learning activities (e.g., Learn and Serve America 2020; NYLC 2020); political or activist-orientated projects (e.g., Cohen 2012); and peer counseling or mediation programs (Haga 2011; Reichert et al. 2012). Seider and Graves' (2020) book offers additional educational models along with recommendations for how

such models could be incorporated into school life through core curriculum, elective courses, extracurriculars, and community meetings.

Alongside these curricular propositions, there is no doubt that schools need *more* mental health resources – not less as has been the recent trend, or worse, cops replacing counselors (Whitaker et al. 2019). Schools like Boys' Prep also require more dedicated staff members with flexibility in their schedules to be available to students in crisis because young people almost always prefer to seek help from those with whom they already have "established and trusted relationships" or have "known…awhile" and are "used to" (Lindsey and Marcell 2012:358; Rickwood et al. 2005:19). These staff members need to be equipped with "'mental health literacy,' which includes knowledge of symptoms and when it is necessary to seek [further] help" (Rickwood et al. 2005:18; Weymont and Rae 2006). When possible, support and counseling for Black boys in these contexts should attempt to go beyond addressing their mental health concerns, to enlisting and empowering them to conceive of ways to change the systems, organizations, and people who impact their lives (Harper, Terry, and Twiggs 2009).

There are many promising approaches to building trauma-informed (or trauma-sensitive or -responsive) schools and to implementing such pedagogies in classrooms (Black et al. 2012; Cole et al. 2005; Dutil 2019; Schonfeld and Demaria 2018; Terrasi and de Galarce 2017). School leaders and teachers would benefit from expert guidance in drawing out the components of this growing field best suited for the specific needs of their student populations. And as Ginwright (2018) warns, it is important that in taking on these interventions we avoid "focusing on the treatment of pathology" or framing trauma as an "individual isolated experience"; instead, these approaches should spotlight the

ways “trauma and healing are experienced collectively” and emphasize “the possibility [of] well-being” through a *healing-centered* approach.

Most important of all, to be in a position to support students’ grief and underlying grievances when traumas hit, a school like Boys’ Prep would need to place greater value on its students’ emerging agency and focus on their strengths. Making space for transformative teaching practices and critical consciousness-raising, and centering students’ collective healing after a loss, requires a school to embrace a different political stance. It necessitates a schoolwide commitment to social responsibility and justice in balance with the attention to students’ individual advancement. This may be a lot to ask of institutions already tasked with so much and encumbered by so many obstacles. But how much more is it that we ask of children when we expect them to remain committed to their education as their friends are dying? By creating opportunities for brothers in grief to find common ground with larger movements for justice, then perhaps we also make space for them to truly heal.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Participant Details

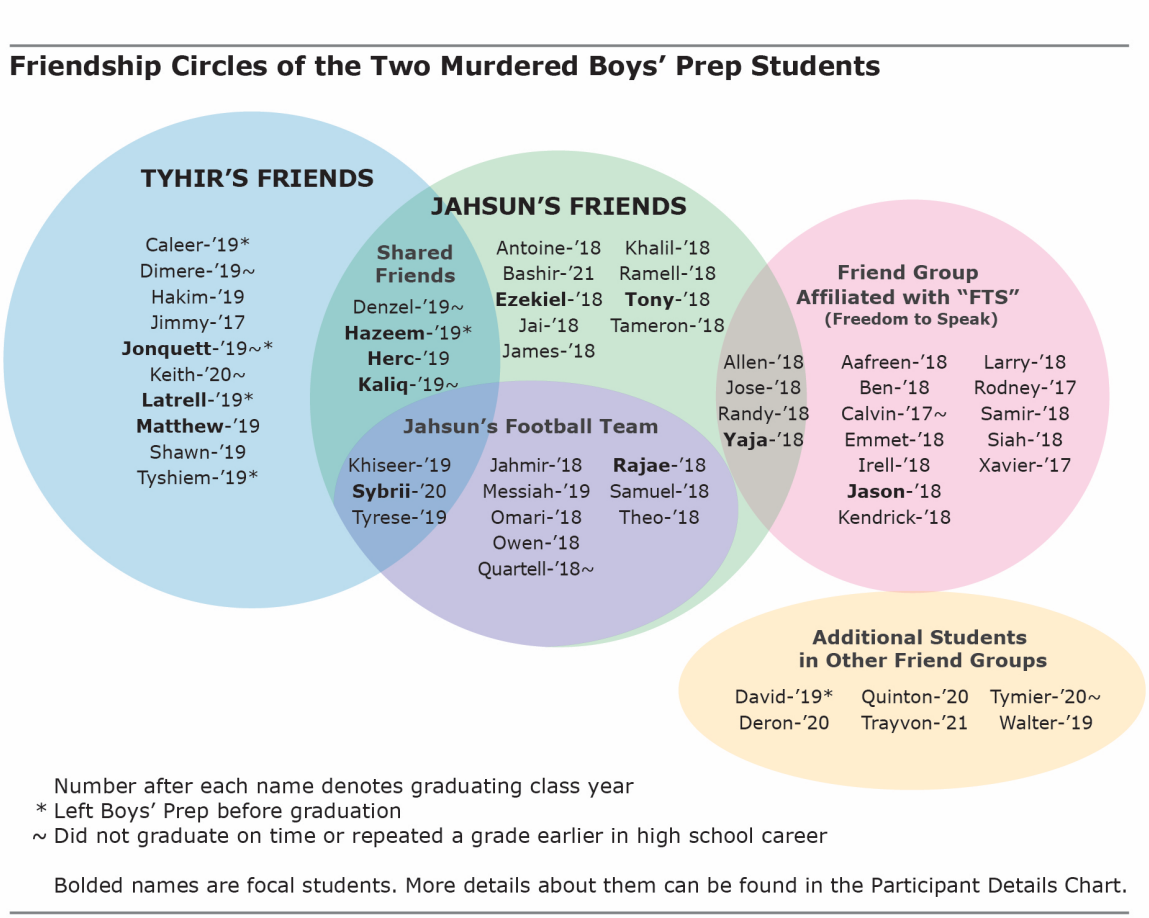

Figure A.1 Diagram of student friendship circles among research participants at Boys' Prep.

Student Participant Details

NAME, AGE DURING RESEARCH PERIOD, & CLASS YEAR	HS GRADES, TRAJECTORY, & SCHOOLING HISTORY	DURING THE RESEARCH PERIOD / WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL			CURRENT COLLEGE STATUS & FUTURE INTERESTS
		FRIENDSHIPS & RELATIONSHIPS TO DECEASED	FAMILY & HOME SITUATION	ACTIVITIES, JOBS, & INTERESTS	
Ezekiel 16-18 years-old Class of 2018	Had a rocky first few years at BP, suspended several times; senior year moved up to some honors classes.	Considered Jahsun his best friend; saw Bill as his "young boul."	Lives with mother, stepfather, and younger brother; mother owns an optical store; stepfather doesn't work, but has savings; biological father not involved.	Makes rap music; worked at Dairy Queen; smokes marijuana regularly.	Attended a mid-sized public university a few hours from Philadelphia (with Tony), but had to leave because of legal trouble.
Hazeem 16-17 years-old Class of 2019	Left BP halfway through junior year to attend online school; has not yet graduated.	Close with Tyhir and Jahsun; best friends with Kaliq.	Lives with mother who is in graduate school; mother's partner is like a father; biological father was in prison and is not involved in Hazeem's life; older brother in college.	Used to enjoy acting; worked at McDonald's; Muslim and very religious.	Not in college; started his own clothing company with some friends.
Herc 15-17 years-old Class of 2019	Graduated on time after several very rocky years and many credit recovery programs.	Close with Tyhir and Jahsun; part of "three musketeers" clique with Jonquett and Latrell.	Parents divorced when Herc was 9; father is handyman at hospital; mother works in a hospital and is in school for counseling; Herc has a conflictual relationship with both; lives with mother and her husband, but sometimes stays with older sister; has nine siblings total, including a few older ones in college and a few "in the streets."	Used to play basketball, but stopped after Tyhir's death; worked at McDonald's; smokes marijuana regularly and periodically sells it.	Got certified in instrumental processing (sterilizing medical equipment) and works in a hospital; previously wanted to be journalist.
Jason 16-18 years-old Class of 2018	Attended an all-boys' private prep school until high school; graduated BP as Salutatorian.	Classmate of Jahsun's, but did not know him well; one of the founding members of FTS.	Mother is high school guidance counselor; father works for Verizon; parents are divorced; Jason moves between two homes.	Plays baseball; makes rap music.	Attends a competitive HBCU to study engineering; wants to be a pilot.

NAME, AGE DURING RESEARCH PERIOD, & CLASS YEAR	HS GRADES, TRAJECTORY, & SCHOOLING HISTORY	DURING THE RESEARCH PERIOD / WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL			CURRENT COLLEGE STATUS & FUTURE INTERESTS
		FRIENDSHIPS & RELATIONSHIPS TO DECEASED	FAMILY & HOME SITUATION	ACTIVITIES, JOBS, & INTERESTS	
Jonquett 16-18 years-old Class of 2019/2020	Spent 7th grade in juvenile detention; repeated 9th grade at BP; left BP after failing for the second year; attended alternative school.	Close with Tyhir; part of "three musketeers" clique with Herc and Latrell.	Lives with mom, her boyfriend, and two half/step siblings; close with older brother; dad was in prison for 13 years.	Enjoys boxing and riding dirt bikes; worked at McDonald's; smokes marijuana regularly and periodically sells it.	Has not yet graduated from high school; previously wanted to be a professional boxer; had a baby in early 2019.
Kaliq 15-17 years-old Class of 2019/2020	Grades throughout high school teetered on passing; did not finish on time; retaking a handful of classes at BP during 2019-2020 to be able to graduate.	Close with Tyhir; had recently discovered that Jahsun was a distant cousin, which brought them closer; best friends with Hazeem.	Lives with mother, father, and is the oldest of six siblings; has many care-taking responsibilities at home; mother is a registered nurse; father is a construction worker; very close with family.	Works many jobs including security, at a shoe store, and cleaning schools; always wanted to play HS football but never did; Muslim and very religious.	Expects to graduate from BP in 2020; not planning to attend college.
Latrell 15-17 years-old Class of 2019	Left BP at the beginning of junior year to attend an alternative high school.	Close with Tyhir; part of "three musketeers" clique with Herc and Jonquett.	Lives with grandmother; left his mothers' house during middle school because of a toxic relationship with her; father was murdered while Latrell's mother was pregnant with him; mother is a nurse and has remarried; has several half/step siblings.	Played football in middle school, but not high school; worked at McDonald's; smokes marijuana regularly.	Graduated from alternative HS a few months early in 2019; does not attend college; had a baby in 2018.
Matthew 15-17 years-old Class of 2019	Honors student throughout most of high school.	Considered Tyhir his best friend.	Lives with mother, father, and older sister; father works construction; mother works for a bank and is working on BA; two older sisters in college.	Plays basketball on school and out-of-school teams; Christian.	Attends small private Catholic university an hour outside of Philadelphia; playing Division III basketball; previously wanted to a sanitation worker.

NAME, AGE DURING RESEARCH PERIOD, & CLASS YEAR	HS GRADES, TRAJECTORY, & SCHOOLING HISTORY	DURING THE RESEARCH PERIOD / WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL			CURRENT COLLEGE STATUS & FUTURE INTERESTS
		FRIENDSHIPS & RELATIONSHIPS TO DECEASED	FAMILY & HOME SITUATION	ACTIVITIES, JOBS, & INTERESTS	
Rajae 16-18 years old Class of 2018	Grades were average, but dropped significantly after Jahsun's death; also suspended twice senior year.	Considered Jahsun one of his best friends, played on the football team with him.	Lives with mother, father, and is the middle of five siblings; one older sibling is in college, the other dropped out; mother is a nurse and has returned to school; father used to work for PGW, but retired.	Plays football and is captain of the BP wrestling team; Muslim and very religious.	Attends a local community college; has stayed close with Jahsun's mother; previously wanted to be a teacher.
Sybril 14-16 years-old Class of 2020	Attended BP middle school; honors student.	Close with Tyhir; football teammate of Jahsun.	Parents split up when he was a toddler; Sybrii splits his time between mother's and father's households, both with several other kids and family members; mother works in law office; father works in an elderly home.	Plays basketball and football for BP; Muslim and very religious.	Expects to graduate from BP in 2020; plans to attend college.
Tony 16-18 years-old Class of 2018	On and off honor roll student.	Considered Jahsun one of his best friends; also close friends and neighbors with Ezekiel.	Lives with mother, father, grandmother, and an older sister and older cousin; father is a police officer.	Played basketball for the first two years of high school.	Attends a mid-sized public university a few hours from Philadelphia (was roommates with Ezekiel until he left school).
Yaja 17-19 years-old Class of 2018	Held many leadership positions at school; but his grades dropped towards the end of HS and he almost did not graduate.	Close with Jahsun, but not part of his friend group; one of the founding members of FTS.	Lives with mother, father, and sister; very close with family; mother works for the Post Office.	Works multiple jobs including for a summer camp; Christian and very religious.	Attends community college an hour outside Philadelphia.

Figure A.2 Details about twelve key student participants.

Adult Participant Details

NAME	RACE / GENDER / AGE	YEARS AT SCHOOL (AS OF 2017-2018)	ROLE AT SCHOOL OR SUBJECT TAUGHT / GRADE LEVELS TAUGHT
Ms. Cory Bloom	White / Female / Mid 20s	5th year	Science and Math Teacher / Freshmen
Ms. Eleanor Cain	White / Female / Mid 30s	7th year	Department Chair & Social Studies and Philosophy Teacher / Juniors and Seniors
Mr. Kevin Donaldson	White / Male / Late 30s	8th year (began as Principal in 2017)	Principal & Basketball Coach (Previously Math Teacher)
Ms. Amanda Estevez	Latina / Female / Mid 20s	3rd year	Math Teacher / Freshmen
Ms. Jill Finn	White / Female / Mid 30s	5th year	Social Studies Teacher / Sophomores
Mr. Spence Gilbert	White / Male / Late 30s	7th year	English Teacher / Freshmen
Ms. Beth Gordon	White / Female / Early 30s	4th year	Dept Chair & English Teacher / Seniors
Mr. Isaiah Hardwick	Black / Male / Late 30s	3rd year	School Support Officer & Wrestling Coach
Mr. Scott Hopkins	White / Male / Mid 40s	1st year	Dean of Students
Ms. Margo Jordan	White / Female / Mid 30s	1st year	Math Teacher / Juniors and Seniors
Mr. Faris Kahn	Indian American / Male / Early 30s	5th year	English Teacher & JV Basketball Coach / Freshmen
Ms. Donna Kallum	White / Female / Mid 30s	7th year	French Teacher / Seniors
Ms. Jessica Kim	Korean American / Female / Mid 20s	5th year (left in 2017)	Special Education Teacher / All grades
Mr. Bruce Marker	White / Male / Early 30s	3rd year	English Teacher / Sophomores
Mr. Kassius Pratt	Black / Male / Early 40s	8th year	School Support Officer
Ms. Maria Rivera	Latina / Female / Early 40s	3rd year	Social Worker
Dr. Seth Stephens	Black and Bi-racial / Male / Early 40s	7th year (began as CEO in 2017)	CEO of Boys' Prep Middle and High School (Previously Principal of HS)
Ms. Maggie Wu	Korean American / Female / Mid 20s	4th year	Science Teacher / All grades

Figure A.3 Details about key adult participants.

Appendix B: Additional Data Collection Details

DATA TYPE	QUANTITY AND TIMELINE OF DATA COLLECTED
Participant Observation	Over 600 hours between November 2016 and July 2018 – throughout school building (e.g., classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, main office, college office, teachers' lounge) during and after school and at related events (e.g., sports games, school dances, memorial events) – documented in 900 pages of fieldnotes; periodic visits to the school or related events through March 2020
Interviews with Students	65 students (4 of them were interviewed in pairs for convenience or their comfort; 12 of them were interviewed multiple times throughout the 2 years), across 101 total interviews (30-120 minutes each)
Interviews with Staff	9 key staff members including the CEO, Principal, Dean, Disciplinary Team, and Social Worker (60-100 minutes each)
Focus Groups with Staff	18 teachers across 5 focus groups in June 2018 (80-100 minutes each)
Focus Groups with Parents	6 parents (all mothers) across 2 focus groups in July-August 2018 (90-150 minutes each)
Social Media Posts	Over 3,500 screenshots of Instagram posts from 75 student participants between December 2016 and August 2018; additional selective social media observation (and screenshotting) through April 2020
Documents and Artifacts	Schoolwork (e.g., essays, drawings) from focal students; documents and artifacts related to the school (e.g., news stories, school website, Board meeting minutes); documents and artifacts related to gun violence in Philadelphia (e.g., news stories, documentaries)
Survey of Faculty	School faculty surveyed in spring 2017 about experiences of loss in their youth and as teachers and support offered to students (50% response rate)
Survey of Students	Senior Class of 2017 surveyed in spring 2017 about experiences of loss, types of emotional responses, and support received from peers and adults (87% response rate)
Students' School Records	Grades, absences, and discipline records each trimester for focal students and all other consenting students
Other Audio/ Visual Data	Dozens of short audio and video clips and photographs from various school events, daily school life, and relevant out-of-school activities
Documentary Footage	11 filmed interviews with students; filmed conversation between 3 mothers of gun violence victims; 10 hours of other related footage (e.g., anti-violence rallies, memorial events, daily life at school)

Figure B.1 Data collection methods and data summary.

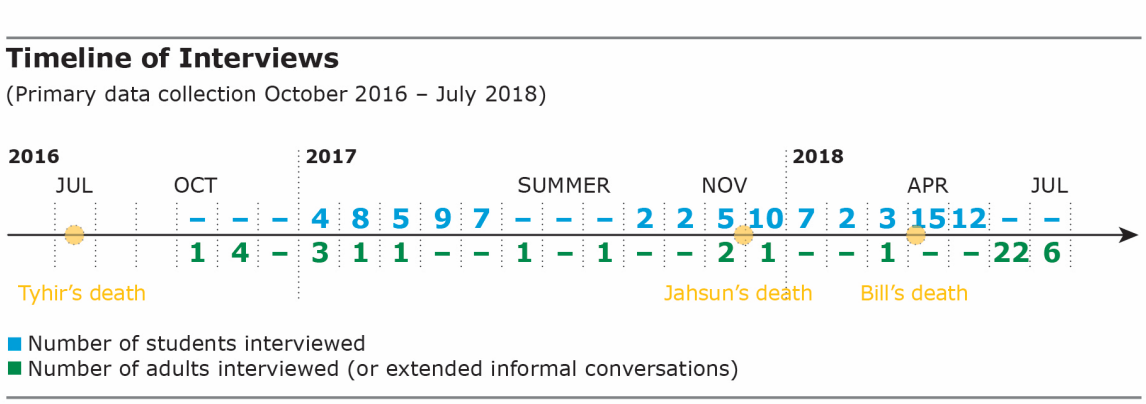

Figure B.2 Timeline of interviews with students and adults during primary data collection period.

Appendix C: To Name or Not to Name: Decisions about Participant Anonymity

The field of ethnography, particularly within the discipline of sociology, is experiencing a moment of reckoning. The publication of Alice Goffman's now infamous book, *On the Run*, in 2014 has prompted – or, perhaps, reignited – a debate about long-held social scientific conventions of anonymity as well as the general approach to offering ethnographic "evidence." In recent years, there has been a mounting call for figurative "ethnographic trials" that would require ethnographers to offer more proof of their claims and rethink the taken-for-granted approaches to conducting and writing up ethnography. In this appendix, I address the specific proposed reform of rethinking, and perhaps altogether eliminating, the established ethnographic practice of using pseudonyms and otherwise disguising people, places, and institutions.

At the forefront of these calls for ethnographic reform is legal scholar Steven Lubet, who argues in his 2017 book, *Interrogating Ethnography,* that there are major problems with the standard approach to urban ethnography. In his view, the qualitative methodology would benefit from employing approaches more aligned with "fact-based" disciplines such as journalism and law, including dropping the use of pseudonyms, the "default approach in urban ethnography," and naming participants (92).

Lubet proposes that the ethnographic convention of anonymity "compounds" all the other "problems" of evidence in the ethnographic texts he examines (2017:91). He argues,

> *When all identities are thoroughly masked, it becomes nearly impossible to separate reliable informants from storytellers and rumor-spreaders, much less to*

> *determine whether the author has omitted or distorted essential information. Nonetheless, it is standard practice in ethnography to conceal the identities of research participants by using pseudonyms for people and locales, as well as by changing personal characteristics, altering facts, and rearranging or editing time sequences.*

Other scholars have similarly weighed in that although anonymizing research participants is a "convention" accepted by institutional review boards, it is not necessarily an "*ethical necessity*" or "*practical necessity,*" nor must it remain the "default" option for ethnographers (Jerolmack and Murphy 2019:816; Murphy and Jerolmack 2016). Further, some have argued that in the age of Google and Facebook, true masking is nearly impossible and promising that to participants may give them a "false sense of security" (Jerolmack and Murphy 2019:803; Reich 2015).

On the other side of this debate are sociologists like Allison Pugh who propose that the calls for ethnographic reform are "propelled not only by controversies bedeviling recent examples of the trade [such as Goffman's book], but by the credibility crisis roiling psychology and calls for greater transparency, replicability and access to quantitative data from within academia as well as the lay public" (Pugh and Mosseri 2020:28). Pugh and her coauthor contend that this "credibility crisis" has resulted in widespread anxieties about trust and a series of "misguided suggestions [that] reflect fundamental misunderstandings" about ethnography's purpose and what it can offer (2).

To these scholars, ethnography is fundamentally different than journalism, law, or laboratory studies: "ethnographic research offers rich accounts of social worlds and the perspectives of their inhabitants, helping to 'make sense' of the ways they make meaning" and they "earn readers' trust along the way, bit by bit" and, in part, through the "emotional resonance" of the narrative (Pugh and Mosseri 2020:29). Ethnography's

purpose is different than law or journalism, and therefore its responsibilities to those whose stories are revealed are different too. Ethnographers can honor the "gift of…participation" by "protect[ing study participants] from the judgment of others both in their orbit and without…because they (and we) cannot fully anticipate the extent of that judgment or its costs at the time of research or writing" (17). Even if our publicly networked lives have made it impossible to assure complete anonymity, "plausible deniability" is a valuable aim and offers benefits of its own (Reyes 2018).

Given the compelling arguments on all sides of this debate, I have made a set of choices about my naming practices for this study which I believe simultaneously provide information and context to my readers *and* protect my participants who entrusted me with their stories responsibly and ethically. These were difficult decisions I do not think I have made them perfectly, but I have taken them seriously and done the best I could.

Naming Places

I have chosen to name Philadelphia as the city where my research was conducted because I see this context as vital to understanding the extent and impacts of neighborhood gun violence during the years of my study. In a moment when violent crime is lessening nationally (Sharkey 2018), Philadelphia's epidemic of gun violence is rising. At the time of this study, Philadelphia is also, notably, the poorest city of the most populous cities in the country (PEW 2018). The experiences of the boys at Boys' Prep could not be fully understood without this context. Further, naming the city allows my work to gain from and contribute to the historical context offered by decades of ethnographies about Philadelphia including the work of W.E.B. DuBois (1967), Elijah

Anderson (1999), Nikki Jones (2009), Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2011), Marcus Anthony Hunter (2013), Jamie Fader (2013), and Alice Goffman (2014), among others.

Within the city of Philadelphia, however, I have decided to disguise both the neighborhood, Randall Park, and the school, Boys' Preparatory Charter High School, with pseudonyms. When necessary, I have disguised small features of each to protect the neighborhood and institutional identity as much as possible. Though neighborhoods across Philadelphia differ in important and meaningful ways – even when they share similar demographics – the specificity of the neighborhood in this study is secondary to the school context itself, which is the primary focus of my investigation. And while the possibility of revisits by future researchers if I revealed more details is intriguing,[64] I find the prospect of risk to the school even more compelling. It is impossible to predict how this work could be taken up to harm the school's reputation or future activities. As Pugh and Mosseri (2020:18) argue,

> *informants (and researchers) do not know how a book's portrayal will be received (either by themselves or by other readers); that common uncertainty means unmasking practices incur very real risks, particularly in an era of trolling, doxing and other threats incurred by the unveiled. These risks are borne largely, but not solely, by participants, who are much more vulnerable than researchers.*

The survival of a school like Boys' Prep relies on both public and private funding as well as family enrollment and I would not want to take the risk of jeopardizing that.

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[64] I do not believe a revisit to this particular school would provide any more value than an exploration of related research questions in a similar context whether or not it was the exact same school. My perspective here emerged, in part, from my reading of another piece of ethnographic work conducted at the school I have called Boys' Prep about 10 years before mine. While I learned a great deal from this author's investigation and findings, it is clear to me from this work that schools – as mini cultural contexts – evolve so much within even a few years as staff change, policies evolve, and student demographics shift that a revisit would be unlikely to provide the opportunity to reconfirm or replicate my findings.

There is of course a significant problem in my logic above: I recognize that the unique features of this school that are impossible to disguise (e.g., that it is a single-sex charter school) may make it immediately, or with some research, recognizable to readers – particularly those familiar with the educational landscape of Philadelphia. Additionally, the details of specific violent incidents that I do not alter (as I explain below) make information about the school accessible through relatively basic online searches. However, I subscribe to Victoria Reyes' perspective that there is tremendous value in *plausible deniability* which "allows for the people who are studied to disavow knowledge or participation in the research" (Reyes 2018:207). Though you may *think* you know, you can never be sure – a fact which I believe offers the central people in the story some continued protection. And my analyses will not haunt the school – or its staff and students – for years on online searches.

Naming People

With the exceptions described in the next section, the names of all people in this dissertation have been replaced with pseudonyms. Though many boys themselves requested that I use their real names in my dissertation and eventual book, I currently am of the opinion that this would be irresponsible since it is not possible to know the full implications of *outing* my participants. Further, there were some participants who openly discussed illegal activities such as smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol as a minor, or possessing a weapon and I have no intention of putting those individuals at risk.

The pseudonyms for the boys are a mix of names they selected for themselves and names I chose. For example, Herc comes from "Hercules," the name Herc originally requested I use for him. Tony also chose his own name because of his admiration for

Tony Soprano and his joking admission during one of our interviews that he felt like Tony Soprano and I seemed like his therapist. For those boys who did not select their own names, I chose names for some of them from the list of teenagers murdered by guns in Philadelphia in 2017 (Ubiñas 2017) to pay homage to those boys' memories. The names of Sybrii, Dimere, Bashir, Irell, Khalil, Antoine, David, and Rajae, for example, come from this list. In all cases, I did my best to select a name for each boy that conveyed similar class, racial, and/or religious markers as his original name while also disguising them as best as possible (Weiss 1995).

I took a similar approach to disguising the names of the adults who became central to my analysis.[65] Of course, in a small community like Boys' Prep, it is likely that despite these efforts, some characters will still be recognizable to others from the community. However, the use the pseudonyms for these people – like for the school itself – offers them plausible deniability: "Even if people are able to guess the real identity of the interviewees, the participants are able to assert plausible deniability that it is them precisely because they are not explicitly named. This is an important point that should not be underestimated. It is one thing to guess at someone's identity and another to know for certain who those people are" (Reyes 2018:212) or to have the research come up in an online search of their name (Murphy and Jerolmack 2016).

[65] There are many people with small, supporting roles in this story – likely too many for a reader to keep track of – but I have chosen not to create composite characters. Sometimes a teacher or student may only show up one or two times across the entire text. I have tried to signal this by limiting the descriptions of these characters when they are introduced, or leaving out the proper names of these people altogether, so that readers can focus their attention on the primary reoccurring figures in this story. This process is not perfect though and there are other choices I could have made here.

Exceptions to the Rule: Memorializing the Deceased

There is one set of names which I did not anonymize: the four beautiful boys whose untimely deaths form the foundation of this investigation and analysis – Tyhir, Jahsun, Bill, and Sy-eed – as well as some of their family members who expressed their preference to be named.

The possibility of using the real names of murdered children did not initially occur to me when I began this study or wrote up consent documents to share with participants. The idea that it might be preferable to *not* change their names first emerged when I met with Tyhir's mother, Tanisha, for the second time a few months into my fieldwork. At that time, I gently raised with her the idea that I would have to change Tyhir's name in anything I wrote – which I assumed would be what was required by the Institutional Review Board as well as my own personal ethical code. I suggested she begin to think about a pseudonym she would be comfortable with me using for her son. She sat for several minutes in deep thought, and then said that she really could not think of another name and wondered aloud about the necessity of a pseudonym. She said that if I was going to write about her son, she would want readers to know who he was and to honor his memory with his real name. A year later, I had a similar conversation with Maxayn, Jahsun's mother. I began to take apart my assumption that a pseudonym was the only possibility, but I also felt conflicted.

The conflict I felt was particularly acute when thinking about Jahsun since he had previously been a consented participant in my study. Less than a year before his death, I had discussed with him the concept of pseudonyms and explained that I would be using one for him. He had even suggested to me a possible pseudonym I might pick for him.

After his death, when confronted with the question of whether or not I should use his real name, I revisited the consent form he signed. I wondered what responsibility I had to the Jahsun I had known in life who had signed the form and how to weigh that responsibility against the new situation – that he was dead – and his mother's preference that he be named. In an effort to seek some advice on this matter, I met with a representative from the UPenn IRB. I explained the situation and she told me, with a cold frankness I was not expecting, that "the dead are not human subjects." Though I do not necessarily agree with this statement, it was at least freeing to know that I was no longer legally nor institutionally bound by Jahsun's signed consent form.

Further conversations with both Tanisha and Maxayn helped me reach the conclusion that the best honor I could give to Tyhir and Jahsun, and then I might assume also to Bill and Sy-eed who died after I made this decision,[66] would be to name them: to recognize their humanity through naming and to honor their short lives by letting readers know them as well as I could make possible. On a practical level, it also became clear that to adequately disguise the identities of these murder victims – about whom dozens of newspaper articles have been written – would require a host of alterations to the timeline of my study, the description of events, and details about the school, all of which might threaten the integrity of my analysis (Jerolmack and Murphy 2019; Reyes 2018).

Anonymizing Visual Data

Throughout the dissertation, I include many images drawn directly from my participants' social media accounts. These images include a combination of faces, names,

[66] I discussed this with Bill's mother about two years after his death, as I was preparing this dissertation for completion. I did not discuss this decision with anyone connected to Sy-eed.

and screen names with identifying information. With the help of a paid undergraduate research assistant, I anonymized each of these images and covered up identifying features. All screen names have been changed to reflect each Instagram user's pseudonym.[67] To limit distractions within the images, the real screen names and names have been replaced with altered ones in the same location, format, and size; however, all altered text in social media screenshots is presented in a light yellow color so that it is distinguishable from the standard white (or other colored) text.

Because I have not changed the names of Tyhir, Jahsun, and Bill throughout this manuscript, I also did not remove or disguise references to them (including the use of their nicknames) in social media images. I have, however, altered their social media screen names where they appear in order to protect their own social media archives. Additionally, I altered or omitted the names of other deceased people not central to the story when they are referenced in Instagram posts or quotes from interviews throughout the dissertation.

[67] Because new Instagram users constantly join the application and current users are able to change their screen names at will, it is possible that the screen names I invented are in active use by people unrelated to the study.

Appendix D: The Word "Boy"

Throughout the dissertation, I describe the young people at the center of my study as "boys" rather than "young men." Although some were 18 when I met them and nearly all are at least 18 (if not 21 or older) now as I write this, I believe it is important to counter the societal impulse to prematurely adultify young people of color, and specifically Black male children. Given the historical legacy of the word "boy" – which has long been part of a white supremacist vocabulary of humiliation toward Black adult males – this is a decision not without risk. I worry that some readers may find this word demeaning to the teenagers and adolescents about whom I write, especially since too often urban schools also employ practices of discipline and control which can infantilize students. However, I worry more about the theoretical and real life dangers of seeing young people as adults before they are, so I use the word "boy" in the hopes that it encourages my readers to honor these young people's childhoods and preserve them as long as possible.

The harmful process of adultifying Black boys has been notably described in Ann Ferguson's (2001) book *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Her study of elementary-age Black boys uncovers the racially divergent disciplinary policies and techniques which "actively produce individual social identities of 'good,' 'bad,' 'gifted,' 'having potential,' 'troubled,' and 'troublesome'" (52). Although the school rules "seem to be specifically designed to control, manage, and channel the 'natural' behavior of boys, who are said to be more physical, aggressive, sexual" (42),

they treat Black and white boys differently: white boys who cause trouble are excused because "boys will be boys" and minimally punished, while Black boys are implicitly considered to have fully-formed adult intentionality and their actions are viewed as representative of who they are. In sum, Black boys' misbehaviors are not only punished more harshly, but are also often interpreted as representative of fundamentally flawed character traits.

These "institutional perceptions and engagement of Black boys as adults" (Dancy 2014:49) are not limited to school; similar racialized processes of adultification can be seen in a variety of other contexts. Goff and colleagues (2014) have undertaken a number of experimental studies to investigate the extent to which Black males of various ages are perceived differently than their white peers. Overall, they find that while no racial differences are found for children age nine and younger, for every age group beginning at age ten, "Black children and adults were rated as significantly less innocent than White children and adults or children and adults generally," a finding which, they argue, "provides preliminary evidence that Black children are more likely to be seen as similar to adults prematurely" (529).

Association with crime can distort age and innocence estimates still further. A related study found that people viewing pictures of children labeled as either misdemeanor or felony suspects overestimated their ages by approximately two years. This result remained constant for white, Latino, and Black male "suspects" for both crime types with one exception: the ages of Black "suspects" of felonies were overestimated by an average of *over four years* (Goff et al. 2014). As the researchers explain, "the magnitude of this overestimation also bears repeating. Because Black felony suspects

were seen as 4.53 years older than they actually were, this would mean that boys would be misperceived as legal adults at roughly the age of 13 and a half" (532). We have sadly seen many real life examples of this in the police-involved shootings of Black boys like Tamir Rice who were perceived by their killers as far older than their chronological age.

We can also see this type of adultification of Black children at work in the healthcare system. For example, a study of the use of pain medication with children undergoing treatment for appendicitis found that Black children were given significantly less pain medicine than their white peers. The researchers conclude that their findings suggest that our society is willing to accept a "higher threshold of pain" for Black children (Goyal et al. 2015). This seems to be part of a larger history, sometimes referred to as the "afterlife of slavery," in which Black people's emotional life – including their trauma and pain – is not as deeply recognized or appreciated by the society at large (Wun 2015). To Goff and his colleagues (2014:527), the denial to Black children of the "central protection" of childhood innocence is a mark of the continued dehumanization of Black people in our society.

In response to the accumulation of evidence of the adultification of Black boys, a number of scholars have recently made the bold claim that in contemporary American society "Black boyhood itself has been rendered both unimagined and unimaginable" (Dumas and Nelson 2016:28; see also Drake 2016). In other words, the authors argue that the very idea of childhood, or boyhood more specifically, has been erased from our conceptualization of the Black male experience. Indeed, a search of the term "Black boyhood" in the Sociological Abstracts database yields less than five results. Perhaps

many of the studies of Black males use terms like “young men” even when describing children as Dumas and Nelson suggest (see also Ladson-Billings 2011).

In an effort to support the reclaiming of Black boyhood and resist processes of adultification – and especially in the context of their experiences with unnatural or off-time loss – I have decided to employ the word “boy” to describe my participants. In addition to all of these theoretical reasons, there is also the name of the school itself which refers to its students as “Boys.” My hope is that the positive political intent behind this linguistic choice outweighs any negative historical legacies of the term and the visceral reactions that some readers may initially feel.

Appendix E: Research Relationships, Reciprocity, and Leaving the Field

My Relational Stance

In my research relationships, particularly with young people, I have tried to center the ideas of care and reciprocity.[68] Throughout this study, I did my best to treat my interactions with participants not as efforts to "build rapport" in order to gain access or collect better data, but as sincere human connection (Jackson 2010). The relationships I built thus involved the periodic discomforts and conflicts of complex human relationships, but also humor, care, and even love. Especially resonant for me is Laura's (2013) description of the role of "love acts" in ethnographic research: "Taking love seriously in social research means that the process and product of scholarship has real consequences for the lives of three-dimensional human beings, the researcher him- or herself included, not for imagined 'others' somewhere out there" (291). In other words, my conversations with students and my presence in their lives surely impacted them; it would be dishonest and even dangerous to claim otherwise. I did everything I could to ensure that those impacts were not negative; and when they appeared to be positive, I documented them carefully since that would also constitute valuable data.

Beyond the intangible ways that I may have impacted boys' lives by showing interest in them, listening to them, offering encouraging words, and being a stable adult presence for at least two years, my tangible interventions on their lives in most cases

[68] I describe the concept of care in research more fully in an in-progress edited book on care-based methodology in qualitative research with young people in schools.

were minimal and mostly came in the form of food, quarters, or rides. To every interview I brought a small snack (e.g. a candy bar, a bag of chips). In fact, once I got a sense from a handful of students of what the favorite snacks were, I bought some of them in bulk and kept them in the locker where I stored my audio recorder and my jacket when I was at school. On special occasions (e.g., the day before a holiday break, Valentine's Day), I often brought bigger bags of treats to share with the classes I regularly observed. In the lunchroom, some students would periodically run around asking anyone in sight for a quarter or two to round out their dollar to be able to buy cookies or chips from the a la carte lunch line. If I had change on me, I would freely give it out.[69] Finally, when I drove my car to Boys' Prep or after school events, I might be asked or offer to give students rides home or at least to a more convenient train station.[70]

In my interactions with students on social media, I was not always as generous. Early on I decided that I would not "like" or comment on students' posts online. I did not want to contribute to or participate in the social media culture that thrived off these small affirmations. (For example, boys might post a picture of themselves, but then take it down a few days later if it was not well-received enough in terms of number of likes.) I also worried that some students might overanalyze which pictures I "liked" or think I was playing favorites if I missed some. However, it quickly became clear that on social media, reciprocity is valued. Boys would frequently tell me that they had noticed I watched all their Instagram stories, but then were dismayed that I never "liked" any of

[69] Other examples of (rare) financial gifts are described in the section on intervening.
[70] There were several teachers at the school who would regularly do the same so this was not interpreted by students as particularly out of the ordinary.

their photos. They would bring this up jokingly, but I was not entirely sure that they were appeased by my explanations. Twice, a student mentioned me in their Instagram story (e.g., "Hi Nora!") to see if that would get me to respond. I eventually decided that there were other ways I could interact with students online that were not as public, but would make them feel like I was not just creepily observing from afar. I started periodically replying by direct message to boys' posts and stories usually with simple comment like "that looked fun" or "I'm sorry that happened to you." Sometimes I would ask a question and we would have a brief conversation over direct message; sometimes these conversations led to plans for another interview or just a quick in-person check-in at school the next day.

Over time, I found that the curiosity and care I demonstrated was often reciprocated. Some students made a point of checking up on me, periodically texting just to ask how I was doing or whether I survived a snowstorm, for example. As other researchers have experienced (Jackson 2013; Reich 2015), through social media, participants also came to know more about my life than they otherwise would which may have created more of a sense of familiarity, and perhaps even some balance, in the research relationship.[71] The boys were often interested in knowing more about me, and I

[71] There was also, of course, a strong gendered component to some of these interactions. Flirtation or romantic/sexual desire may have been an unspoken component, on the part of the boys, in some of our interactions – as is likely in many interactions between heterosexual teenage boys and women of any age, and has been discussed by other researchers (e.g., Pascoe 2011; Goffman 2014). During my study, this came up explicitly only a handful of times. For example, during one epic three hour joint interview with two students, they both confessed to having a crush on me and wondered whether, once they graduated, they could really have a chance to date me. Fortunately, in these instances I was able to shut down their advances without embarrassing the boys or seriously harming my relationship with them or others. There was only one instance when, after he graduated, one student clearly gained more confidence in trying to pursue a relationship of some kind. An inappropriate in-person gesture, followed by a related text message, required me to draw boundaries with that participant and avoid following up on his whereabouts or pursuing participant validation activities with him.

was generally pretty open with them. They asked questions about my college experience, about New York City (where I grew up), about my love life, my ambitions of being a professor, and they noticed if I was wearing a new pair of shoes or got a new phone.

Should I be doing this work at all?

Unspoken in all the questions about research relationships and reciprocity is the much bigger and more complicated (or, perhaps, far simpler) question of whether I, as an upper middle class white woman, should be doing this research at all. Obviously, the fact that I did it suggests that I believe that I have a right to and that I can do it well. And yet, there may be others who read this who disagree.

Certainly, there were many moments – particularly as I prepared myself to attend a memorial service, meet with a mother who had lost her son, or conduct an interview with a young person in the aftermath of a death or, perhaps even more strongly, as I sat at my desk writing – when I had second thoughts. My mind would wander to a few lines from Langston Hughes' poignant poem about early death, "Kids Who Die":

> *Of course, the wise and the learned*
> *Who pen editorials in the papers,*
> *And the gentlemen with Dr. in front of their names*
> *White and black,*
> *Who make surveys and write books*
> *Will live on weaving words to smother the kids who die*

I would no doubt fit into Hughes' category of a person "with Dr. in front of their names" (or almost), but was I writing words that would "smother the kids who die"? Was I conducting research that centered damage or deficit rather than young people's desires or strengths (Harper 2010; Howard 2013; Tuck 2009)? Was I relying on a "jungle book trope" that sensationalized violence or dehumanized my research participants (Betts

2014; Paris and Winn 2013; Rios 2011)? I believe that my commitment to the rigor of the work, my investment in the outcomes of the work, and my deep affection for the people who were part of it kept me from falling into those traps, but ultimately each reader will have to make that decision form themselves.

Balancing Conflicting Roles

Some of the most challenging moments for me methodologically were when my role as researcher and my role as responsible adult seemed to conflict. I previously worked as a high school teacher and remain a somewhat idealistic educator invested professionally and emotionally in the successes of vulnerable people. As such, I have deeply ingrained instincts to encourage slacking students to do better, offer advice, or discourage bad behavior that is either illegal, against school rules, or simply counter-productive to personal advancement in the face of societal injustice and inequality. In some interactions with Boys' Prep students, these adult/educator instincts would be in conflict with my instincts as a researcher to observe, be curious, and not excessively intervene.

One relatively minor, but frequent example of this came when I would observe playfights in the school building. Often this tussling or headlocking was pretty clearly in jest, but sometimes it escalated or looked like someone could get injured even if it was not the players' intentions. If I had been employed by the school, I would have been expected to break up these fights and perhaps even discipline the students involved. In my researcher role, though, I was technically not expected to do any disciplining – which, I believe, contributed greatly to my ability to build strong and trusting relationships with students. However, in these moments, I worried that if someone were to get hurt, I would

be – or at least feel – responsible. And I often felt self-conscious that if another adult arrived on the scene to break up the roughhousing, and saw that I had been there doing nothing, I would lose their trust or respect.

There were also students who did not fully understand who I was and would be confused by my inaction. For example, on one spring afternoon, a group of seniors were playfully roughhousing in the second floor hallway. They were headlocking each other, and sometimes grabbing unsuspecting students who walked by and also putting them into brief and playful headlocks. I was standing in the hallway, leaning against the lockers, and casually chatting with a couple students while this was going on. At one point, a sophomore walked to his locker on the hallway where the seniors were playing. They grabbed him from both sides and put him into a headlock. After several seconds, he weaseled his way out of the hold and stood up, somewhat out of breath. He looked at me and said that I was being a bad teacher by not breaking up the fight. One of the seniors retorted that I was not a teacher, to which the sophomore replied, "well, a bad adult person."

This and other similar moments made me wonder if the fact that an adult was nearby and watching led students to assume that I would break up their fight and therefore, perhaps, they might not do as much self-policing as they otherwise would if no adults are around. Sometimes, when I just could not handle the role conflict, I would walk away – there was not much data for me in observing a physical altercation anyway. The one time that I do remember trying to physically intervene on a fight that I felt was getting out of hand and dangerous, another student physically prevented me from getting closer worrying that I would get hurt.

My decision not to enforce school rules or discipline students was much easier to abide by when it came to behaviors that did not put anyone at risk. Students quickly learned that I would not chastise them for being in my presence out of uniform (or with a sloppy uniform) and that it was fine for them to curse or to criticize the school in my presence. I was also comfortable with them talking about smoking or selling marijuana, or even describing times when they possessed a weapon, but I would sometimes subtly suggest that they not say more than that for fear that it might put me in a difficult ethical position.

When to Intervene

Beyond the day-to-day playfighting scenarios, there were a handful higher stakes moments throughout the research when I had to make decisions about whether to intervene in ways that some researchers might consider outside the bounds of that role. These moments of methodological dilemma fell into two categories: decisions about breaking confidentiality and decisions about offering support or resources to a student in need.

In general, I rarely broke confidentiality. But this was tested very early on in my time at Boys' Prep. In fact, just a week or two into getting to know Hazeem, he texted me to ask if we could meet the following day. When we met, he was very upset. I let him talk undirected and he described to me a lifelong history of fighting, concluding in a casual admission that a group of kids from another school were planning to come to Boys' Prep that afternoon to fight him. Not knowing him or the context very well yet, I was unsure how serious the situation might be and whether I should alert the principal or another school adult even though Hazeem had specifically asked me not to tell anyone. I went

back and forth about this for several hours unsure of what to do. Eventually, I decided to reach out to Kaliq, one of Hazeem's friends who was apparently also going to be involved in the fight, to get his read on the situation. This was a break in confidentiality, but not the kind Hazeem was most worried about. Kaliq, who already in my short time of knowing him struck me as the most rational and savvy of the boys I had met, assuaged my worry: "It's going be cool. I doubt anyone will show up. People are just social media thugs." With this new information, I decided not to break Hazeem's trust and alert any adults to the possibility of a fight after school.

In the end, nothing happened. However, this initial test of my trustworthiness alerted me to the need for a plan for those kinds of situations. A few weeks later, I explained this dilemma to Mr. Pratt, the head disciplinarian who had taken me under his wing and let me come along with him on his drives through the neighborhood during the let-out period after school – what he called "safety corridors." He agreed that if I learned of something that could put students in danger, I could just give him a vague heads up – like, "after school today, maybe have some extra people outside" – and he would agree to not ask for details or inquire about who the information came from. To me this plan seemed like a good compromise for a tricky situation, though I ultimately never needed to use it.

The second type of methodological – and ethical – dilemma I faced about intervening came when students periodically asked me for support or resources in financial or other forms. This type of dilemma also came up early on when, just a few months into my fieldwork, one of my primary participants, Herc, was facing expulsion after he was caught with marijuana in his backpack for the second time. On the day he

was caught, he spent several hours in the main office meeting with various school administrators and waiting for his mother to pick him up. When she arrived, I took the opportunity to introduce myself and we ended up in a lengthy conversation while she waited for the principal to be free to meet with her. Later, when Herc and his mother left the main office after their meeting, they found me to explain that he was going to have to appear at a hearing with the school board and was being considered for expulsion. They asked if I would write to the board in support of him; Herc also asked two of his teachers for letters.

I initially felt conflicted about whether to write this letter, or whether, in my role as researcher, I should be letting things play out as they would if I were not there. I believed that an expulsion would have enormous detrimental consequences for Herc, and I also knew that I possessed information about him that few other people in the school knew – namely, that less than two months earlier, he had attempted to take his own life. I also, selfishly, realized that if he was not allowed to return to Boys' Prep, I would be unable to continue spending time with him and he would likely drop out of my research focus. I ultimately decided to write the letter, against the advice of an advisor at the time. A few days later, I learned that the board had allowed Herc to return to school. Though my letter was surely just one of many pieces of information and factors in the conversation, the principal mentioned that there was a phrase from what I wrote – something about knowing that schools have to weigh multiple factors in these sorts of decisions – that he read during the hearing and posed as a question to Herc.

As I got to know students better, there were also a handful of times when students said that they were in a bind and asked me for financial resources. Mostly these requests

were specifically for Ubers from their jobs back home late at night when the buses were running sporadically. These requests would come by text, sometimes when I was already in bed, and each time, I would feel tremendous conflict and frustration, but would often give in. I was generally more frustrated by the time inconvenience of having to get the addresses, type them in, and then relay messages between the driver and the rider so that they could find each other; the cost was generally never more than $10 or $12. The requests came only during my second year of research and perhaps a total of 12 times from two specific students, Herc and Kaliq.[72] When the requests were at their peak and one asked for a ride which turned out to be for his sister and not him – and the back-and-forth took so long that the driver canceled the ride, charging me anyway – I drew the line. I reminded them that I was a student and not made of money, and that they should save these requests for absolute emergencies; they understood and have abided by that rule since.

These same two students have also each asked me for a direct financial loan once, in both cases after my official research period ended. I have remained in regular touch with both students because they were part of the team participating in the documentary film project. Kaliq asked for $25 for the deposit for his school laptop; he promised to pay me back, but never has. In early 2020, Herc asked me for a $250 loan because he was in a bind owing someone else money, but would not elaborate further. At the time, a check for $180 was on his way to him for his work on the film project; that check was about a

[72] The requests began only after I had offered to order an Uber for Herc one day when he left school midday noticeably sick. He had thrown up several times already, and was dismissed early, but without anyone available to pick him up. I saw him on his way out the door; he said he had to take two buses home and it would take about an hour. I offered to order him a car and he accepted.

month later than it was supposed to be so I was comfortable spotting him that amount because I would be guaranteed to get it back. After some back and forth, I decided to also loan him the rest because I felt some legitimate worry about what kind of situation he had gotten himself in. He has not yet paid me back, but given the crisis that has overtaken the world since then, I expect that this will also turn into a gift rather than a loan.

My Own Grief

Beyond the role conflict I described between researcher and caring adult, there were also other, more personal, ways in which I felt conflict between multiple roles – such as my role as researcher and my role as someone who was also personally in mourning. This came up most acutely during the ritual and memorial events for Jahsun. Unlike Tyhir and Bill, I had known Jahsun personally, and he had known me. Before his death, Jahsun's mother knew about me — Jahsun had told her about how much he enjoyed being interviewed. In the case of the other two boys, almost everything I learned about them and their mothers, and their mothers about me, came after their death.

Jahsun's memorial service that took place in the school cafeteria/auditorium on a Saturday about two weeks after his death was an event that I was especially dreading because I was still feeling deeply saddened by his death. Although I had found much strength and solace in the previous memorial gatherings for him, and in the school days of the two weeks prior, this particular event was not sitting well with me. The moment I pulled into my parking space in the school parking lot, I began to feel conflicted. On the one hand, in a room where most people would be new to the school, I was an insider. On the other hand, I was still an outsider in most ways in the school and was not fully a part of this grieving community. I wrote at the end of my fieldnotes that day that the best

word I could come up with about the conflict between being a mourner and a researcher was "weird" – which, though I knew was not adequate, reminded me of how often that was the only word the students could grasp onto to describe a complex emotional response.

I felt *weird* walking in and not being sure where to sit: should I sit with the teachers (adults, white people) in the back rows? Should I try to sit with some students since my research questions pertained most to how they were experiencing this period? Should I sit alone in a far back corner to have a view of everything? Should I be floating like the photographer so that I could see different parts of the event and the behind-the-scenes?

Once I was seated, in a back row squeezed between a teacher and a sophomore I did not know well – a game time decision given the limited options available – a new conflict emerged: should I apologize to my neighbors on either side for taking notes on my phone? I did not want them to think I was being disrespectful by using my phone, but I also did not want to draw attention to my role as researcher in that moment. As the service continued, I became more aware of my own grief and wished that I were sitting with people to whom I felt more personally connected, even if it was just for support or camaraderie in silence. When the service ended, I felt my outsider status even more as students and adults were finding each other for warm hugs and words of condolence. I felt a longing to be more fully a part of the community so that my own grief would have a little more space.

When this cycle of events repeated four months later with Bill's death, I felt a very different kind of internal dissonance about my role. I had not known him. For days

after his death, I racked my brain for a memory of him in the hallways or cafeteria. I looked up his schedule and compared it to my own field notes from the weeks before to see if I had been in any of his classrooms. When I learned what table he had generally sat at during lunch, I realized that he had been involved in the food fight that occurred the day before spring break between a sophomore and a senior table. I had been sitting with the seniors (Jahsun's friends) and because I had not really known the specific students at the sophomore table, I had not paid much attention to them. That afternoon, I sat with Mr. Pratt and Antoine in the surveillance room as they flipped through videos trying to figure out who started the fight. After Bill died, I longed to re-watch those videos and find him in them to jog a real memory of my own. After all that I had been through that year *with* everyone at the school, I felt a bit like a fraud that I was not personally sharing in their grief this time.

Unbeknownst to most students and adults at Boys' Prep, I was also experiencing my own ongoing personal grief during the period of my research. During this time, and for the three and half years before, my mother was dying from terminal cancer. I regularly traveled to New York City to be with her and my father on weekends. My trips to New York might come up in conversation with students if I left school early on a Friday or if, on a Monday, they asked what I did during the weekend; except to the select students who prodded extra hard, I rarely explained the specific purpose of these trips. Though I believe that my experience of long-term anticipatory grief increased my sensitivity to the boys' plight, I also head the caution of Rebecca Louise Carter (2019:25), who similarly suffered a parental loss while in the midst of writing up an

ethnographic account of grief, that "personal experience does not necessarily give greater access to the lives of others."

Leaving the Field

Ending my formal period of data collection was something I dreaded throughout the entire research process. Over time, and very quickly in some cases, I had come to love and deeply care about many of my participants, both the boys and the adults. And though days at the school, and nights writing up fieldnotes, were utterly exhausting in ways I had not experienced since being a teacher myself, they were also filled with so much joy and laughter and feelings of accomplishment and hope. As someone who is trying to do research with real world implications and for the social good, the possibility of making an impact through my research feels so far away; but in day-to-day interactions with young people, I was aware that I was contributing to their lives, even if it was only in the smallest ways. Thinking about this phase of work ending was very sad to me, even as I felt eager to have the time and distance to really dig into my data and make sense of what I had witnessed over the two years.

Many researchers describe the emotional and relational challenges of leaving the field (Hammersley 2006; Iversen 2009). I was lucky in that school years have a natural start and end so, as I prepared to leave at the end of the 2017-2018 school year, I was not the only one saying goodbye. Because it had been such a challenging year, everyone's goodbyes – including graduating students and teachers moving on – felt more poignant.

Ms. Cain, a teacher I had become close with, thought to honor me at the senior luncheon a few days before graduation. She asked one student to give a short speech and

then invited me up to accept a bouquet of flowers. Randy offered the following words, which brought me to tears:

> *Many may not know you, some know a ton about you. Some with deep relationships, others with none. Despite that, you're one of us. We wanted you to know that you belong in our community. Appreciated liked a student and respected like a teacher, Ms. Nora we're all grateful that you're here! We want you to understand that without you this school wouldn't be the same. We can always look to you for guidance and some of us look to you for confidence. For myself personally I appreciate you allowing me to openly express my feelings about the death of Jahsun.*

I attended the seniors' graduation a few days later, this time joining the procession of faculty and sitting in the front section of the auditorium with them, rather than with the audience as I had the year before. I took photos with seniors, exchanged phone numbers and emails with those whose contact info I had not already had, and gave and received many hugs. And then it was over: the school year and my formal data collection period.

Social media has allowed me to stay connected to many of the people, both young and old, whom I got to know during the research. During the year following the completion of my research, I visited the school a handful of times, and I have continued to attend major school events such as graduation, alumni day, and memorial events. The documentary film project has kept me connected in a more meaningful and engaged way with several folks, but now I barely know any students still attending the school and several of the teachers with whom I was closest have also left.

The spring after I concluded the research, my mother died. Some of the boys saw my posts about it on my Facebook or Instagram pages. Several reached out with comments of sympathy or support. Keith, who was one of the first students I met during his freshman year, responded movingly to one of my posts on Instagram about missing

my mother, “I’ve got your back because you had mine when I was down.” Though life at Boys’ Prep will surely ebb and flow and the people who walk the hallways will change, I imagine I will feel forever connected to the community that was there during those two years because we shared so much.

Appendix F: Additional Charts: Academic Trajectories Following Peer Loss(es)

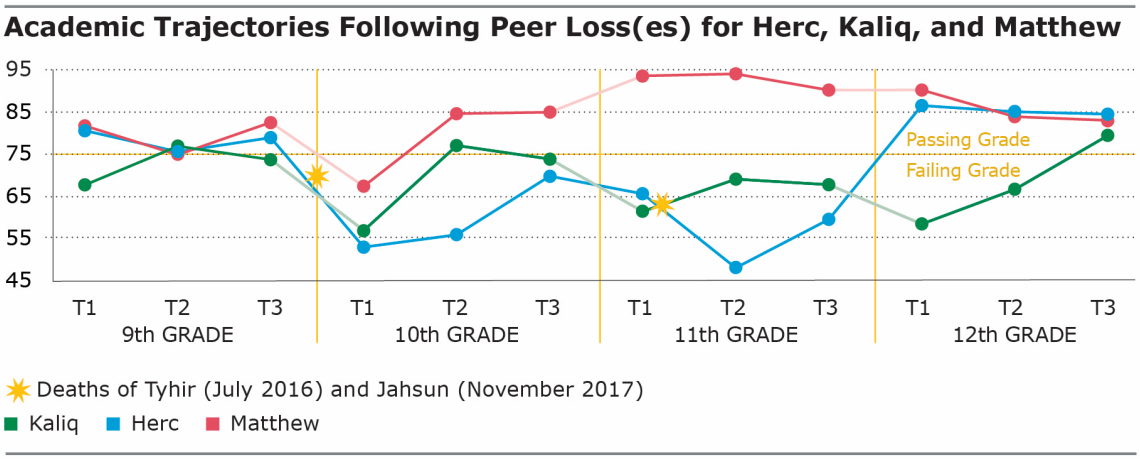
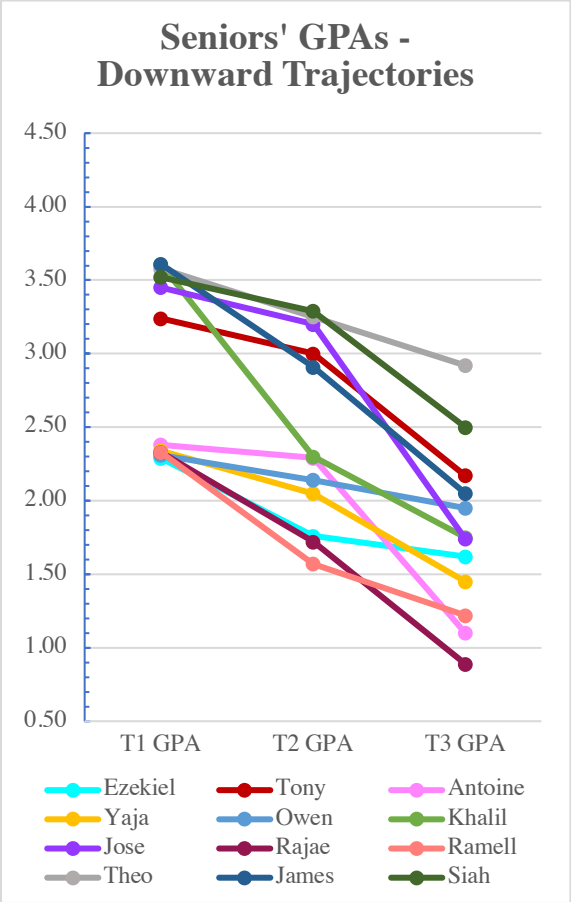
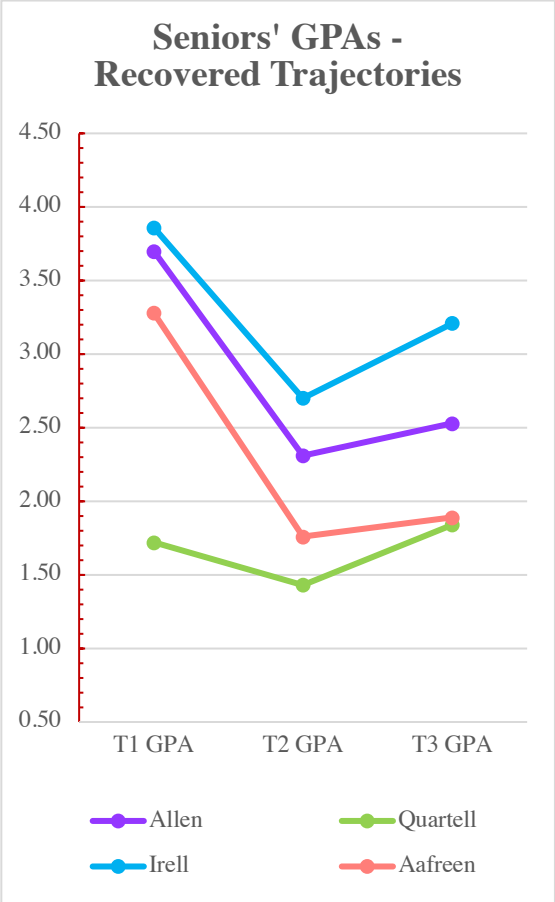
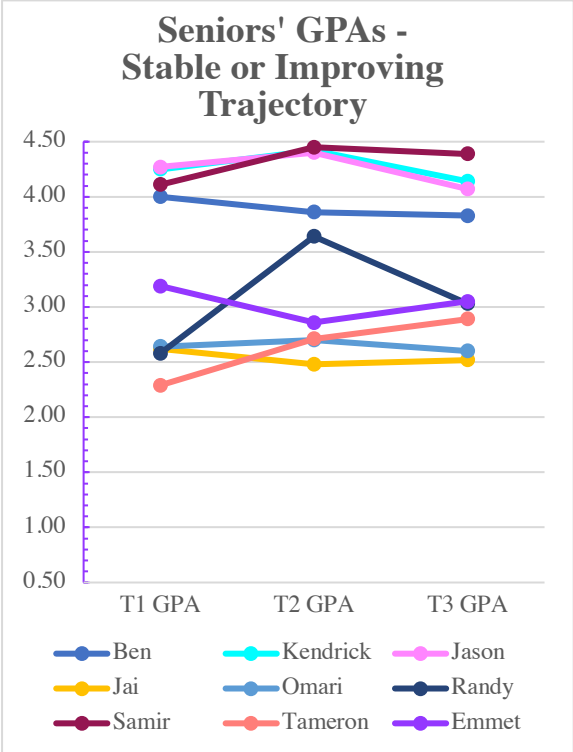


Figure F.1. Herc, Kaliq, and Matthew's average grades for all classes each trimester of their high school career. All three boys experience a drop in their average grades after Tyhir's death, but only Herc and Kaliq do after Jahsun's (Matthew did not consider Jahsun a close friend). The three also show different trends and timelines for bouncing back.







Top row:
Figure F.2 Seniors' GPAs – Downward Trajectories. Twelve seniors whose GPAs dropped between 1.31 and 0.09 points from the end of Trimester 1 to the end of Trimester 2, and between 1.46 and 0.14 from the end of Trimester 2 to the end of Trimester 3. Among these twelve, half started with GPAs above 3.0 and half below 2.5.

Figure F.3 Seniors' GPAs – Recovered Trajectories. Four seniors whose GPAs dropped between 1.52 and 0.29 points from the end of Trimester 1 to the end of Trimester 2, but then stabilized or improved slightly during Trimester 3.

Bottom row:
Figure F.4 Seniors' GPAs – Stable or Improving Trajectories. Nine seniors whose GPAs stayed more or less stable throughout the year, or improved. Among this group, about half started the year with GPAs of 4.0 or above and the remaining with starting GPAs between 2.29 and 3.19.

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