

# **The Murder of Tayshana Murphy**

**by Jonathan Abrams**

The phones started ringing early in Harlem on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The calls quickly spread to the rest of the boroughs and followed the same pattern of emotions: shock and disbelief, anger and frustration.

“One of the parents called me up,” said Ed Grezinsky, the girls’ basketball coach at Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers in New York City. “They asked, ‘Is it true?’”

“I got a call at 5:30 in the morning,” said Raichelle Thompson-Pressley, a Harlem resident. “I was sleeping. Somebody told me that a shooting had occurred. I didn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe it.”

“At around 4:40, 5-ish in the morning, I started getting calls,” said Reverend Vernon Williams, a Harlem community activist. “Easily, over 50 calls. I made one call just to confirm. Then, I started making calls to people I work with, started getting people on the ground over there.”

“Whatever happened, they ain’t going far,” Will Rampersant, an AAU basketball coach, thought when he received the call. “Everybody knows Chicken. She lived in the two biggest projects in the doggone city. I had girlfriends that knew her, and they called me right away, ‘Is that the girl?’ and they knew somebody that knew her. That’s how known the kid is.”

Taylonn Murphy will wait for a phone call he will never receive because of what caused the flurry of phone activity. “I still wait for my phone to ring and her to say, ‘Pops, come pick me up from the gym,’” Taylonn said.

A family mourns, a basketball team is struggling to regroup, and a community is struggling to understand a senseless death because of what caused all the phone activity on that already cursed day.

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Mention a court in New York City – West 4<sup>th</sup>, Rucker, Orchard Beach – they don’t just know of Tayshana “Chicken” Murphy. They know her. She possessed that killer crossover and played “man strong,” as Taylonn, her father, likes to say. Tayshana loved contact. “Babies,” she called the girls who helplessly bounced off of her when she drove to the rim. She played taller than her 5-foot-7 and with a fierceness that contrasted against her gentle, hazel eyes.

Those eyes sized up Shannon Bobbitt of the WNBA’s Indiana Fever this summer.

Bobbitt conducts a clinic every year outside the Harlem projects where she grew up. The clinic is a way for children to see the footsteps she laid for them to follow. Bobbitt had heard of Tayshana and that she could ball. She probably had no idea that the high schooler was itching to test her skills against the professional.

“She’s fast as hell, Pops,” Tayshana told her father of Bobbitt. “But she’s so little. She can’t handle me. I’m too big for her.”

Tayshana would soon be part of the same lineage as Bobbitt at Murry Bergtraum High School for Business Careers. She looked forward to this, above all else. Grezinsky, the same coach who had Bobbitt, would now give Murphy the reins. Bobbitt had played point, too, controlled the team and tempo, and continued the Lady Blazers’ reign of domination. Tayshana hoped to stretch that run to a 14<sup>th</sup> straight Public Schools Athletic League championship.

“Stay focused,” Bobbitt told Tayshana. “Listen to Mr. G. He has your best interests at heart. I look forward to seeing you play this upcoming season.”

The season would start in a few months. Tayshana could not bottle her excitement about it to anyone who talked to her about basketball. A blown ACL and high school transfers had interrupted her time on the basketball court. She had finally returned to it, a haven that reduced any frustration and elevated any happiness.

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Before her senior year, ESPN ranked Tayshana as the 16<sup>th</sup>-best point guard in the nation. She always tried to stand out instead of blending in. She carried her own style and often wore boys’ clothes. Sometimes she walked into the gym wearing a perm and curls. Other times, she wore her hair in braids.

Taylonn and Kasim Alston, Tayshana’s godfather and often coach, laid out the blueprint. Together, they were the primary members of Team Chicken. Taylonn told her to shoot for the stars because it would be OK if she landed on the moon. They often talked about professional basketball.

“WNBA?” she once told her father. “I ain’t talking about the WNBA. I think I can play in the NBA.”

“Yo, Chicken, you bugging,” Taylonn responded.

“No, I think I can,” Tayshana said.

Her college choice approached before any professional decision. The University of Miami made its first offer after watching her dominate a Florida tournament. Murphy still had the basketball she took with the school’s insignia after they made the offer. But everyone from home could watch her play if she attended St. John’s. And Alysha Lovett, her old backcourt mate in AAU ball, just joined Cincinnati. Still, more and more likely, Virginia Commonwealth looked like the landing spot. It played an up-and-down game that suited Tayshana’s style, and even offered the ideal criminal justice program.

She had plenty of choices. But it nagged her that Tennessee had not reached out.

The Lady Vols are among the best. Bobbitt went there. Pat Summitt coaches there. Maybe if Tayshana asked Grezinsky to put out some feelers, the interest would be mutual.

Grezensky agreed to be a facilitator and called an assistant there, Dean Lockwood. By the time Lockwood finally returned Grezensky's call, it wasn't to discuss basketball.

He wanted to offer his condolences.

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*It's hard to get that Chicken in you. You've got to have that Chicken in you, that aura, that heart. Other girls might be more fundamentally sound on this and that. But they don't have that Chicken in them. It's not something you can go get or buy. You can't go to a trainer and get it. It's a gift from God.*

**Kasim Alston**

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Most people want to know more about the nickname. Tayshana often said that her family called her Chicken because she walked bowlegged. That is not the actual origin.

Taylonn partied the week before Tayshana's birth in the spring of 1993 and a week after out of excitement.

"That's my daughter?" he asked when he first saw Tayshana at the hospital.

"Yeah, doesn't she look like a wet duck?" said Tephania Holston, Tayshana's mother. She joked, "From you eating all that chicken, she came out looking like a wet duck."

They did not want to call her a duck. That would be too embarrassing. Instead, Chicken stuck.

The family moved to the Queensbridge Houses in Long Island City when Tayshana was about 6. The projects loom as the largest public housing development in the country. Alston coached youth boys and girls. He placed Tayshana on both teams, and her legend started to grow. Tephania fretted, concerned that Tayshana would be hurt playing against the boys or suffer another one of her suffocating asthma attacks.

But Tayshana ran circles around the boys and girls. When she got older, she'd bet people \$10, \$25, \$100 that she would hit her next jump shot. Once, she broke a boy's ankle in a one-on-one game. As he was loaded into the ambulance, she told the paramedics to wait. She had not collected her winnings.

She loved to dance. She loved to write poems. But most of all, Tayshana loved basketball.

"You could see it when it was coming off her fingers if her body was squared," Taylonn said. "It was just water, man. It was pure."

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Tayshana began high school at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School, despite the bigger, well-known programs in pursuit. Alston served as junior varsity coach there, and Taylonn suggested she honor those who had been with her from the beginning. Tayshana and Alston knew that with her talents it did not matter. She could put the school and herself on the map.

She played junior varsity her freshman year and guided Bishop Loughlin to an undefeated record until an asthma attack hit. She went to varsity the next season, but transferred after only three

semesters following a fight at a varsity boys' basketball game, which led to the possibility of a suspension.

Tayshana transferred because her family was concerned for her physical safety, Taylonn said. "It was a good safety move," is all Taylonn would say about the incident. "Between the jealousy among the kids and her being who she was, once they had that incident at Loughlin, it was just a good safety move."

She first landed at St. Michael Academy, a school that closed because of financial constraints, and found Murry Bergtraum after debating out-of-state schools. Taylonn and Tephania had worried about being too far should Tayshana suffer another asthmatic episode.

Murry Bergtraum High gets its name from a former president of the New York City Board of Education. The school opened in 1975 as one of the nation's first business-themed secondary schools and sits at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

It is an unlikely place for a high school girls' basketball dynasty. Grezinsky needed coaxing to coach girls' basketball. He is a man who looks both his roles – a former football coach and lifelong New Yorker from East Flatbush.

He was coaching football when he accepted the girls gig in 1990 as a favor to a friend who had few other options. The team played well, and Grezinsky thought he could fully develop the players if he focused on them more. In 1998, he dropped football and the girls captured their first city title under him. The championship win came against August Martin High School, the same school that Taylonn had played for a decade earlier – an example of how small New York City actually is and how the basketball community is intertwined.

Grezinsky coaches an up-tempo style and his teams press often. The more titles he won, the better caliber of basketball players he attracted. The school became the standard for public schools girls' basketball in New York City. Christ the King in Queens, which boasts alumnae like Sue Bird and Chamique Holdsclaw, remained the standard-bearer for Catholic schools in the city.

The greatest adversity Grezinsky encountered during the next decade dealt with an on-the-court fracas. He allowed Epiphanny Prince on the court long enough to score 113 points in a 137-32 walloping of Louis D. Brandeis High School in 2006. The outcome ignited a national debate on sportsmanship. Grezinsky dismisses the argument now like he did then. Prince wanted to play, so he let her.

Tayshana would have stepped into the program last year, except her setbacks continued when she tore her ACL in a tournament during the summer of 2010.

Tayshana knew this summer she would finally be cleared to play when she snuck out to play in a tournament with Alston.

Alston knew that she had not been cleared. But she seemed healthy. They had practiced, even though she didn't go all-out. Those little moves that he used to do on a younger Tayshana, like jabbing her in the ribs when she held the ball to toughen her up? She did it to him now. It hurt.

He decided to let her play.

“I’m glad now,” Alston said. “That was the last time I ever saw her play on the court, so it was a blessing for me to see her recover. She put up like 30 points. It was unbelievable, step back, squaring up, the whole bit.”

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The details of the early morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 are still unraveling and may not fully be explained for months, if ever. Tayshana lived in the General Ulysses S. Grant Houses. Youth residents in her project and a nearby project, the Manhattanville Houses, had sparred for years. The group in Grant is known as a gang called “3 Stacks.” An hours-long brawl between residents of the two houses erupted at the Grant Houses on September 10<sup>th</sup>, according to several people who witnessed it. The same people are divided on whether Tayshana or any of her relatives participated.

Robert Cartagena, 20,<sup>1</sup> and Tyshawn “Ta-Ta” Brockington, 21, allegedly obtained a nine-millimeter handgun from 24-year-old Terique Collins. A witness reported seeing Collins possess the weapon at the Manhattanville Houses at around 3am, according to a criminal complaint against Collins. A second complaint states that Cartagena and Brockington were spotted about 45 minutes later and said they were going to “smoke” someone from the Grant Houses.

From their apartment on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor, Tephania watched the scene unfold.

Tayshana had been dancing in a courtyard with a group of friends. Now, she darted into 3170 Broadway. She ran through the doors that were supposed to be locked, up the stairwell, and made it to the fourth floor.

“I am not with them,” a cornered Tayshana said, according to a witness in one of the complaints.

“I don’t give a f---,” replied a male voice, the same witness told police.

Tayshana raised her arms in self-defense. On her forearm, there was a tattoo with a basketball and the inscription “It’s not a game. It’s life.”

The assailants shot her three times with a nine-millimeter, according to the city’s Office of Chief Medical Examiner.

Tephania ran out of the apartment and was the first to locate Tayshana. “Why did no one open their door to help my daughter?” she cried out. When law enforcement arrived, the clothes of Tephania and other relatives were soaked in Tayshana’s blood.

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The Grant Houses are one of Manhattan’s biggest housing projects and are a short walk from Columbia University on the border between Morningside Heights and Harlem. The nine-building complex can accommodate 4,500 people and towers over much of Harlem’s smaller buildings. The building's namesake, Ulysses S. Grant, is entombed a couple of streets away.

The city completed construction in 1957 for the 1,940 apartments. “After 10 o’clock at night, that place was quiet as can be,” said Richard Kostelanetz, who lived at the Grant Houses from 1962

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<sup>1</sup> Cartagena was 20 at the time of the shooting. He turned 21 on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

to 1966 when he attended graduate school at Columbia. “Working people lived there. They had to get up in the morning and go to work.”

Kostelanetz said he complained only about the elevators, which were often filled with playing kids.

It is not the same setting. There have been incidents of shootings, animal abuse, and the high-profile stabbing of a 9-year-old at the Grant Houses in recent years.

The city has trumpeted the decrease in violence for years and maintains some of the nation’s strictest anti-gun laws. About half of the 49 homicides committed this year (as of October 20) in Manhattan involved a gun. Last year, more than half of the borough’s 65 homicides were gun-related. Harlem’s gentrification – a Starbucks here and there – is also a trendy story and speaks to the willingness of retailers to relocate into a safer borough.

“That’s bulls---,” says Ilesha Sekou. “That’s bulls---.”

Sekou speaks from a gun buyback in Harlem, and the conversation is often interrupted by her pleas to passersby. She can either trust a piece of paper, the statistics, or rely on her own eyes that see the pain caused by gun violence. If crime is down or suffocated, then what is her need as a community activist who stresses anti-gun and gang initiatives? It’s not like she is at a loss for people to counsel or mourners to console.

*No questions. We don’t ask anything if you turn a gun in.*

“This is a war that’s going down between housing projects, certain streets against each other, and the way it’s playing out is insane,” Sekou says. “Kids who live on one block can’t go on another block. It’s just crazy. It’s housing project pitted against housing project.”

*Excuse me. Excuse me. Young man? Oh, OK. They’re just walking by.*

“It is ridiculous that people don’t understand the magnitude of these shootings,” she continues. “They don’t understand. This is almost an everyday thing, and the kids see having a gun as a necessary means for survival. It’s like one of those things that go along with having a roof over your head. That’s the mentality.”

The Manhattanville Houses are only about three blocks away from Grant. No one is quite sure when the houses started their quarrel. But many are certain that it has lasted decades and probably originated from a spurned lover whose girlfriend started dating a member from the other project.

The fights are not limited to Grant against Manhattanville. It’s other projects against other projects, and often people are not sure who or what they are fighting for. “That’s why I don’t understand the concept of this,” said Rev. Williams. “There’s no money involved. Why are you trying to represent? What are you protecting? What exactly are you holding down?”

Williams, Sekou, and other activists are trying to curtail retaliation. A 16-year-old boy was non-fatally shot in mid-October in what police termed as a retaliatory shooting, and there have been two other related shootings, according to Williams. Sekou posted herself at Tayshana’s wake in Queens and discussed the repercussions of any retaliation. Some nodded their heads in agreement, some could not promise there would be none, and others said they would try for it not to happen but wouldn’t be caught off guard – unarmed – if provoked.

Tephanie alerted police in early October to messages scrawled in the stairwell where the assailants killed Tayshana. One read, "Kill the snitches." Another contained a scribbling of a chicken with a basketball and the word "dead," surrounded by anti-gay epithets.<sup>2</sup>

Williams hears these details and shakes his head. Once upon a time, he gave up his dream of opening a ministry to focus on the streets that weaned him.

"I knew Chicken," he says. "I never knew her real name until an hour after her death. Most of the young people, except the ones I've known for 15 years, I just know them by their street name unless they get in trouble with the law. Then I learn their full name. That's just how it goes, man."

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Murry Bergtraum claimed the unprecedented 13<sup>th</sup> title last spring at Madison Square Garden. About 5,000 people watched as the Lady Blazers triumphed, 56-48, over Brooklyn's South Shore. Grezinsky termed the win the most satisfying of the baker's dozen. He had lost seven seniors to graduation before the season.

Shequana Harris, a junior guard, scored a game-high 14 points. Ashley Gomez (Canisius College), Cori Coleman (Cleveland State), and Shaniqua Reese (Temple) all graduated last summer. But Murry Bergtraum is often a revolving door of talent. Shequana's future tag-team partner sat on the bench and cheered during the championship. Many expected Shequana and Tayshana to form the city's best backcourt in 2011-12.

Grezinsky did not expect to land Tayshana in the first place. Taylonn met with Grezinsky about Tayshana's landing spot once St. Michael's closed and did not tip his intentions. But Grezinsky had impressed Taylonn with his focus on academics, the program's heritage, and the kindness he showed toward his girls. They decided on Murry Bergtraum last year. Tayshana begged Taylonn not to divulge her leg injury.

"If I don't tell him, you'll get on the court and think you can play with a bad ACL, so I have to," Taylonn responded.

Tayshana's enrollment quickly spread from whispered hope into full-fledged excitement last year.

"Everybody was like, 'Oh, Chicken's coming to this school. Chicken's coming to this school,'" said Widly Couloute, a forward. "She was a star."

Tayshana had just started attending conditioning sessions with several teammates-to-be as summer turned into fall. Tayshana and Shequana bumped hard into one another at the first session. Neither budged.

"It's going to be a problem next season," Tayshana told Shequana. "We're bumping into each other and we're not even going nowhere. It's going to be a problem for other people that have to guard us."

The team is now figuring how to regroup.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* reported the epithets and cited a police source.

“There’s not one day that I don’t think about her,” Shequana said. “When people mention the season, I’m always thinking about her. What it would have been like if Chicken was around? I had things planned. Me and her were supposed to be captains.”

Grezensky convened the team the first Monday of the school year. Tayshana had been killed the day before. He told the girls not to forget, to remember Tayshana. That they could grieve, but they had to move on for their own sake at some point. Following his own words proved tough. Grezensky delayed making the Lady Blazers schedule this season for a few weeks after the murder.

Counselors met with most of the team. “It helped me get my mind off of it for a little while, and it made it a little bit easier because I looked at it from a different perspective, from her shoes,” Widly said. “If she was here and somebody else had passed, what would she do? Work harder.”

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Police arrested Collins, an aspiring rapper, the day after Tayshana’s murder. Authorities from several law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Marshals’ fugitive apprehension task force and NYPD, arrested Cartagena and Brockington 10 days after the shooting. The agencies tracked them to an apartment complex off of Broad River Road in Columbia, S.C.

They were found hiding in a closet.

In Manhattan, the criminal division of the New York Supreme Court is less than a 10-minute walk from Murry Bergtraum High School. The courtrooms are like the city, with tight confines and high ceilings. On a recent Tuesday, Murphy walks in and sits next to the aisle in the second row. The first row is reserved for officers, attorneys, and reporters.

A half hour passes, and then an hour. Cases are called out and defendants come forward: Trinidad Luna, Arturo Rodriguez, Michael Danielson. The rows, once nearly empty, are filled to capacity when Brockington and Cartagena are called in for their arraignment. The police presence has also grown, and nine armed officers form a semicircle around the rows of seats. Both defendants are handcuffed, wear sweatshirts, and are similarly small in stature. Both plead not guilty to killing Chicken and are charged with murder in the second degree. “I hope they die of AIDS,” a young woman whispers to a friend.

The young lady sits on the right side, two rows behind Taylonn. The rows are filled with Tayshana’s friends and family, a conglomerate of people skipping school or work. The left side is filled with the families and friends of Cartagena and Brockington. Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly has said video surveillance places both men at the scene of the murder.

A gasp of disbelief from the left sounds out when the prosecution informs justice Thomas A. Farber that he will seek a penalty between 22 years and life for the defendants. He says that he has a video of the duo walking into Grant with handguns. A gasp of disbelief from the right sounds when the defendants’ supporters tell Brockington and Cartagena, “We love you,” as they are escorted out of the room.

The police move down the middle of the aisle and let Tayshana’s family and friends disperse first. Many of Tayshana’s friends are upset by the vocal support allowed to the defendants, and

Taylonn counsels them outside the courtroom before they descend on the elevators. “We have to do this in a classy manner,” he said. “We have to. They have a family, too.”<sup>3</sup>

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The chill is returning to New York, a precursor to the winter and the basketball season that will soon follow. All around the city, high school boys and girls have departed their summer basketball teams in preparation for the high school season.

The best of the best, boys and girls from New York and New Jersey, came together for a one-day classic at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in the middle of October. The court is elevated, and it is a five-story walk to get to the court where Tayshana once dominated. The game is held in honor of Sharette Dixon, an instructor at Kingsborough Community College who died in 2009. “Let’s go team! We’ve got backyards!” a young roofer from New Jersey screams from the stands. “Team, we’ve got grass!”

It is a game that Chicken would have loved to play in: an up-and-down showcase in which individuals can flaunt their skills. “It has to be one of the biggest losses in the history of women’s basketball in New York,” says Apache Paschall, a legendary girls’ basketball coach in the city, as he watches from the stands. “There are so many people to this day that are still down. We try our best not to talk about it. But it put a black cloud over this whole community.”

Shequana, the girl who would have shared the backcourt with Chicken, plays fluidly in the exhibition. She recently committed to UNC Charlotte.

Taylonn attends the game, dressed in all black. His shirt is a picture of a dribbling Tayshana with the words “Ball in Peace.” Kimani Young, Sharette’s widower and the memorial’s organizer, summons Taylonn to midcourt at halftime.

“Chicken would have been playing today with her peers and her friends, but unfortunately she’s not here today,” Young begins. The tears well in Taylonn’s eyes before Young ends, and he walks off the court with a framed jersey in one hand, while embracing Young with the other.

Shannon Bobbitt watches from the second row in the corner of the stands with her father. She wanted to pay her respects to Chicken’s family and offer her condolences. She will soon depart to play in Turkey and continue her basketball journey.

This is the gift and curse of the projects. They can lift you up or snuff you out. Chicken could have been another Shannon, who returned one day to give back, run clinics, sign autographs, and be a role model. Shannon could have been Chicken just as easily.

“She had a lot to live for,” Grezinsky says. “That’s what the real tragedy is. She could have given back to the community like Shannon Bobbitt. She comes back every year and puts on a clinic during the All-Star break, and I asked her, ‘Are you getting paid for this?’ And she said, ‘No, I want to

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<sup>3</sup> Brockington, Cartagena, and Collins have denied any involvement in Tayshana’s murder. “I didn’t even know who she was,” Brockington told the *New York Daily News*. “I didn’t know anything about her being a basketball player, nothing. All I know is we didn’t do this.” Daniel Parker is Brockington’s defense attorney. “There is already a public perception that’s been fueled by the press and by people in the neighborhood that creates a portrait of Mr. Brockington,” Parker said. “That portrait may be completely inaccurate. Despite the presumption of innocence, many people have already made up their minds without seeing any of the evidence and without analyzing the reliability of any of that evidence.”

give back to the community.' Tayshana was the same type of kid. She had a community sense about her. She was somebody who could have given back and been someone for other kids to look up to."

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Nowadays, it is not just awkward when Taylonn Murphy and Kasim Alston see one another. It is painful. To see the other is to see Chicken and relive the nightmares of shattered dreams.

Taylonn has the frame of an every-down running back or a point guard who stopped growing. His head is shaved and he will remove his glasses several times over the next couple of hours to wipe away the tears. Kasim is thinner and wears a red sweater. He speaks in a low voice tinged with pain.

They meet at a barbecue joint a half block away from Central Park. While together, both will need to excuse themselves at separate times to recompose.

Alston thinks about the circumstances of the tragic weekend. Tayshana had scheduled a workout with him that Friday, but they never met up. A Friday practice could have led to another workout on Saturday. She often spent the night with Alston's family in Queens because the workouts were so rigorous. Maybe she would not have even been at Grant that Saturday night if they had stayed the course.

"You can't blame yourself," Taylonn says.

"I lost one of my first cousins like three or four years ago," Alston says as the tears swell in his eyes. "He got killed in Brooklyn at a basketball game. It wasn't a basketball player who killed him. But that really hurt me. It tore me up. I lost my father four years ago. I lost my aunt a week before Chicken. I don't want to say I want it to be all over, you know? That's not how I feel. But there are days when all you want to do is stay up or just not feel it anymore. I thought I knew death. But I thought death was a process. You get sick, you get old, you die."

"When you do stuff, you've got to be held accountable for it," Taylonn says. "All I can say about those guys is God have mercy on their souls. I pray for their families. It's a tragedy all the way around the board. What kind of justice is really going to be served if I reacted to violence with violence? It's like three or four families all screwed up by this whole thing. It's just senseless. You know what I mean?"

"In the beginning, if I was the type of person in the streets, like one that dealt with weapons, I'd probably have went up there and went crazy," Kasim responds. "But then as time went on, I really thought about it and I really wouldn't want to do nothing to those kids, really. Because I know what it felt like to lose a kid, and for their parents to get the news that we got, I know what it would do to them. I don't want anybody to ever feel that. I want justice served."

"But there is no justice," Taylonn solemnly states.

"Those children are going to jail," Kasim says. "Their parents are affected. They're grieving. Everybody is affected around the board."

"It takes more strength to have a forgiving spirit," Taylonn says, taking a long inhale. "It takes a whole lot more strength to forgive and look to make things better. Chicken left us here to actually make things better."

“I’m going to be honest,” Kasim says bluntly. “Right now, I’m not forgiving them. I just wish no harm on them as far as their parents having to go through what we went through. But right now...”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Taylonn says, cutting him off. “But understand what I’m saying. My thing is, you don’t fight hate with hate. You know what I mean? You have to fight hate with the opposite, which is love. We might not be able to reach those dudes who did what they did. But maybe we can reach some other guys that’s thinking about doing the same thing. Right now, it’s all about how many people we can get to change their mindset. I’ve got to think about what Chicken would have wanted. Would Chicken have wanted me to run around and look for revenge and kill the people behind her being killed or would she want me to try to change things?”

“Every right I think I have, I owe her something to feel this way and keep her name alive in a positive way. When you’re trying to be positive, you can’t be halfway positive. There’s no gray area for that. I know what I want to do. I’m talking and trying to be sensible and not wanting to add fuel to what’s going on. As a parent, I’m furious. There’s times I’m furious and want to say, ‘Give me 10 minutes with them cats.’ But if you looking for change, how are we going to do the same thing they did? That’s not change. That’s just a cycle, and we’ve got to break the cycle.”

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Taylonn soon rises from the table. The pendant he wears around his neck is now fully visible. It is a picture of Tayshana smiling with an accompanying poem.

*If tears could build a stairway  
and thoughts a memory lane  
I’d walk right up to heaven  
and bring you home again*

He wishes Kasim a good night’s sleep and strength for the following day. He hops in a cab that goes north up Broadway and stops at the Grant Houses. He will sit in his daughter’s room and pray for his own courage, his own Chicken.