

Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin, says she finds comfort in knowing that she is fighting for justice for her son.



FULTON: STYLING, KRISTINA KITCHEN; HAIR AND MAKEUP, TASHEBA JOHNSON/KENBARBOZA.COM; OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: AP PHOTO/THE SYRACUSE NEWSPAPERS/DICK BLUME; COURTESY OF DORISMOND FAMILY; AP PHOTO/FAMILY PHOTO VIA THE DAILY NEWS; AP PHOTO/STEVEN SENNE; AP PHOTO/DAMIAN DOVARGANES; ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES; AP PHOTO/FAMILY PHOTO VIA THE LAW OFFICES OF JOHN BURRI; AP PHOTO/JOHN MARSHALL MANTLE; AP PHOTO/HO; BETTMANN/CORBIS.

THE DANGER OUTSIDE



EMMETT TILL, 14
KILLED IN 1955



JONNY GAMMAGE, 31
KILLED IN 1995



AMADOU DIALLO, 23
KILLED IN 1999



PATRICK DORISMOND, 26
KILLED IN 2000



TIMOTHY STANSBURY, JR., 19
KILLED IN 2004



SEAN BELL, 23
KILLED IN 2008



OSCAR GRANT, 23
KILLED IN 2009



DANROY HENRY, 20
KILLED IN 2010



RAMARLEY GRAHAM, 18
KILLED IN 2011



KENDREC McDADE, 19
KILLED IN 2012

SONS WE LOST

THESE YOUNG MEN WERE ALL UNARMED AT THE TIME THEY WERE KILLED

For decades we've talked to our boys about the threat of being unfairly targeted by law enforcement. Last spring, the shooting of an unarmed Black teen by a neighborhood watch volunteer ratcheted up the stakes, sparking national debate over racial profiling and a law that initially allowed the shooter to walk free. As emotions continue to swirl, what should we be telling our young men about how to keep themselves safe?

BY JEANNINE AMBER

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JEFFREY SALTER

On the day Trayvon Benjamin Martin was born, his father, Tracy Martin, and both his grandmothers were in the delivery room to hail his arrival. Now, his mother, Sybrina Fulton, stares intently at a photo of her son as a toddler. His grin stretches across his round baby face, full of joy and promise. “You can’t look at Trayvon’s pictures and not smile,” she says softly. Trayvon was the son who pulled pots and pans from the cupboard, who loved sports and planes and adored his little cousins. His older brother, Jahvaris, 21, was the thinker; Trayvon, four years younger, was the doer. The two boys were Sybrina and Tracy’s perfect set.

Trayvon’s parents, both 46, ended their marriage in 1999 after five years, but remained close. In fact, Sybrina would say they were better as friends than as husband and wife. Tracy, a truck driver, had the boys on weekends and also saw them often during the week. When Trayvon started playing football at 6, the whole family would come to watch—aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Sybrina would take a cooler of drinks and pitch a tent on the field to shield the family from the Florida sun. Trayvon would look over and see the clan, spilling out from the tent, cheering him on. After the first season his father moved from the sidelines to the field to coach the team himself.

Sybrina wanted her boys to experience life outside of Miami Gardens, the predominantly African-American town in southern Florida where she and Tracy both lived. She would get a notion, call one of her relatives, a travel agent, and ask how much the trip would cost. And then she’d save. In June 2010 she took the boys to New York City to see a Broadway play and the Statue of Liberty. When Trayvon was 10, she took them skiing in Colorado. “My bright idea was that they should have a white Christmas,” Sybrina says now. “I wanted them to see the mountains and the trees and everything. I remember the boys would sit in the window at the ski lodge and just stare at the snow. It looked like a postcard. We did a lot together.”

Sybrina, who works as a housing coordinator for the Miami Dade Housing Authority, took her boys to the circus and fairs and amusement parks. But when it was time to be serious, she and Tracy would sit them down and talk. Like so many Black parents, they had conversations with their sons about racial profiling and how they presented themselves. “Trayvon always had a haircut and nice clothes,” says Sybrina. “He was always clean.” When Sybrina was stopped once for a minor traffic violation with Trayvon in the car, she led by example, calmly pulling out her license and registration. She knew her son was watching.

“Trayvon’s grandfather was a retired police officer,” says Tracy, “so Trayvon had the utmost respect for the law. He knew to comply with all police officers’ commands and not to make any sudden moves.” Tracy took special care to talk to his son about conflict resolution and how to walk away. “I remember one time Trayvon asked me what to do if somebody jumped him from behind. I always told him his first priority was his life. If he ever had to run, he should run to live to see another day.”

Now Sybrina, sitting in a hotel restaurant in Washington, D.C., a glass of water untouched in front of her, seems transfixed

by images of her youngest son. Her finger glides over the smooth surface of her phone, scrolling through snapshots: There he is with Jahvaris, mugging for the camera; there he is with his cousins; there he is as a toddler, his face beaming out at her.

In February, Sybrina had organized another family outing. She took a picture that day that would later be released for the world to see: Trayvon astride a horse, looking into the camera. She stares at the photograph for a long time. Less than two weeks after the picture was taken, her son would be dead.

PROFILED TO DEATH

In the early evening of February 26, three weeks after his seventeenth birthday, Trayvon Martin was walking to his father’s girlfriend’s house in The Retreat at Twin Lakes, a gated community in Sanford, Florida. The teen, wearing jeans and a hoodie against the rain, was noticed by George Zimmerman, 28, a White and Hispanic neighborhood watch volunteer who was patrolling in his sport-utility vehicle. Zimmerman called 911, describing Trayvon as “a real suspicious guy.” In the course of the call, he told the 911 dispatcher he was following the teen. The dispatcher replied, “Okay, we don’t need you to do that.” Zimmerman ended the call and, moments later, shot Trayvon once in the chest. When questioned by police, Zimmerman claimed he’d acted in self-defense.

More than six weeks after the shooting, Zimmerman still had not been charged with a crime, igniting a national outcry over what many considered to be state-sanctioned vigilantism. For many African-Americans the case had even deeper implications: Trayvon Martin, who had no criminal record, had been doing nothing more suspicious than walking. Many saw his death as another tragic example of racial profiling, the latest in a seemingly endless succession of unarmed Black men shot for appearing suspicious: Robbie Tolan, who survived being shot in his Bellaire, Texas, driveway in 2009 by a cop who thought he was trying to steal his own car; Amadou Diallo, shot and killed in 1999 in the Bronx when police mistook his wallet for a gun; Sean Bell, killed in 2008 on his wedding day in Queens, New York, by cops who thought he had a gun; Oscar Grant III, fatally shot by an Oakland transit cop on New Year’s Day in 2009 while restrained and on the ground; and now Trayvon, with only a pack of Skittles and a can of iced tea in his possession, shot dead on a Florida street.

For the millions of women who looked into the face of Sybrina Fulton and saw themselves, the case brought to the fore a question Black mothers have been asking themselves for generations: *When my son walks out this door, will he come home alive?*

“Our people have been free for 150 years and yet our young men are still treated like criminals,” says Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP. “Racism is the original sin of our country.” But if this is the world we live in, what can be done to safeguard our boys and men? For her part, Sybrina Fulton wants to ensure that no other mother will ever have to endure the pain she now lives with every day. The fight for justice she and Tracy undertook on behalf of their son spotlighted laws that put Black men at risk, and underscored the collective power we have to bring about change.

LIFE LESSONS

Being schooled about racial profiling is almost a rite of passage for African-American boys. “This has been part of Black culture for generations,” says Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, chair of the Congressional Black Caucus. “There is not a Black father in this country who has not done as my father did for me and as I did for my three boys, and that is to sit them down and say, ‘Son, if you are ever stopped by the police, put your hands on the dashboard, ask if it’s okay to get your license, and don’t say anything no matter what he says.’ That talk has served us well and has probably reduced the number of killings.” But as Cleaver and many others point out, the shooting of Trayvon Martin illuminated a different kind of risk. Although George Zimmerman admitted shooting the teen, he was at first allowed to walk free, based on a law many people didn’t even know existed.

Florida’s Stand Your Ground provision, signed into law by Governor Jeb Bush in 2005, and lobbied for by the National Rifle Association, allows citizens to respond to feeling threatened with deadly force and without the obligation to retreat. Various forms of Stand Your Ground, also known as Shoot First and Kill at Will laws, exist in 24 states, including Texas, Georgia and West Virginia, according to Mayors Against Illegal Guns, a coalition of more than 600 mayors nationwide. “It’s an extraordinarily dangerous law,” says Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center. “We live in a country where there’s a widespread perception that associates Black youth with criminality. Now add to that a law that allows that if you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation, you can shoot first and ask questions later. It’s a recipe for a modern-day form of lynching.”

And what are we to tell our boys in the face of this threat? For decades we’ve known what to tell them about the police. We even know how to warn them about the violence that plagues our most challenged communities: Don’t hang with those boys, come right home after school, watch what colors you wear. But what warning do we offer a young man who may be confronted by an armed individual who sees him as a threat and feels he has the right to shoot? “The unintended consequence is that you’re now going to have young African-American males paranoid if they are approached by anybody in the street who is White,” says Cleaver. “And can you blame them?”

Cleaver’s comments highlight the psychic toll racial profiling exacts on our boys and men. “Seeing what happened to Trayvon was traumatic,” explains Marc Lamont Hill, associate professor of education at Columbia University and coauthor of *The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America* (Third World Press). Hill says the delay in arresting Zimmerman sent a clear message to Black youth: “‘You’re less valuable and less worthy of protection, love and investment than other folks.’ And when that message is received, it wears on your spirit. It’s tough to live in a world where you’re seen as less than.” Even so, Hill maintains that it’s imperative that we coach our sons about how to conduct themselves given the scrutiny they face, especially from police. “We need to emphasize to young men that their very bodies might be viewed as suspicious. I’m not suggesting that they smile and do a tap dance, but they have to find a way of communicating that they are not being aggressive.”

Hill points out that along with practical tips to ensure their safety (see sidebar, page 107), we need to create opportunities

for young Black men to speak about the emotional impact of being profiled. “There need to be conversations about what it feels like to be followed in the store, chased out of the mall, or to not be welcomed on the other side of town,” he says. “Give boys the space to ask questions, vent and cry and be vulnerable in a world that almost demands them to be hard at all times. Because sometimes that very toughness, that hyper-masculinity, is the very thing that could get them in trouble.”

But for many Black parents, conversations about racial profiling can be difficult. “One of the things our research has shown is that parents will often delay talking with their children about discrimination because they are worried the kids will feel bad about themselves,” says Diane Hughes, professor of psychology at New York University. “Yet children report experiencing discrimination before the parents are talking to them about it, so this is a conversation that needs to start early and happen often. And it needs to happen in conjunction with conversations that

“WE TALK TO OUR BOYS ABOUT WALKING WHILE BLACK, BUT WE RARELY ASK ABOUT PATROLLING WHILE RACIST.”

instill in the child a sense of pride. Teach your child about their culture and the contributions of their ancestors. That has to be part of the equation.”

There is also another dialogue that needs to take place—not with our boys but with those who mean them harm. “We so often talk about walking while Black, but we rarely ask about patrolling while racist,” says Hill. “We have to shift our focus and ask how we can get people to rid themselves of their assumptions about young Black people. At the same time we need to organize on a civic level. For instance, we can do our own neighborhood watch, then we are occupying that space on the street corners instead of a man like Zimmerman walking around like a lone cowboy.”

A MOTHER’S NIGHTMARE

After he was shot, Trayvon Martin’s body was taken to the Volusia County Medical Examiner’s office and tagged John Doe. When Trayvon’s father, who had been out at dinner, came home to find his son wasn’t there, he assumed he was with his older cousin and went to bed. In the morning, when Trayvon still hadn’t shown up, he called Sybrina at work. “Tracy said Trayvon didn’t come home,” she recalls haltingly, “and we both knew that wasn’t like him.” They agreed that Tracy would call Trayvon’s cousin then call Sybrina back. Sybrina tried to turn her attention to work but was so distracted she couldn’t remember her computer’s password. She told her supervisor she was dealing with a family situation and packed up her things to leave.

In her car she called Tracy. It was just past 9:00 A.M. Since they had last spoken, Tracy, not finding Trayvon at his ▶

cousin's house, had called the police to file a missing person report. Soon after, police arrived at his home asking Tracy to see a picture of his son. Tracy pulled out his phone. The officer studied the digital snapshot, then pulled a photograph from a folder he was carrying. It was Trayvon, lying dead on the ground, eyes rolled back, a tear on his cheek, saliva dripping from his mouth.

A stunned Tracy told Sybrina about the detectives and the photograph, but she refused to believe what she was hearing, insisting Tracy go look at the body. Sybrina started her car and headed for Interstate 95 to make her way home. She dialed her mother's number. The words fell from her mouth, "Trayvon," she said, "he's been shot and killed." Then Sybrina pulled her car to the side of the road and wept.

Few women can understand the extraordinary anguish of losing a child and feeling betrayed by a system that's supposed to protect him. Angella Henry's son, Danroy, played football for Pace University in Pleasantville, New York. The unarmed 20-year-old was shot and killed on October 17, 2010, by police responding to calls about a bar fight. A grand jury investigation resulted in a decision not to prosecute the officers involved. A year after Danroy's death, the cop who shot him received an Officer of the Year commendation. The case, which drew national attention and allegations of racial profiling, is currently being investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"I want to hold Sybrina Fulton and tell her I understand the pain she's feeling," says Angella Henry. "There's no magic for how to get through this. You wake up and you're in a pain that's indescribable and you move throughout the day not knowing how you got from point A to point B because the grief is so intense. But you realize that if you don't get up and move forward, who will fight for your child? I just want her to know that there are mothers out there who know how she feels, and we're praying for her."



Protestors called for Zimmerman's arrest at a March 24 rally in Washington, D.C.

These days, Sybrina leans on her faith to keep going. "People tell me I'm strong," she says, "but my strength comes from God and from Trayvon. I know he is happy right now because he's in heaven and because his parents are fighting for him."

CALL TO ACTION

On March 16, more than two weeks after Trayvon had been killed and at the demand of Sybrina and Tracy, the Sanford Police Department released the 911 tapes from the night of the shooting. Until the tapes were made public, their son's killing had gone largely unreported. But now the tapes, and the glimpse they gave of Zimmerman's mind-set that evening, were being analyzed and scrutinized across the airwaves. Here was Zimmerman muttering, "These assholes always get away"; the 911 dispatcher discouraging him from following Trayvon; Zimmerman's quick breathing as he pursued the teen; the concerned neighbors, the cries for help, the sudden blast of a gun.

Bolstered by celebrity tweets, a petition Trayvon's parents put on change.org, calling for the prosecution of Zimmerman, quickly became the fastest growing one in the site's history, garnering 1,000 new signatures a minute, and more than 2 million supporters by the end of March. Thousands of protesters took to the streets, showing up for rallies in New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Kansas City and Washington, D.C., brandishing placards bearing Trayvon's image and demanding the arrest of Zimmerman. Students, politicians and athletes, including the Miami Heat's Dwayne Wade and LeBron James, donned hoodies in solidarity. Amid the uproar, the Sanford chief of police stepped down, the state's governor appointed a special prosecutor, Angela Corey, to look into the case, and the U.S. Justice Department launched its own investigation. Finally, on April 11, special prosecutor Corey announced that Zimmerman would be charged with second-degree murder

in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman, who had been in seclusion for weeks, turned himself in to the Seminole County Jail that same evening. His arraignment is set for May 29. If convicted, he could be sentenced to life in prison.

It took 45 days for Zimmerman to face charges; many say if not for the public outcry it may have never happened at all. "It is truly because of all the people who came to the rallies and signed the petition, all the students who walked out of class and said this can not be allowed to happen in America, all the clergy who wore hoodies in support," says Benjamin Crump, attorney for Martin's family. "This is the reason we finally got the evidence looked at fairly and impartially."

Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, cautions this is only the first step. "We have a long way to go to achieve justice for Trayvon and to institute the reforms to prevent future Trayvons," she says. "We want better gun control legislation, better training of police, and measures to deal with quasi police, everything from security guards to neighborhood watch groups. It is urgent that people remain vigilant and make their voices heard and become involved in fighting for these systemic changes. And yes, we will need to march again."

Sybrina Fulton sits at a quiet table near the lobby of her hotel in Washington, D.C. Wearing a simple black dress, her hair pulled back, she is at once stoic and full of pain. The next day she and Tracy will join thousands in a protest at the headquarters of the American Legislative Exchange Council, the group that, along with the NRA, is responsible for lobbying for the Stand Your Ground laws that exist throughout the country. But for now Trayvon's mother is thinking only of the son she lost, the boy who came into the world under the gaze of those who loved him and whose death set off a heated national conversation about race, justice and the worth placed on the lives of young Black men.

"At first I didn't understand why this happened," Sybrina says slowly. "But now I believe that just as God gave his beloved son, we gave our beloved son as a sacrifice for others. Some teenagers have expressed to me that they're afraid this could happen to them. We need to look at laws that need to be changed and we need people to understand that all human beings have value." □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for this magazine.



Trayvon Martin's parents and brother appeared at rallies across the country.

A CRITICAL CONVERSATION

Across the country parents are having The Talk, teaching their sons how to stay safe in a world where Black males are too often seen as a threat. Here, experts share their tips:

Be clear about what's at stake. "We talk to my 13-year-old nephew about the color of his baseball cap, whether his hood is up or his pants are too low. We remind him it's not just about presenting himself as an upstanding young man, it's that 'we don't want you suspected, hurt, killed.'" —Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO, NAACP

Teach them to survive the moment. "We have to inform our children that whether they are dealing with the police, a threatening individual or a criminal, the objective always has to be 'survive the moment.' That might mean attempting to flee from a perpetrator or interacting with law enforcement officials effectively. If a cop confronts you, make sure your hands are always visible. If you have something in your hand, drop it. And no matter what the officer says, follow the commands. Even if the officer is breaking the law, don't argue because you are going to lose. Many times young people, because they are tired of being harassed, feel they have the right to object. They may have the right, but the objective is to survive the moment." —Noel Leader, 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care

Instruct them to stay visible. "If signaled to pull over, drive to an area where you'll be seen by others. Witnesses might be your best defense." —Tanya Clay House, director of public policy, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

Make sure they know to follow the rules. "I just told a group of my Black students leaving on break, 'There are four of you in a late-model car driving late at night through small towns. You can't drive over the speed limit, not even a little.'" —Jacquelyn Washington, adjunct professor of criminology, Spelman College

Tell them what to do when questioned. "I advise young men to know their Miranda rights and not to give police too much information. One of the problems we see is that Black and Latino youth answer everything, thinking if they cooperate they can go home. But sometimes they create more suspicion. If police ask questions beyond your name and address, respectfully say, 'I'm going to remain silent' and 'Am I free to go?' This works with cops who are being lawful. If you have a rogue cop, say as little as possible. Let him arrest you so you can call a lawyer." —Barbara Arnwine, executive director, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

Document wrongdoing. "If you feel as if you've been discriminated against by police or the authorities, documentation is key. Get a badge number, write down everything, and file a report with your local NAACP and Urban League. If we don't report it, nobody else will." —Benjamin Crump, attorney

For more tips to share with young men, visit blacksnlaw.tripod.com.

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BE AN AGENT OF CHANGE

YOU HAVE THE POWER TO HELP PREVENT ANOTHER TRAGEDY LIKE THE KILLING OF TRAYVON MARTIN

HOLD ELECTED OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE. Find out if your state has a Stand Your Ground law, advises Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. "If there is such a law, tell your representative, 'I want you to

be a leader in repealing it.'"
MONITOR LOCAL POLICE. "Studies show that when confronted with an African-American, police will shoot faster than they will at a White suspect," says Arnwine. Contact your local NAACP (naacp.org) to help you research the anti-

profiling training your local police receive and to push for more training if needed.
WATCH THE COMMUNITY WATCH. Agitate for local regulations governing neighborhood watch groups to ensure proper training. For information go to usaonwatch.org.

JOIN THE FIGHT. For more on how you can help drive change, contact the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (lawyerscommittee.org), the Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org) or the American Civil Liberties Union (aclu.org).