

VIEWPOINT

The Talk. How parents raising black boys try to keep their sons safe

By Jeannine Amber

Certain events have a way of changing everything, reorganizing life into an unforgettable before and after. For New Orleans residents, it was the hour the levees broke and their city began to flood; for New Yorkers, it was the terror of Sept. 11, 2001.

Before, there is an order to things. After, there is a danger that feels imminent, unpredictable and wild.

For black parents, the new demarcation between before and after was the moment we watched George Zimmerman walk free after being tried in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old. Before the jury announced its not-guilty verdict, black parents understood what we were up against as we sought to protect our sons. We knew our boys, adored and full of promise, might be treated like criminals by police even though they had committed no crimes. We were painfully reminded of this danger by the deaths of other people's sons, like Sean Bell, who was shot and killed on the morning of his wedding in 2006 by New York City police who incorrectly thought there was a gun in his car; or Oscar Grant III, who was fatally shot in 2009 by a transit cop in Oakland, Calif., while restrained and facedown; or unarmed college student Kendrec McDade, who was killed in 2012 when San Francisco police saw him clutching his waistband and assumed he had a firearm. To gird against the danger that could result from our boys' being profiled, we gave our sons the Talk.

At kitchen tables, during drives to school and in parting words as we sent them off to college, we shared a version of the same lessons given to young black men for generations: "If you are stopped by a cop, do what he says, even if he's harassing you, even if you didn't do anything wrong. Let him arrest you, memorize his badge number, and call me as soon as you get to the precinct. Keep your hands where he can see them. Do not reach

for your wallet. Do not grab your phone. Do not raise your voice. Do not talk back. Do you understand me?" Parents in communities besieged by gun violence might add a coda, admonishing their sons to come home right after school, close the blinds, stay inside.

These warnings weren't always heeded, and sometimes they weren't enough. But they allowed parents to feel that we gave our children a measure of protection against a threat we could identify. When confronted by violent gangs or overzealous law enforcement, we knew these rules of engagement might help keep our sons safe. But in George Zimmerman we saw a new danger, one that seemed utterly lawless.

We may never know exactly what happened the night Zimmerman shot Trayvon, but black parents know this: A neighborhood-watch man saw a brown-skinned teenager—a boy who could have been one of ours—wearing a hoodie pulled up against the rain and assumed he was up to no good. That suspicion set into motion a chain of events that left the boy dead. How do we protect against that? Do we tell our children to run if they are being followed? Or should they stop and turn around? Do we tell them to defend themselves as Trayvon appears to have done or to get on the ground like Oscar Grant?

Police are trained to ascertain risk, yet studies have shown they are likely to shoot at an African-American suspect faster than at a white one. What about the untrained civilian? Armed with bias and a handgun, how likely is he to see a threat where none exists?

Before Trayvon, we had the Talk to guard our children against danger.

After Zimmerman's acquittal in his death, we realize with anguish there may be little we can do to protect them.

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