

STEVONTE WOOD

“You don’t have to be directly affected by the bullet”

Stevonte Wood, 23, earned a college degree in three years, has a fulltime job as a security officer, and is recently married – a happy, fulfilling life that was highly unlikely 10 years ago.



Stevonte was 13 when he witnessed a horrendous act of violence, the shooting deaths of his mother and older brother after an argument on a basketball court at his family’s Shively apartment complex. After that terrible day, for Stevonte, “things really took a turn.”

He was on a grieving, trauma-filled downward spiral marked by anger, bad conduct and failing grades. Family support, counseling, caring teachers, others in his life – and his own hard work and determination – helped Stevonte rebound.

Before the shootings, he had been a good student, making A’s and Bs, which he credited in part to his mother who “made me book heavy.” His father worked long days, taking two buses to and from their home to his construction job.

After the shootings, Stevonte was deeply troubled and struggling. He was still living in the apartment where his mother and brother were killed, and he had trouble focusing and sleeping. When he did sleep he often had nightmares. He argued with his father, who had been injured in the shootings and was grieving. (They now have a close relationship).

Angry and withdrawn, he failed 9th grade. He went to school but had trouble concentrating. “I was there but I wasn’t there. I was constantly thinking about what happened.” He wanted to communicate but he said he didn’t know how; his words were angry, and he said he felt “a lot of self-hatred.” He worried about his father’s safety and that someone might retaliate against his family in another act of violence.

From Butler High School he was sent to Western High School to repeat 9th grade, which turned out to be blessing, he said.

Counseling helped him manage his grief, overcome his anger and detachment so he could focus on schoolwork, he said, and teachers encouraged him while holding him responsible. A turning point came when one told him he didn't want to fail the same grade twice, that would "not be good, trust me."

"I started listening in class, participating and my grades climbed up."

4,558

Number of times citizens reported hearing gunfire to Louisville Metro Police in 18 months, from Jan., 2018-June, 2019, over 200 times a month.

He was motivated to make up for failing at Butler. "The people I was surrounded by were well-rounded people. Once I put myself around people who wanted me to succeed, that was one heck of an opportunity. I didn't want to miss out on it."

With good grades, he pursued advanced placement classes in his junior year at Western and started racking up college credits through courses taught through Jefferson Community Technical College. When Stevonte received his high school diploma in 2015 he had 31

college credits toward his degree from the University of Louisville, which he earned in 2018.

His decision to major in criminal justice was influenced by the good relations he had with police officers after his mother and brother were murdered. "I began to idolize the good police and those who interact with the community," he said. Police were kind to his family and checked on them, he said, and he thought he could be like them and help people.

He has shared his story with other survivors of gun violence to offer hope and encourages awareness of the signs of trauma in children.

Anger, withdrawal, depression are key signs, he said. Schools and parents also need to be connected. "When you get that disconnect, that's when you start losing kids. We need to find who these kids are and take the time to understand their situation and help them to the best of our abilities."