

Gun violence

Essential question: What is lost when young people lose their lives to gun violence?

School: Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

Year of project: 2004-2005

After realizing just how many young Philadelphians have been killed by gunfire in the past year, Mike Galbraith's 8th grade class decided to focus their service-learning project on the issue of gun violence.

Part of their learning process was gaining a better understanding of how these violent acts affect not only the victims but also their families, friends and communities.

The students developed a visceral sense of what an emergency room is like for a victim of violence when they met with staff from Temple University Hospital's ER, which accepts the highest number of gunshot victims of any ER facility in the state. They climbed inside an ambulance, visited the trauma treatment bay, saw the various instruments physicians use to help resuscitate patients, saw the room where doctors meet with a victim's relatives. They even visited the morgue.

"When we went into the family room," said one student, "I was thinking about how the parents feel when they were waiting to hear if [their child] is dead, alive or about to die. I can't imagine how sad they are when they hear the bad news."

Unlike watching *Law & Order* or some TV cops and robbers show, the students understood this was real.

Perhaps even more powerful were the encounters they had with people who have lost their children to violence. Susie Johnson, whose 15 year-old grandson Malik was killed on July 1, 2004, described her grandson when she visited Mike Galbraith's classroom this spring and then again when students created an audio portrait of Malik by interviewing Ms. Johnson in her home. The students wanted to know who he was – what sports he enjoyed, what were his favorite CD's and video games, what he had hoped one day to become. They cried when she cried, laughed when she laughed.

Malik is one of several murdered children whose story was preserved as part of the students' service-learning project.

Mr. Galbraith used the project as a way to motivate his students to write. He asked the class to write "I am" pieces, biographies of the slain children written as though in their own voices. Students who formerly found writing to be a drudgery responded with first drafts, revisions, second drafts, then finished pieces. When a formerly reluctant writer was asked why the change, he answered: "Because I'm writing about someone's life."

The introduction of taped "sound portraits" of these young people came about through a partnership with Story Corps, a national project whose mission is to instruct and inspire people to record each other's stories in sound. The audio stories of these young victims of violence are archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress for their families and for future generations.

"You hear about people getting shot every day, but you never hear – 'He was an A student; he was a good son; he was hopeful.'"

-- 8th grade student