

Vigil honors lost loved ones

By Hannah Taylor

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"I wasn't able to call it murder for a long time," says Joslin Simms. "I used to say my son died..."

Joslin cradles a photograph of her son in her hands. The memory of Rayburn "Black" Simms is preserved in a 6-by-9 frame. He is dressed in black slacks and a white button-down shirt. His black jacket is tossed casually over his shoulder as he poses nonchalantly on the day of his younger brother's wedding. His smile is warm and relaxed like the sunny weather the day the photo was taken. He is 30 years old.

Rayburn, known as "Ray" by his family, never aged past 30. In May 2005, he was shot to death at the corner of Broad Street and Leon Street, leaving behind four children including a one month-old daughter. His daughter Shae is now 18, Raven is 14, Marcus is 10 and Toni-Ray, the youngest, is now 5 years old. His killing is one of the Durham's unsolved crimes and one of 40 homicides that took place in the city in 2005 alone.

The 19th Annual Vigil Against Violence on March 3 was held to honor the lives of the 28 people killed in 2010 and to allow Durham to mourn as a community.

This year's event was sponsored by the Religious Coalition for Nonviolent Durham, Parents of Murdered Children and Durham Congregations in Action.

Joslin was the first mother to share her story that day. She stood at the podium in front of an audience of 200 and poured her grief onto empathetic ears.

In the audience, pastors, church members, numerous family members and friends of murder victims and at least one police officer listened and supported.

"We go on but we don't forget," Joslin said to the crowd. "It's been almost six years, but I still cry every night. I have to cry in quiet because I don't want to bring my family down, so I wait until everyone goes to bed. I close my door and I cry."

Later, a candle was lit and a bell rung as the name of each victim was read aloud during the vigil.

After the candle ceremony, anyone who had lost a loved one to violence in Durham was invited to the podium to speak that person's name. Some people



Staff photo by Allison Russell
Joslin Simms holds a photo of her son, Rayburn Simms, killed in 2005. Simms says she mourns his death every day, but it's family, like her son Antwann and grandson Maurice, that are her reason for living.

spoke only a name, while others shared more personal memories.

One young girl wept openly about her cousin, a promising student, who was killed at 19. One daughter, whose mother's life had been taken, spoke about feeling a pain that becomes sufferable but never goes away. Most speakers were mothers mourning their children.

Marcia Owen, the director of the coalition and organizer of the vigil, said that community support is the key to mending hearts and changing the trend of violence in Durham.

"It's just a time like no other in Durham when we stop and gather to honor those who've been taken by violence and acknowledge the injustice and receive the grace that comes with honoring a common bond," said Marcia. "It's in that unity that we find healing."

Crime doesn't just affect individuals and families, but entire communities. In Durham, 65 percent of crime occurs on the streets, Marcia said.

"It's happening in our neighborhoods. It's affecting our neighborhoods," she said. "It really behooves us to respond as a community and not let those families become isolated and alone in their sorrow."

The anti-violence vigils began in 1994, but the murder rate has remained relatively steady since then. Out of the pain and anger of loss have come pleas

for change at the community level.

Recidivism, or the return of individuals to jail after a repeat offense, is common in Durham. However, Marcia believes incarceration as a safety measure doesn't work.

Instead, she advocates placing restorative justice groups in the court system to allow the community to decide how to punish criminal behavior.

Charles Lyons, who led the Salvation Boys and Girls Club in Durham for 20 years, proposed community activism such as marches against violence and more thorough integration across racial and socio-economic levels. He listed the names of 20 of his "kids" who were "gone to soon" — killed in their youth by violent acts.

"My dream is for Latinos, for whites, for blacks, for Indians — for whomever to come together, starting as 3- and 4-year-olds in these beautiful new renovated recreation centers with free programs, to start sharing each other's cultures, start friendships that last and eventually cut down on the violence in Durham," Charles said.

"I'm tired of seeing our young people die," Joslin says. "The violence is not worth it. I had a full heart but now I only have three-fourths of a heart. We need to stand up for this. Churches need to stand up for this. We need to take our town back and tell them no more."