

Twenty-eight months into being famously widowed, Terri Corley-Mizell explains how becoming a single parent overnight kept her from lapsing into an aimless, prolonged period of mourning.

After her husband, rap hip-hop trailblazer Jason Mizell known as Jam Master Jay, spinner of turntables for the 1980s triumvirate that was Run-DMC was shot dead in his Hollis recording studio, she had to hold it together for their two sons. Besides, she said, she never was the type to be sidelined.

Suddenly, a single mother

"The hard part is having no male figure for my boys. But I don't feel lonely. I don't feel a void. I am extremely busy," Corley-Mizell said by telephone from her new home in Chantilly, Va. She moved there from Queens to be near her mother and sister and the support they could offer.

As they had in New York, her children - Jesse, 9, and T.J., 13 - are leading active lives in their new schools. They are playing every possible sport and are in the band. Schoolmates are often invited over for Friday night pizza. Against that schedule, their mother has signed on for the PTA and is still juggling a salesclerk's job at Banana Republic, where she first took a position shortly before her husband, mired in hundreds of thousands of dollars in delinquent taxes and other debt, was killed at age 37. No arrest has been made in that case.

Building a foundation

Friday night, the 34-year-old widow expands her profile when JMJ Foundation for Music, which she created to keep her husband's work in the public eye, hosts its inaugural fund-raiser at Skylight, a downtown Manhattan gallery.

"Jason played the drums. He played the violin, he played the trumpet, he played the piano," Corley-Mizell said. "Music played such an important role in his life as a child ... that this foundation was just a natural thing to do."

She went about securing that part of her husband's story almost as soon as he died, said Rob Principe, co-founder with Jason Mizell of Scratch Academy, a Manhattan school for DJs.

"Within that week, she called," said Principe, one of 12 members of the foundation's board. She came into our meeting and said, "How can I help you?" I was blown away. I certainly sensed her human emotion, the pain and grieving. But she was incredibly resolute. She felt responsible for carrying on his legacy."

Dismissing the rumor mill

One thing she wants to make clear: Launching a foundation to benefit music programs in underfunded schools is not an attempt to remake her husband's image - Run-DMC was known for its clean, uplifting lyrics - or reclaim what has been seized by a public hungry for grit. She neither listened to nor read the flood of news reports suggesting Jason Mizell was killed for involvement in the narcotics trade (police dismissed those rumors as unfounded) or by the man with whom she was rumored to have had an extramarital affair (she has not spoken on that subject or rumors of a failing marriage).

"But I did hear about everything that was said," she said. "I don't care what people say or think about me. I am confident in myself, and I know, at the end of the day, that I have to live with whether or not I did the right thing."

What she is doing now, with the help of entertainment lawyers, artists, recording executives and other industry insiders, is fine-tuning the gala.

New to the spotlight

Celebrity DJ Ed Lover and celebrity rap artist Chuck D will be its co-hosts. Missy Elliott and Public Enemy, among other famous rap stars, will bring a mix of old school and new to the affair. Skylight will be outfitted with long communal tables and, following trends in entertainment

seating, beds. Images of Jason Mizell, the man she met at 16 and married at 20, will hang from the gallery's ceiling.

"In my dreams, I am hoping it will be a classy club atmosphere, with places for talking and just being around each other," said Corley-Mizell as her publicist listened in, courtesy of three-way calling.

Utilizing a publicist, one in an army of personnel who were part of her husband's musical arsenal, and taking the helm of this new charity has thrust Corley-Mizell into a wholly new position.

"This is different," said the former flight attendant whose adulthood was spent mainly as a full-time homemaker. "This kind of puts me in the limelight, and I'm not a limelight kind of person."

Yet, she has recognized the necessity of moving on, adapting to the demands of being a single mom determined to protect her children and the dead father whose name they bear.

"I've seen her from the very start of the mourning process to where she is now," said Ivan Taback, attorney for the foundation and Jason Mizell's still unsettled estate. "I would describe her as strong and smart and unselfish ... And that is not just some corporate line."

If those are elements of her character at this moment in time, Corley-Mizell said she attributes that to what must be an innate survival instinct.

"I am just doing this, and I don't really know how," she said. "I have a lot of faith. I look back and ask myself how did I get here? I'm just one of those people who has learned to make lemonade out of lemons."

WHEN & WHERE "JMJ: Superstar," a benefit gala, is tomorrow, 8 p.m. to midnight, at Skylight,

Terri Corley-Mizell's JMJ Foundation for Music

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Thursday, 24 February 2005 03:39 -

275 Hudson St., Manhattan. For more information and tickets, log on to www.jmjfoundationformusic.org or www.adidas.com/superstar35

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