

South LA Community Mourns Teen

Written by Westside ID214

Saturday, 16 October 2004 10:06 -

LOS ANGELES - A funeral for a 14-year-old boy gunned down in an alley grew into a three-hour community rally Saturday as speakers implored teens to abandon gangs and reclaim responsibility for their lives.

More than 500 people packed the Praises of Zion Missionary Baptist Church and an adjoining chapel at the service for Byron Lee Jr. Dozens more, mostly teens, spilled onto the sidewalk and adjacent street corners.

Lee, a ninth-grader known to friends and family as "B.J.," was attacked shortly after 2 p.m. on Oct. 9 as he rode his bike in this South Los Angeles neighborhood. Two men in an older model car followed the boy and fired one round at him, police said. The men then got out of the car, approached the wounded boy and shot him 19 times with handguns as he begged for his life, police and witnesses said.

Investigators believe the shooting was gang-related, even though Lee had no gang connections.

In an open letter printed in the funeral program, Lee's mother wrote that the night before he died Lee dreamed of his younger brother, who died of cancer 11 months ago. Lee told his mother that in the dream, Marqueace DeQuawn woke him up, took his hand and asked him to play outside.

In a ceremony punctuated by religious rap, standing ovations and gospel music, friends and family remembered Lee as a spunky teen who wanted to be a famous rapper. He loved to watch "low, low cars" and spent much of his spare time fixing up his bicycle.

Lee, who admired the late rapper Tupac, recently made a CD with his father and performed at a rap show in Long Beach. A home video shown during the service showed Lee, dressed in a

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blue jumpsuit and wool hat, mugging for the camera, break dancing and rapping into a microphone.

Michael Paskel, 13, said he often hung out with Lee at the high school swimming pool, where Lee was known for showing off with fancy dives. He would lead his friends in the rap song "Get Low" by Lil' Jon & the Eastside Boyz as they swam, said Paskel.

"He wasn't a gangbanger. He was a good guy," the 13-year-old said. "He's, like, the most popular dude in the school and you know you've got to be popular to be a ninth-grader and still be the most popular in the school."

One after another, pastors, teachers, family members, politicians and community activists took the podium to beg the teens in the audience to reject the gang life. They asked mourners for a day of peace in Lee's honor.

Larry Higgins, principal at Fremont High School where Lee attended, said change could start with more parents taking an interest in their children.

"Byron's in a better place. But the question is: What are young people going to do to make this community a better place? This community's been called a killing fields, but they can be the loving fields, they can be the teaching fields, they can be the fields of our dreams and of respect," Higgins said.

"This young man's legacy has to be that he transformed the behaviors of specific youngsters."

Malik Spellman, a gang intervention and prevention specialist with the community group Unity II, blamed black men for not taking a stand against gang violence.

"It's a shame when you have a better chance of surviving on the Gaza Strip in Palestine and Israel than you do on the Crenshaw Strip in Los Angeles," he said. "To the brothers especially

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... stand up like a man. You are lying down like boys and dying."

Katrina Ford didn't know Lee, but felt compelled to come to the funeral because her 15-year-old son was killed in an unsolved drive-by shooting last month. Ford said her son was not in a gang.

"I'm grieving for my son, but to hear what they did to this baby ...," said Ford, who wore a T-shirt bearing her son's name. "How's it going to stop? I was used to hearing about it on the news, but when it happens to my baby, that's too close."

Source: [MercuryNews](#)