

THE FACTS

# Shooting leaves two dead, one wounded

By JESSICA GOODSON  
Senior Staff Writer

The shooting that left police officer Mark Swaney and Davidson youth Damon Kerns dead happened about 5:30 p.m. Christmas Day in the neighborhood just west of the Davidson College campus, across from the Ada Jenkins Center.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department has been called upon to investigate the double homicide. In the meantime, an entire community seeks solutions to issues which culminated in the death of two of its citizens.

Kerns, 18, left his home Christmas evening, despite relatives' efforts to dissuade him, in pursuit of a gunman who had fired on his family in a drive-by shooting only moments before.

Witnesses told investigators that Kerns left the Westside Terrace on foot, followed by relatives who called for the Davidson officers' assistance to prevent Kerns' anticipated retaliation. On Mock Circle, Kern's family again physically tried to stop him. Swaney and Sergeant Charles McLean intervened and attempted to restrain Kerns, who responded by striking Swaney twice.

Swaney pepper-sprayed Kerns as the two officers fought to take him into custody. After someone in the gathering crowd pulled Swaney's arm away, Kerns briefly broke the grasp of the officers, seizing the opportunity to pull a pistol and fire several shots at Swaney.

Officers drew their service pistols and returned fire, instantly killing Kerns, who was pronounced dead at the scene. Swaney died later at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte.

"It was mayhem," said Grayling Houston, who was staying at a nearby home. "There were police everywhere. It's a shame this happened on

Christmas. You've got three families shattered now."

McLean was released from the hospital two days afterward, having sustained critical injuries. Kerns was laid to rest Sunday, Dec. 28 at Gethsemane Baptist Church in Davidson. More than 600 law enforcement agents assembled the same day on the front lawn of Fieldston Presbyterian Church in Mooreville to honor Swaney.

Swaney had worked for the Davidson Police Department since 1995 and had recently been reinstated after a three-month suspension for firing into an occupied dwelling while off duty.

Kerns was a worker at Vail Commons.

## ◆ Tragedy occurs across the tracks in Davidson on Christmas Day.

Friday, Dec.-26, town and civic leaders met to try to calm tensions and share feelings.

"Naturally there was tension expressed at the scene," said Assistant Chaplain and Director of Common Ground Brenda Tapia. "We can't get away from race to a degree, but this is not a racial issue. There should be no value judgments. Two lives have been cut short, and we have to acknowledge this and lift it up to someone who can do something about it. In my knowledge, that's God."

Common Ground's executive council called an emergency meeting to organize a prayer vigil, which was held on the field behind the Senior Nutrition Center at Ada Jenkins. Candles were lit in honor of Kerns, Swaney, and McLean.

Pastor L. Bryant Parker of Davidson Presby-

terian Church spoke words of healing and lit a unity candle representative of the entire Davidson community. Damon's aunt and uncle spoke on his behalf and Pastor James Howell of Davidson United Methodist Church lit candles for Officers Swaney and McLean.

An estimated 400 community members turned out for the prayer vigil. Tapia said she was pleased by the diverse composition of the group.

"People were hesitant to leave," said Tapia. "Usually we're eager to run back to our work at Davidson, but there was an obvious feeling of God at the vigil."

Tapia also took advantage of the vigil to

introduce Robert Mohammed of the Nation of Islam, whom she hopes will initiate "manhood training" programs in Davidson.

"I realized that there is a segment of people in this community - young black men ages 16 to 29 - who are disenfranchised," said Tapia. "This is a vulnerable group, and the Nation of Islam is known to assist these boys. They help them to become men."

Tapia also cited the lack of alcohol and substance abuse awareness as an issue which contributed to the shooting. Five counselors were invited on Jan. 5 to speak with various witnesses and acquaintances of Kerns and offer their expertise on drug-related incidents.

Common ground will consequently launch an initiative to educate the Davidson community

through a series of three weekly classes on the disease of alcohol and substance abuse, how it affects the family, and where to go for help. The series is tentatively set to begin Mar. 1 and will run continuously thereafter.

But the goal of Common Ground is not a paternalistic one, said Tapia. They do not hold all the answers.

"We want to know from the community what the issues are. We still don't feel that everyone has shared."

Common Ground will organize several teams consisting of a trained facilitator, recorder, observer, and a fourth person to conduct a community inquiry about problems which are not currently addressed in Davidson.

The teams will comprise a diverse group by age and race and will make themselves accessible through a variety of sites including churches, club houses, and laundry rooms - wherever community members congregate.

At the celebration of Imani (faith), the eighth day of Kwanza, we spoke of binding the threads of faith, said Tapia. "We spoke of a time for believers, regardless of their particular faith, to take their threads of faith and weave a rope to lift up humanity for we are morally and ethically fallen. It will take that rope to pull us back where God would have us be."

Tapia encouraged Davidson students to become involved in the effort. She also invited students to attend the Common Ground meetings every third Monday night from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at the Ada Jenkins Center.

In lieu of this month's meeting, Common Ground will meet at the Martin Luther King Worship Service and Gospel Fest. Regular meetings will resume on Feb. 16.

PERSPECTIVE

# Remembering the past, hoping for the future

## Davidson graduate contemplates the events that shattered a quiet college town

By ISAAC BAILEY '95  
Guest writer

A child's curiosity is more important than the pain and suffering accompanying the tragic loss of a friend. Children can provide the spark for profound thought when painful realities cloud our judgment and hinder us from thinking critically and broadly.

I know, because I lost a friend recently in that fatal Christmas night shooting in Davidson that left 18-year-old Damon Kerns and 26-year-old police officer Mark Swaney dead. I know, even without focusing on the tearful faces and broken hearts of hundreds, maybe thousands, of friends and families those men left behind.

And I know, when I realize our children are growing up in a violent world.

A few years ago I sat in a doctor's office, quietly thumbing through a magazine that listed the "Bottom 50 Colleges." Schools with the poorest black student-athlete graduation rates were being cited, or indicted, if you will. The more I read the article and noticed the names of the very prominent and high profile institutions included, the more I became upset. I sat ready to accuse "White America" (whatever that means), of being at most, racist, and at least, blind and insensitive, to the needs of minorities.

"That's what they do," I thought. "Use us like farm animals to make money then throw us out in the cold to fend for ourselves without an education."

It didn't matter much that I was an African-American college football

player at a high profile, white institution myself, nearing graduation. About 98 percent of my education at Davidson college, almost \$22,000 a year at the time, was being paid for by the school, federal grants, and other scholarships.

Neither did it cross my mind that education is a two-way street — one that begins with the individual and stretches in the direction of many potential teachers — meaning even black college athletes, along with the schools in which they are enrolled, should be held responsible for their academic success. I didn't take the time to recognize that most issues aren't simply black and white — especially not the one that seems to divide so many blacks and whites — until I encountered a little white boy in the waiting room that day. He could have been no more than 5 years old.

I looked up from reading that magazine quite a few times, trying to conceal my disgust about the reported graduation rates. And each time I looked up, I noticed this young guy staring in my direction. At first I thought he was just daydreaming, and by sheer coincidence, his eyes just so happened to be locked in my direction. But after looking away, then back again several times, I began to wonder why he stared so religiously.

I cringed a bit, feigned a few smiles and even began to count the seconds as they slowly elapsed on my watch. Still, he stared. Nothing going on in that room was interesting enough to pull his

eyes away from me. Barney and Big Bird themselves could have entered the room and not interrupted his penetrating stare.

If he was 10 years or more older, I'm sure I would have addressed him and accused him of being some uncouth individual who had no respect for the privacy of blacks. Not only was I the insensitive one, but naive and hypocritical as well, for jumping to conclusions without first using reason.

Then finally, his mother re-entered

**"Another black male killed before the age of 22; another heroic officer slain in the line of duty is probably all that most people will remember."**

the room. And before she could approach him, he hurriedly ran over to her, jumped into her arms and asked an incredibly probing question: "Mommy, mommy," he screamed as if in pain. "Why is that man brown?"

There we were, a couple of dumb-founded adults — one black, one white — and one curious, seemingly frightened child.

And there I was, just a few weeks ago, reading an article about an officer slain in the line of duty; and an 18-year-old teenager who was killed as well. I noticed the story that day because of where the incident occurred — Davidson, N.C. — the place where I spent the last six years of my life.

The names were being withheld at that point, and not until later did I find out the teenager killed was Damon, a

person I considered a friend, and in so many ways, a younger brother. I cried my tears, blamed myself for not doing more and tried to make sense of another death, of which we've all experienced too many.

Yet, if the name and location were different, I'm sure I would have read the article, said my "we've got to stop this!" and not thought about the article again. Just like many people have already done. Another black male killed before the age of 22; another heroic officer slain in the line of duty is probably all that most people will remember.

And that's it. That's all we eventually remember. The events of that night will be probed and challenged and relived in several minds and in too many hearts, but when all is said and done, we normally fall back into the path that allowed this tragedy to occur in the first place.

Out of anger, we begin to fight one another with words and divide ourselves further. Out of fear, we run and hide behind our prejudices and shortcomings. In the name of love, we cry a tear and console a friend or two. And maybe out of ignorance, we forget the reason for those things.

Once the emotion drips away and the anger finds itself a cool resting place in the deep crevices of our grieving souls, all we remember is that another black male is killed before the age of 22 and another police officer was slain in the line of duty.

I haven't forgotten because I, just a week ago, met another curious little boy. And that 2-year-old simultaneously made me hopeful and fearful angry about this thing called life.

When he met me, he began pointing at me and constantly grabbing at me saying "red man, red man." I was wearing a red sweater that day, and to him, any person in a red shirt or sweater was a red person. He referred to an older white woman earlier in the week as "purple lady" because she wore a purple blouse.

To witness this naivete was refreshing because it gave me a reason to hold onto hope for the future. Here was this child, this individual, whose mind seemed absent fear and anger, and I'm sure the same can be said about his heart. He was just a curious, little kid searching for another reason to smile, willing to learn, almost begging to be heard.

And it scared me out of my mind when I began to wonder about how a 5-year-old Mark Swaney and a 2-year-old Damon Kerns expressed their curiosity. About how they questioned their strange, new surroundings.

And about how society answered.



Isaac J. Bailey is a 1995 graduate of Davidson College and current feature writer for The Sun News in Myrtle Beach, S.C., where this article originally appeared. While a student at Davidson, Isaac was one of Damon Kern's community Big Brothers and counselor-mentors in Davidson's Love of Learning Program.

W  
A  
dent Damon  
Charlie Mc  
diffi-  
cult for  
m a n y  
people  
t o  
whom  
I have  
talked to  
take place  
difficult for  
Swaney.  
Havin  
friends with  
— includin  
work at th  
Davidson,  
grown to h  
men and w  
time again  
our safety.  
Unfor  
has been a  
this traged  
a racially  
black vers  
bad.  
The p  
trouble wit  
secret. I h  
incident w