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Escaping Violence via the Drill Team, but Not Completely



Rodney Nelson, in dark shirt, practicing with the South Shore Drill Team. (Photos by Paul Beaty)

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As his team pulled into Dayton, Ohio, at 4 a.m. one day in early April, the head coach of the [South Shore Drill Team](#) was confident that his sleepy squad of 15 teenagers from some of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods had a shot at glory for the first time in nearly 20 years.



Rodney Nelson attends his friend Quintin Turner's funeral. "I knew Quintin all my life," he said. "He was a great kid. Funny. Friendly. Full of energy."

They had done everything he had asked. They had worked hard in practice for months and were ready to win the color guard world championship if they could complete one more task: block out the violence and struggle back home.

It would not be easy. There were 62 teams chasing the same dream, and the ghosts and

hardships of the city had followed the Chicago squad on the road. The team barely had enough money for food and gas. Hotels were out of the question.

In Dayton, a lucky few slept on air mattresses scattered across the gym of a Boys and Girls Club. But most of the team, including the coach, Michael Borum, 32, had only sheets and blankets, which they spread on the floor.

“I was right down there with them,” Mr. Borum said.

One of the team’s hardest-working and oldest members, Jeffrey Lovett, 20, who had been with the team since he was 9, did not make the trip. He was at home in the South suburbs nursing a gunshot wound to the stomach that he sustained while trying to break up a fight at a party a few weeks before.

“The doctors said two more inches and I could have been dead,” he said. “But I ain’t a street guy, so God spared my life.”

The experience rattled his teammates.

“People only see the performances,” Mr. Borum said. “They don’t see what we go through to keep the kids off the street. They don’t see what the kids go through to stay off the streets.”

In its 31-year history, the South Shore Drill Team has never really been about winning titles or glory. It has been about keeping at-risk youth out of harm’s way. On April 8 it accomplished both.

For the second time in 19 years, the team from Chicago hoisted the championship trophy toward the roof of [University of Dayton](#) Arena. The teenagers were giddy, including Rodney Nelson, 18, who wept “tears of joy.”

“Holding that trophy up was amazing,” he said.

Moments later, Rodney’s sister, Ahliya, 16, a member of the girls’ drill team, weaved through the celebration and stood in front of her big brother. Ahliya also was crying.

“Quintin’s been shot,” she said, sobbing. “He’s dead.”

Childhood Friends

Quintin Turner, 17, and Rodney Nelson grew up together in the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side. As boys they did everything together. They played basketball, walked to the lakefront, traveled downtown, dreamed of flying airplanes across oceans.

“I knew Quintin all my life,” Rodney said. “He was a great kid. Funny. Friendly. Full of energy.”

As they got older, Rodney said, he started “hanging with the wrong people, getting into trouble, which is easy to do where I come from.” Then he saw the South Shore Drill Team marching in a parade five years ago, throwing mock rifles high into the air and deftly catching them as the crowd, especially the girls, cheered.

“To be honest, I mainly joined the drill team for the females at first,” Rodney said. “Then I started getting out of the neighborhood and it got to be a habit.”

Rodney said he had tried to recruit Quintin too, but he had his own interests, his own plan for staying off the corner and alive.

“Me trying to do something positive with my life with the drill team — Quintin was doing the same thing playing football,” Rodney said.

Before leaving for Ohio, Rodney called Quintin and told him he was going to return home “a world champion.” Rodney was glad they had talked. He had not seen much of his old friend in recent months because he had been busy practicing with the drill team.

When the team arrived in Dayton at 4 a.m., the Boys and Girls Club where they were to stay was closed.

The team had to sleep in its two rented vans for three hours, until the club opened.

At the Friday night finals of the [Winter Guard International Class A division](#), the team performed a skit called “Mind Heist,” based on a scene from the movie “Inception.”

A review of the finals in the Winter Guard International newsletter said the performance by the South Shore team had been “eye popping” and included “one of the season’s most spectacular endings, where high rifle aerials combined with leaps and somersaults, culminating in a perfect catch, which had the entire arena on their feet.”

Afterward, Elijah Thomas, 18, called Jeffrey Lovett back in Chicago and told him the team had won. Mr. Lovett, whose gunshot wound in the stomach was closed with 29 staples, did not believe him, so Elijah put his cellphone on speaker mode so Mr. Lovett could hear the celebration.

“I’ll be at practice as soon as y’all get back,” Mr. Lovett told his teammates.

In Broad Daylight

Shortly before 5 p.m. on the day of the championship, Quintin Turner was walking with two friends near the post office at the corner of 46th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue when someone opened fire from a moving car, striking the three young men. Quintin was hit in the face.

He was pronounced dead at 5:45 p.m. at a hospital. The police said that the case remains open.

Will Burns, the incoming alderman for the ward, said police officials had told him that there is a continuing gang war in the neighborhood. “These guys are shooting in broad daylight,” Mr. Burns said. “These are clearly people who have no common sense or decency.”

A few hours after Quintin was killed, word reached Dayton. Rodney’s sister got a call from a friend. She wanted to tell Rodney right away, but Mr. Borum, the coach, asked her to wait. “Let him enjoy the moment,” he said.

When she did tell Rodney, his tears of joy turned to “tears for my loss.” He retreated to a corner and wept. His teammates followed and encircled him.

“That made me break down even more,” Rodney said. “The drill team is my family, and that love and comfort they showed made me cry. I told them if it wasn’t for me being there with them, I probably would have been with Quintin, getting shot.”

Rodney said his friend was not involved in either of the warring gangs but was probably walking with the two other young men for protection the day he was shot.

“Nobody likes to walk the streets alone,” he said. “Anything can happen. Now I think twice about walking with somebody else. Groups attract more attention.”

Quintin’s funeral was Tuesday at Gatling’s Chapel on the Far South Side. Several of Quintin’s teachers from the Tilden Career Community Academy joined dozens of young people to say goodbye. Rodney got up to speak but broke down before finishing.

“When I saw that casket close, I felt nervous,” he said later. “I felt guilty. I wish I could have prevented it from happening.”

After the funeral, Rodney’s mother dropped him off at the place he said he feels safest: drill-team practice.

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