

Right place, wrong time

Girl survives stray bullet, tries to return life to normal

By Katy Murphy, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

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OAKLAND - Charity Gipson lay on the ground, humming to herself. A bullet was in her head, but she felt no pain.

Moments earlier, the outgoing 13-year-old had been dancing at her sister's sweet 16 birthday celebration, down the street from her house in East Oakland's Eastmont neighborhood.

As the chaperoned party broke up around 10:40 p.m. March 16, an argument spilled out into the street.

In another neighborhood, in another era, the dispute might have ended with hurtful words, bruised egos or maybe a black eye. But, as has become all too customary for troubled young men in many parts of America, someone pulled a gun instead.

Charity ran toward the house when the popping began. She was near the door when a stray bullet, perhaps triggered by the forefinger of a childhood acquaintance, landed in her skull.

Her sister Dominique blamed herself for having the party. She had nightmares for weeks after it happened. But she wasn't surprised that it did. In fact, she had almost expected it.

She came of age years before her sweet 16.

"You do not want to live out here," Dominique said this month as she stared ahead without expression. "You'll just get shot."

A night in Oakland without one or two shootings is rare, said homicide Sgt. James Morris, who investigated the March 16 incident. Like many things in this mid-size city of sharply divided incomes and lifestyles, its bloodshed is not spread evenly.

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In some parts of town, parents advise their children to look both ways before crossing the street. In others, they tell them to stay inside.

The words of caution Charity didn't heed on the night she almost died might startle those who live in safer circumstances: When the shooting starts, hit the ground.

Cassie Slaton, Charity's great-aunt and foster mother whom she calls "Nana," recalls first imparting that advice to the girl when she was 7 or 8 years old.

Charity, now 14, lived to celebrate her next birthday and her promotion to high school. She survived even though a relative, not an

ambulance, rushed her to the Highland Hospital, even though she was discharged with the bullet still in her head — apparently to avoid further injury.

But with the bullet in her head, Charity wasn't eating, drinking or talking. She bumped into things constantly, and her feet were "ice cold," Slaton said.

After the teenager started to fall asleep in the bathtub, Slaton thought she was losing her. A friend drove them to Children's Hospital Oakland, where Slaton pleaded for more medical attention.

Dr. Peter Sun, a neurosurgeon whom Slaton now calls "the miracle doctor," removed the bullet. It had only bruised her brain, Sun said. If it had gone further, Charity probably would have died.

Different reality

In another Oakland neighborhood, where attending a chaperoned birthday party wouldn't be considered risky behavior, such a senseless event would surely cause a community uproar. Charity's family is steeped in a different reality. Though some neighbors offered to pray for the child, that didn't dispel the fear of retaliation for cooperating with the police.

Shortly after a 17-year-old boy was arrested in the case, Slaton said, she received strange phone calls. She found a dead rat on the front walkway, and she spotted a car circling slowly around the block.

Slaton may be furious about what happened, but she is just as afraid of what will come next.

Charity says she isn't angry at the shooter. Even though he was carrying a gun, she reasons, he didn't mean to hurt her.

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said.

She tries not to blame herself, she said, but for some reason she feels guilty anyway. Others, including her sisters, have reprimanded her for putting herself in harm's way.

Contributing to the subtle undercurrents of blame, some — including Charity's principal at Edna Brewer Middle School — suggested the media coverage would confer on Charity a celebrity status that might set a bad example for other youth, or for the teenager herself.

The director of the Central East Oakland branch of the Boys and Girls Club, for example, told the Tribune's online producer she couldn't film Charity in the after-school program. After giving the request much thought, she said, she decided all of the attention might convey the wrong message to the program's younger children about what will make adults care about them.

Charity is neither a troublemaker nor a straight-'A' student who plays three sports and sings in the choir. She behaves like a typical teenager, if there is such a thing. She loves her sisters, though they argue about petty things. She earns decent grades and has plenty of friends. She sneaks text messages in class when she is bored.

Throughout her recovery, Charity has maintained an air of nonchalance about her near-death experience. She has expressed very little bitterness or self-pity — only concern about how the incident has affected Dominique.

"I feel lucky," she said.

Immediately after the surgery, the eighth-grader rushed to regain a normal life. She called and text-messed her friends while still in a hospital gown after her surgery. At a doctor's appointment just days after her release, she wore an armful of bangle bracelets, nail extensions and a stylish scarf that covered the patch of cropped hair in the back of her head.

Charity had to wait four weeks, until after her first brain scan, to erase the last visible sign of what she had endured. At a small beauty shop named All is Well, stylist Rashida Jones spent hours treating the girl's hair and smoothing the area around the bullet wound with a hot iron.

For years, Jones has styled Charity's hair on big occasions. This time, it was for her return to school. When Jones swiveled her chair around to face the mirror, the teenager smiled, briefly, before resuming her stoic expression.

Back to school

On April 16, exactly one month after the shooting, Charity sat in the principal's office, prepared for the onslaught of questions from her classmates. An assistant principal gave her a hug and, to her disappointment, made her stay put until all of the students were in class.

Her early elation ended quickly. During her first-period advisory class, Charity looked with dismay at her progress report. In her absence, some teachers had marked her missing work as a "0." Some of her A's and B's had become C's and D's.

Her advisory teacher, Andra Kimball, who had visited Charity in the hospital, gently suggested she talk to her teachers "nicely" to clear up any problems with her grades.

A classmate, Alayshia Johnson, told Charity not to worry.

"You can just do hecka extra credit," she said.

"Extra credit is boring," Charity said.

Although she took part in an after-school homework club to catch up on her work, her grades slipped. Weeks later, when her report card came in the mail, she broke down and cried.

Charity still feels a burning sensation on the back of her head. She says she cries too much, she tires more easily and she panics every time she hears an engine pop. When she reads, she says, the words sometimes jump around on the page.

'We've moved on'

Her close friends and family say they almost never talk about the life-altering event with her. They don't want to dredge up bad memories.

"I don't like talking about it, and she doesn't either," Dominique said. "We've moved on."

Charity likes to think about the future, though. She talks about life's prospects with a cheerful optimism one might expect from a child who has lived an easier life.

"I still want to be a fashion designer," she said in early June. "If I'm not a fashion designer, I want to be a therapist. If I'm not a therapist, I want to be a model. If none of those work out, I want to be a lawyer. To argue."

Unlike Charity, Dominique is not so ready to forgive the world in which she lives, much less to embrace it. She's mad that boys carry guns. She's mad that life in her community has become so cheap. And she's mad that blood will forever stain the memory of her sweet 16.

Just like she thought it would.

E-mail Katy Murphy at kmurphy@oaklandtribune.com. Read her blog on the Oakland schools at <http://www.ibabuzz.com/education>.

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