

From the Cradle to the Grave Our Legacy of Love and Hope

A Collection of African American Funeral Programs
1958-2005

The Death of Jerry Dewayne Shepard, Jr.

Fannie Shepard takes a deep breath before she speaks.

“If you would have asked me about it a year ago, I wouldn’t have made it through without crying.”

The death of her “baby” is still painful to speak about nearly 10 years later.

“I guess it would be easier if I didn’t have so many questions. I really just want to know why,” she says. “He was a good man. He was going to school and was so good with his hands,” she brags.” He would never sass me. We were always more like brothers and sisters. I would always tell him if there is a problem, come to me. And he did. He was a good son.”

Shepard wants to know why, just nine days before Christmas, her son Jerry died of a gunshot wound to the head.

On Thursday, Dec. 12, 1996, Shepard talked to her son that evening just as he had arrived home from work. Life for Jerry, who had just turned 21 in November, as far as his mother knew, was good.

“On Thanksgiving he had announced to the family that he and his girlfriend were getting married. They were looking for a house together, because he had an apartment with his brother. They had two little boys and everything was wonderful. We were

looking forward to a wedding. We ended up having a funeral,” she laughs, still in disbelief.

The next day, Friday the 13th, her whole life changed. “It was like one day I was talking to him, and then poof- my baby was gone.”

The Brownsville Police Department ruled Jerry’s death a suicide, adding suspicion to the Shepard family’s grief.

“It just didn’t make any sense. Why would my son kill himself? It just didn’t make any sense at all. ”

Shepard says his death is still shrouded in mystery, after all this time. According to her, the story police told her was unbelievable from the start, but this much she thinks is true: After dropping off his 3 year-old and 2 year-old sons with the babysitter, Jerry Shepard went to see an ex-girlfriend at her home.

“I guess they were still friends... I don’t know. I do know that the girl still liked my son, and was probably unhappy about him getting married.”

The fact that her son went to see an old girlfriend didn’t seem odd, but her son committing suicide in someone else’s house does.

“Who would do that? Who would go to someone else’s house, their ex-girlfriend’s house for that matter, to kill themselves? Everything about that day seems shady,” she says.

And things weren’t about to clear up.

According to Shepard, toxicology reports stated that Jerry Shepard had no gun residue on his hands, leaving his mother to wonder how he was really shot.

“How could there be nothing [on his hands] if he shot himself?” She also says she’s not sure who the gun belonged to. “It could have been his gun, only because he is a man and I don’t doubt he would have one. But I don’t know if he used it.”

Shepard believes that something else happened to her son in that house. She never pinpoints what. “Maybe she [Jerry Shepard’s ex-girlfriend] shot him,” she says. “Maybe she knows who did, I don’t know because she has never said anything to me.”

In the days that followed the shooting, Shepard says that Jerry’s ex-girlfriend, the only witness to her son’s death, avoided her.

“She never came to me and told me what happened. Every time I would go near her, she would just turn the other way,” she says.

The Brownsville Police Department questioned Jerry’s ex-girlfriend twice, but no charges were filed. “The police told me that if anything happens somebody’s gonna talk. That eventually someone would tell the truth. I don’t care about in 10 or 15 years, I wanted to know right then,” Shepard says.

What puzzles Fannie Shepard about her son’s death even more than the day of the shooting is the fact that according to her, he was “at one of the happiest points of his life.”

“There is no reason for me to believe he killed himself. He was happy. The day before it happened, I told him I had saved \$700 for him to buy himself some clothes for Christmas,” Shepard says.

Even though her son was grown, she says she would always do something special for Christmas. Now she says there is no more Christmas for her.

“Christmas just ain’t Christmas anymore. I do things for the children, but nothing for me. My Christmas is over.”

Fannie Shepard says her entire family was devastated.

“My children were really angry, but I had to tell them the revenge belongs to the Lord. I just loved him so much that I had to turn it over to God. It was really hard. We were all just quiet about it for awhile.”

When asked if any one else would like to be interviewed, she gives a firm “no”, adding that she wouldn’t want “to open an old wound.” The rest of Shepard’s family took Jerry Shepard’s death hard, too.

“Two weeks after Jerry, my daddy passed,” says Fannie Shepard, choking back tears. “It was a hard year for me,” she says almost in a whisper.

Her older son Shcorey was living with Jerry at the time of his death. After the shooting, he came to live with her.

“It was more for my benefit than his,” she says.

Both Jerry and Shcorey worked for the same company making parts for lawnmowers. On their way to work, they would often come to visit her.

“Sometimes, I still expect him to come through the door. I would be asleep and he [Shcorey] would be coming in from work, and I would listen for two car doors to slam. Now, I only hear one.”

“I walked and prayed.”

That’s how Jerry’s mom got through 1997.

“I cried when I needed to, but I mostly prayed. When I couldn’t sleep, I would get up and pray, or do my ceramics.” She says making ceramics in the middle of the night, during her frequent bouts with insomnia, helped her cope with her loss.

“I grew closer to my grandsons. I feel close to Jerry by spending time with them.” Shepard says her two grandsons, Jovonte, who is now 11 and Jontavious, who is 10, make her feel close to her son.

“I keep them every two weeks, sometimes more. I love spending time with them.”

She says her relationship with Jerry’s fiancée Janice, is still strong. “She is so good to me. She’ll bring them [her grandsons] to me; she calls to make sure that I can still keep them. She gives me presents on the holidays. She’s a good person.”

Fannie Shepard says one day she hopes she is strong enough to learn what really happened to her son.

“Closure would help. It would help a lot. Time makes it easier, but I’m still not there, yet. It’s still in God’s hands.”