

Ronnie Polaneczky: It's not right to fear doing nothing wrong



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"IT'S NOT GONNA work," Darryl Smith apologized. "The parents are too scared to let him talk."

Their son - let's call him Gabe - had been friends with Harvey Lewis and Dominique Smith, who were gunned down in Grays Ferry 10 days ago and memorialized at their joint, utterly overwhelming funeral service this past Monday.

I'd heard from Darryl that Gabe had much to say about his buddies. Darryl is a longtime acquaintance of Gabe's family and, as it happens, a program director at CADE - a local organization that places violence-prevention specialists in high-risk schools to teach kids how to control their impulses.

Clearly, a lack of impulse-control led to the deaths of Harvey and Dominique. The boys were shot by thugs who knew they'd mistaken the pair for others they'd intended to kill.

They executed Harvey and Dominique anyway. Just because.

As were his friends, Gabe is a sweet, good kid who has come through some rough spots - just adolescent-identity stuff that all kids wrestle with - to develop into a fine young man discovering his purpose in life.

Unlike Harvey and Dominique, whose life stories must now be told by others, Gabe is still here, able to tell his own.

So I planned to meet with him, after the boys' funeral at Yesha Ministries Church, in South Philly. I wanted to hear about Gabe's friendship with Harvey and Dominique, and to ask him what it takes for teens his age to walk away from danger instead of courting it.

It was not to be.

"They don't want [Gabe] getting hurt," said Darryl, who, after trying to set up the get-together, phoned with news that Gabe's parents did not want their son's story in the paper. "They're afraid of retaliation."

Yes, retaliation.

For being friends with victims who were so loved, their funeral drew almost 1,000 mourners.

For doing nothing wrong, to anyone.

For wanting to do something as honorable as speak well of his friends and - God forbid - of tender hopes for his own future.

As I hung up the phone, I thought of how, at the funeral, the congregation was urged to overcome their fears and to "snitch" on those who terrorize the innocent. (In this case, neighborhood input had helped police capture the alleged killers.)

Who knew, one day later, that people would feel just as scared to "snitch" on someone who makes his parents proud?

Given what happened to Dominique and Harvey, who wouldn't understand that fear?

That's not the only concept that has been turned on its aching head with the terrible passing of Harvey and Dominique.

Over and over, since the teens were killed, people have said that the friends were "at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Meaning, I suppose, that if a different set of innocent friends had happened upon accused killers Anthony Satchell and Derek Brown, they, too, would've met their end with a bullet.

As if the killers' actions were inevitable and unaffected by choice - like a lightning strike.

Oh, how that sentiment sets my teeth on edge!

There was nothing wrong about Harvey and Dominique walking home, on a neighborhood street, after an innocent night of fun at a friend's house, at 8:45 on a lazy Sunday evening.

"They had a right to be where they were and a right to go home," said Everett Gillison, deputy mayor for public safety, still sounding sad and weary yesterday from the boys' funeral, at which he spoke.

"They were doing the right thing, hurting no one, and they were intercepted by people with wrongdoing on their minds."

Amen. Thank you.

Even locked up, Harvey and Dominique's alleged killers still ravage the community they harmed. The magnitude of the evil they wrought - evil found in every terrorized neighborhood of the city - can make good people afraid to speak openly about even good things, for fear they'll be destroyed.

Out of cruelty. Or spite.

To keep him safe, Gabe's folks just can't talk about what a good kid he is.

A kid who tries, like his friends did, to make every place a right place, every time a right time. *

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