

When child is lost to violence, teachers must deal with students' grief and their own

CPS to assign counselors to all elementary schools

By Carlos Sadovi | Chicago Tribune reporter
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Every morning when she opens her attendance book at Holmes Elementary School, Kiesha Shaw-Nobles gazes down at a picture of a handsome 10-year-old wearing a white T-shirt, his jaw set, the corner of his mouth slightly raised in a muted expression of self confidence.

Even eight months after Arthur "AJ" Jones was caught in gang crossfire while walking to buy candy at a nearby convenience store, his teacher still breaks down in tears when she talks about the boy. She remembers how polite and sweet he was. She remembers how his face lit up as he boasted about new wrestling figures he received.

The traumatic experience of losing a student caused Shaw-Nobles to question her faith, looking at her own two young daughters and wondering how God could allow innocent children to be killed. Still, it was only two months into the school year and a classroom of 5th-graders had to be taught.

"I was a wreck, it was hard for me to be vulnerable like that, [but] I had to let them know that it was OK for them to feel whatever way they were feeling," Shaw-Nobles said.

AJ was the fifth of 24 [Chicago Public Schools](#) students to be killed outside the classroom during one of the district's deadliest periods in recent memory. As the school year comes to a close, often overlooked is the emotional distress on teachers, who must make sense of the violence not only to the remaining students, but also to themselves.

Many of those who taught this year's student victims remain so affected by the losses they refused to discuss the deaths. They also say they're guarded about opening up old wounds in surviving students who have grieved for their friends.

To help teachers and students cope with the escalating violence, counselors will be assigned to all 483 Chicago elementary schools beginning this July as part of the latest union contract, Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart said. District officials said they're on track to meet that new requirement.

Stewart, whose union represents more than 30,000 teachers and support staff, said teachers often have to teach students who are victims as well as perpetrators. They also

have to teach siblings who bear the emotional strain of their family's loss. The union pushed for the counselors after 34 students were killed during the 2006-07 school year.

Although there appears to be little research on the emotional toll student deaths take on teachers, [Michigan State University](#) professor Carl Taylor thinks dealing with the violence remains a major concern for them. "Some teachers think of these children as their children so when they see a child who has died they are looking at the death of their own child," said Taylor, who has interviewed hundreds of teachers while studying urban violence for 30 years. "It affects every single bit of your life."

Some become jaded and leave the profession, others become aggressive toward remaining students and many remain silent, he said. The good ones, though, use it as a teaching experience for the other students.

That's what Shaw-Nobles and her teacher's assistant, Kimberly Simmons, found themselves trying to do the day after AJ's death. His classmates fearfully huddled outside of Room 203 and had to be coaxed back into the classroom.

The first lesson: Their own tears allowed students to understand their tears were acceptable.

"You saw this empty chair where yesterday there was a body there," Simmons said. "You, being an educator, you're trying to keep it together for the children, and it was rough."

Although the district sent crisis counselors to the school, it fell on the teachers to answer most of the questions for the students.

"Is Arthur going to heaven? Do you know what heaven is like Mrs. Shaw-Nobles? Will I go to heaven too? What happens when they bury you in the dirt? Am I going to get shot like Arthur?," she recalled.

Shaw-Nobles is a devout Christian, and she knows not to discuss her faith in public school. Still, her maternal qualities came out, and she remembered trying to put the boy's death into context as much as she could, knowing she wouldn't be able to answer all of their questions.

"I want them to know its going to be OK, but when you get questions like, 'Is that going to happen to me?' " Shaw-Nobles said. "What am I supposed to tell them?"

Lionel Goss, 11, who was AJ's classmate, said his teachers helped by not frightening the class, telling the children not to worry about the violence but to keep a cautious eye on their surroundings when they are outside.

Students still talk about AJ when papers bearing his name show up or as more violence breaks out, Shaw-Nobles said earlier this month.

Lionel said he and AJ "would have been close friends if he would have lived much longer. I just miss Arthur."

As a teacher, Shaw-Nobles has used the tragic experience to focus on getting her remaining students to develop into better people who treat each other with kindness rather than violence.

"They need me more now than they did before," she said, wiping away a tear.