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Let record show: Loving memories

Students tape the stories of families of slain children, and learn about much more than statistics

Uri Alston was Rick Alston's son. He enjoyed pork chops, was impossible to wake up in the morning, and had a lump on his nose because he'd broken it in a swimming pool when he was a child. He had a younger half-brother who looks and acts just like him. He was 17 when he was murdered.

He was not just a body discarded under the Betsy Ross Bridge in May 2004, just another victim with a gunshot wound to the head, a statistic, an unsolved murder. His father wants the world to know that.

So on Memorial Day weekend, one year after his son's body was found, Alston sat down with two eighth graders from Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, who taped his remarks. He answered their questions about his son - from birth to death - and about his own mistakes and regrets. He talked about the void in his life since his son's death.

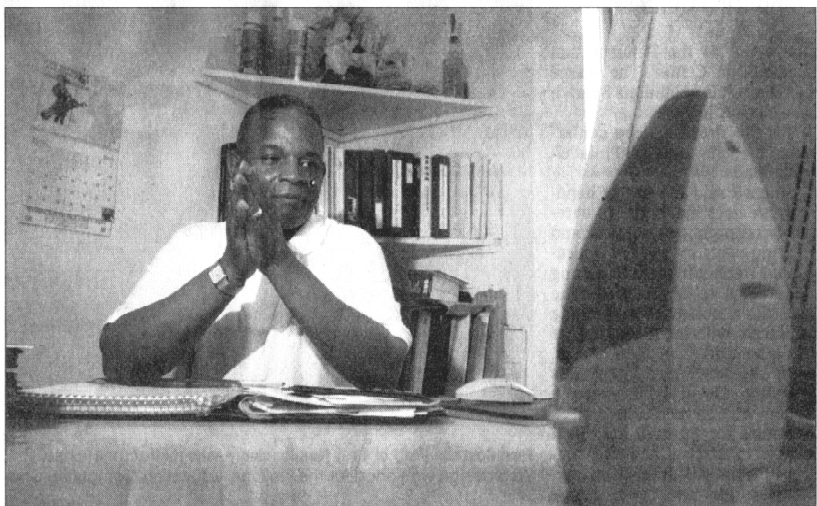
"I won't see Uri that much no more. The only time I'll see him is in my heart and in my memories," he said, choking up during the recording session. "There's a son I'll never get to see have any grandkids. There's a son that I will never see grow up to be a man. My life changed

a whole lot. And I will always wonder what kind of man he would have made."

Except that Uri's story will never be lost: It will be remembered by the 33 students who interviewed his father - and the finished recording will be stored in the StoryCorps project,

possible by a local service-learning group called Need in Deed and by StoryCorps, a nonprofit organization that encourages ordinary people to record one another's stories.

In addition to Uri's father, the students recorded the memories of the parents or grandparents of



DAVID SWANSON / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Rick Alston listens to the interview he gave to eighth-grade students about his son, Uri, who was found dead Memorial Day weekend last year. The Grover Washington Jr. Middle School pupils recorded Alston as part of a project by Need in Deed and StoryCorps to foster the sharing of people's stories.

housed at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress.

It was like a therapy for me, to help me fill a void, to speak out about it," Alston said. "I'll never forget, that's the hard part. But I felt at least his death didn't happen in vain."

The project was made

Philadelphia homicide victims Malik Upchurch, 15, Tyrique Lovett, 15, and Lamont Adams, 16. They also talked to the mother of Marquis Harris, 13, another victim, with plans to make her part of the project.

By meeting and interviewing
(Continued on next page)

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these survivors, the students learn that pulling a gun isn't an answer, that one moment's flash of anger can cause someone else a life of pain, that the statistics aren't just lines on a page, the project's organizers say.

"For me, it was important for the kids to stop looking at the kids as numbers and instead come to understand what they represented in life," said Scott Charles, program director of Need in Deed, a youth program that stresses civic responsibility and service to others.

But first, they had to know whom those people were.

"I asked them: 'Can you name, with the exception of Faheem Thomas-Childs, one kid who had been killed in the city?' " Charles said. They couldn't, he said, but they did know JonBenet Ramsey, Laci Peterson and Nicole Brown.

This largely African American group of students knew "the beautiful white faces that are all over the media," teacher Mike Galbraith said.

Said Charles: "And what does that say to the kids who look like the Uris, the Tyriques, the Maliks?"

Some students cried during the interviews. Others were affected in different ways: One boy, for example, seemed to have a new resolve to do his work and get good grades. And even months after the interviews began, the students are still buzzing about what they had heard: how Lamont would routinely run in and out of his house, and his friends told his grandmother after his death that he did that to check on her; how

Uri was a rebel who talked about becoming a rap star and supporting his family.

They understood when Uri's father told them that every action has consequences. They appreciated the frank way that Marquis' mother talked to them.

"She was down to earth," said Victoria Chau, 14. "She talked about how everyone has a time to go and you just have to live life."

And, from a teacher's point of view, one important thing is that they were interested.

"There was a real intensity and scholarly approach to the task that you don't always see," Galbraith said. "What surprised me was it wasn't always the same people. Different kids connected with different speakers. The top students always produce, but kids who aren't always engaged were really into it."

Besides the recordings, the students wrote essays with such themes as "Why would you be missed?"

Their answers were simple: Because I watch my little brother; because I help clean the house; because my family loves me.

They also crafted "I am" essays that they wrote in the voices of the lost teenagers.

When Uri's body was found, there was no mention in the local newspapers. One television station briefly noted the discovery, but after he was identified, his name was never heard over the airwaves.

That struck at least one student. She ended her "I am Uri Alston" essay this way:

"No one really knows what happened that day. But what I do

know is that I want to be remembered as someone special. Not just the young, African American male between the ages of 17 to 25 who was found under the Betsy Ross Bridge. I want to be remembered as someone's son and as someone's brother."

For Information

For more information, visit www.storycorps.net and www.needindeed.org. Contact staff writer Natalie Pompilio at 215-854-2813 or npompilio@phillynews.com.