

ARVIS JONES

My name is Dr. Arvis L. Jones. I was born in Los Angeles. I lived in different areas of LA. My parents are from Texas. Every year we went back to the south, so I know how it feels to live on both sides of the country.

‘The power of music transcends a lot of regular things.’

I started playing piano when I was five. My parents took me to see Marian Anderson, who was one of the first African American women in the Metropolitan Opera House and at Carnegie Hall. I did not pay as much attention to Marian as I did to her accompaniment. Fast forward, I'm playing, and I enjoy playing for singers, as opposed to just playing. When I was about 26 years old, I was a part of this organization called the National Association of Negro Musicians; we are 106 years old. Our purpose has been to preserve music written by African Americans and to give scholarships in all kinds of instruments to young people. We're one of the oldest African American organizations in the United States. I was playing for a singer and in the audience was Marian Anderson's accompanist. He was 80. I was so excited to meet him.

I married young. When my son was going into high school, I decided to go back to school. I graduated with my AA (Associate of Arts) degree from West Los Angeles two days after my son graduated from high school. I went on to Cal State Long Beach to get my music therapy degree. The program was so intense that they could not add any more units to it because it would have been illegal, but we still had to do a lot of internships and field work to get that degree. Now I've got my degree in music therapy. There aren't many of us – African Americans –in music therapy and I'm so proud of myself.

I originally was majoring in psychology. I'd never heard of music therapy. When I saw that music therapy was offered, because I loved the healing aspect of music, I jumped at it. I had to go in as a pianist because you have to have an instrument. One day, the head of the music therapy program asked me if I wanted to work. She says, “There's this daycare center for the elder. Try it and see.” I learned so much working with those seniors! It was incredible. That's why I say never say no when you're offered something. The first day I got there, one lady sang every verse, and she stood up with her hands up. She had Alzheimer's. I found out she used to be a Sunday school teacher and music brought it all back. Another woman was one of the first Black nurses in World War II. The movie “Six Triple Eight” was made about those women. These people, with the power of music, would tell me things that their families knew, but nobody else at the center knew. I stayed there for four years, even after I graduated. I did my internship and my field work at the mental health facility in Norwalk. It's very intense working with the mentally ill. Working with those kinds of clients opened a whole world to me. It increased my self-esteem too.

My mom had multiple myeloma, which is one of the most painful cancers. I worked with her using music therapy every night. She didn't use any pain medication. The nurse would come and say, "Bernice, you're not using your pain pills." She said, "I don't need them. I got my daughter." All this led me to grief and loss. When I would work with her, I would separate myself from being her daughter to being a music therapist. The power of music transcends a lot of regular things. Music therapy is a backdoor way to get to other issues.

'That was my first foray into gun violence.'

I was involved with gun violence as far as being a mother because in the '80s was when the drive-bys started and my son was a teenager. I was aware of that and very afraid of it. Now fast forward, I graduated and got my degree. I'm driving down the freeway on Vermont and Exposition by USC (University of Southern California), I look over to LA Child Guidance Clinic. I said, "I wonder if they want a music therapist." I got that job. I was employed there seven years, working with all ages and saw these kids with all these problems, when this lady came in from the Center for Grief and Loss for Children. Not knowing she was a jazz musician, I said to her, "Do you want to hire a music therapist?" She knew music, but she didn't know about music therapy. I started working for the Center for Grief and Loss for Children part time. This was a Caucasian organization, so they didn't know how to work with African Americans in grief. I went around the whole County, telling them about how unresolved grief and loss affects our children. That was my first foray into gun violence.

I started doing things that my boss never would've thought about doing. I get a call, "There's this young man, he's going to be in court today. His father died. Do you think you could come see him?" "I'll be there." I found out that this young man was adopted. His adopted dad got really sick. His wife, the adopted mother, didn't really want this kid. When his adopted dad died, he started having problems because she was mistreating him. That's why he got into trouble. He stole something because he was hungry. I spoke to the judge, and we got him put in a better home.

From there, [police] would call me on crime scenes when children were involved because [African Americans and Latinos] are a community that does not believe in getting help. I started going out, not to do therapy, but to let these families become aware of a therapist. I would go see them two or three times a week, help them with the funeral arrangements, telling them all the time, "Miss Arvis wants you to get some help." Then the Mayor's crisis response team called me in to start training them. Things just got bigger and bigger. Everybody started calling. This is how I ended up combining the two things. I work closely with gang interventionists. Then I started combining music therapy with seeing my clients.

'It was not supposed to happen to me.'

Ultimately, I'm doing this for about 10 years. Then I get a call on October 20, 2008. I'm talking to my son. 15 minutes later, I get a call from my daughter-in-law telling me he's been shot. She said, "We were standing on the porch with a childhood friend of his. Somebody came along and shot him." I ran over to the house to get her; he was already gone in the ambulance. We went to the hospital and then they took us in this little room. I said, "This doesn't look good." He had coded in ambulance; they revived him. He coded again and he didn't make it.

It was not supposed to happen to me. But I am so geared towards gun violence, grief and loss, and helping people. This family came into the hospital. Their daughter, who was pregnant, was shot and killed around the corner from my son's house. They weren't sure if the two are connected. The mother comes in crying; I get ready to go over to help her. My police officer friend grabbed me by the collar and pulled me back and said, "No. This is your time." I did not know how to take care of me. I have clients. I have my staff. I have my grandchildren. I have everybody leaning on me. My youngest grandbaby was born six days after [my son] got killed, one day before his funeral.

I was already in grief and loss. After my son's death, I was asked to write a school program for grief and loss as a gang prevention program. I became a workaholic. I started the first groups working in March and April. I ran all over the city. I had to hire staff. Working with those kids kept me up; it was middle school. This was a two-year program. At the end of the two years, I had a minor car accident. All I could do was go to the doctor, go home, drink a lot of water and cry. I was off work for 12 weeks. It was the first time in my adult life that I only had me to take care of. I got married right out of high school. I always had a child, then it was my parents. But I learned I had not been taking care of me. I used to tell the kids what a pressure cooker was, that it builds up fresh steam. "If you don't open the steam, what happens? BOOM." That's what I was. I've learned a lot through my own journey.

'You never get over it.'

I didn't have any more children. At 18 years of age, my first baby died at four months old in my arms. Sometimes suicide goes by your mind. I told [the kids I worked with,] "Who in here sometimes thought about suicide?" A lot of them raised their hands. I said, "You know what, I did too. But I had to think about, if I did something to myself, how would you guys feel?" I learned how to walk that walk. I call it "the grief walk," the grief journey. Two steps up, one step back; four steps up, one step back. It goes on until it goes. In some communities, kids are traumatized over and over again. I was taking care of the kids. I was taking care of my family. I wasn't taking care of me. I thought I was, but I wasn't.

My youngest granddaughter, who was born six days after my son's death, will be 16 in October. It's been 16 years. It still hits you. You never get over it. Now it was one thing to lose my baby to what they called Crib Death (there was no SIDS yet), but it wasn't the same thing as the gun violence thing. He was a working man and father. He had three children already grown. His wife was pregnant with her only child. But [the gang] thought he was somebody who was informing to the police. It had nothing to do with the girl that got shot around the corner. The person that they had for my son's death was killed himself (the police don't know who shot him). It was a mistake. They didn't have permission to shoot who they thought he was. The gang, through interventionists, sent me a word of apology because they knew the work I was doing with their kids. Can you believe that? It didn't hit me at first what a big deal that was.

I miss my son everyday. It's hard that it happened. My oldest grandchild was 23 when it happened. He had his own apartment and did not live with me. After his father was killed, I would call him three or four times a day. "Where are you going? Who are you going with? What time are you going to be home?" I had to tell him, "I know I'm going crazy. But after what happened to your dad, I can't help it." It's not easy. Before my son got killed, I had a feeling, but I thought it was [going to be] my grandson. He wasn't having the best of friends that he was hanging out with. I'm blessed because all the grandchildren, none of them were on the street. I've got great grands. I'm blessed because I know a lot of mothers who lost their only child don't have any grandchildren.

'You are not alone.'

This last Mother's Day, I finally admitted to everybody, *I hate Mother's Day*. I've hated it since my mother died. But once my son died, that was it. I want to stay in bed on Mother's Day. I can't tell you how many people contacted me on Facebook and said, "Thank you for giving us permission to feel that way," because everybody's trying to be strong. Some of my son's friends still keep in touch to check up on me. One of his female friends called me, and she said, "Don't you know you've been our mother?" I got so much from that Mother's Day. At first, I thought, *maybe I shouldn't do this. Maybe I'm sounding a little weak*. I couldn't believe how many people called me. I always post everything from Moms [Demand], Everytown, so people were not used to me posting anything personal. I was so shocked when they contacted me that I got up and went to church. Getting it out felt so much better.

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[I tell other mothers,] I can't take your pain away but I can help you with your grief walk. I'll tell them what that grief walk is to me. Then I watch and see what's going on with them. Everybody's in different places. Some are in denial. Everybody wants to start an organization in their child's name. I said, "No, you're not ready yet. You can't help nobody else until you can help yourself." I don't let them start one until they look like they're beginning to heal. You're never going get over it, but you can help yourself by helping others. Whenever I find a new mother, I have a Zoom meeting and introduce her to all the other mothers. They keep up with each other. The one thing I keep telling them is that "You're never alone." My mothers just help each other to heal.

