

YVONNE TRICE

My name is Yvonne F. Blakely Trice. I was born and raised in LA. I live in the Culver City area, and I've been there almost two years now.

'I tried to get help for him'

I had five sons and one daughter. My oldest son Monte was born to me when I was 15 years old. I came from a family that was middle class. I was a single mom and trying to do the best I can, having support from my parents. I really didn't know anything about being a mother, but I knew I wanted to keep him; I wanted to bring life into the world. He was not just my son. Because I was 15 years old when I had him, he was my brother and my friend first.

I really didn't know anything other than my parents being there for me. When I chose to be a mom on my own and raise my son and my daughter, life was totally different. It was my choice and in choosing my husband, we had to live in a different area. There was all kinds of avenues and things that my son could get into, and his life changed drastically. When my son was probably about 14 and got into the streets, he joined the gang. And when he chose the street life, I was devastated because I was like, *there's nobody in my family life like that. Why, I asked myself over and over again, why.* He died at 39; most of his life was in one prison after another. When I'm sitting here telling this story right now, he's not here.

I remember continuously praying, him running in and out of juvenile, him running in and out of prison, just running in and out. Every time he would come home, I tried to get help for him and tried to get programs for him. Because we didn't make enough money, there was no place that would accept him and when they did, they said he had to go to jail before he can get some help, before there could be anything that would be available for my baby. I kept trying, and the more I kept trying, the more the gangs and stuff kept taking him in. I was terrified. I was like, *where did I fail him? What could I have done differently?* But my son had no problem with his life. To him, "If I'm having cars, money, everything, I don't see nothing wrong with it."

He grew up in that environment. But the young man I raised was funny, respectable. He could come in a room with two mismatched socks on and everybody else would start wearing them. [That was] the young man I knew. I didn't know the street young man because he wasn't allowed in my house. People go, "It must come from the parents and the home." No, it came from the street and what was surrounding our children, like our schools today, our public parks today. There wasn't a lot of places you could go. It's what's outside of your door. My mom always used to say, "What's in my door, I can control. What's on the outside of my door, I can't control."

My son was gifted. He was playing football and he cut his knee. When he injured the knee, he could never play sports ever again. [Football] was his lifeline. He had been playing all his life. He had promises to go to college and when they couldn't use him no more, life was over. He didn't take that very well.

He was so angry. I believe now, after 17 grandsons and 8 granddaughters, the worst time for a teen is from 14-16. When you pass that 16, you got a little bit more leverage, but it's hard to pass that 16 when you live in a community [like ours]. There were no opportunities. When I really realized that, I remember crying one day. Me and my husband came home from work, [my son] was telling me that the people in the streets were his friends, they were his family. I was like, "You gotta be kidding, the people in the street? No, we're your family."

'When he went to jail, I saw a whole other man.'

I worked inside a [jail]. I went there as I got my CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) license. I wanted to know how my son was treated in there. I saw things that were so improper. I saw poor care. I saw people get into fights. I saw the people that are supposed to be watching to keep a basic calm, they were instigating. I couldn't believe what I saw. I stopped working there because it was mental. When I [think back], I don't understand how he survived. It's like two pit bulls fighting consistently. If you're not doing it with the main people who run the place, you're doing it with your cellmate or somebody else. You cannot think about your family. You got to live each day that you might not make it. You don't have no health.

[He spent] three stretches in jail – 10 years, 5 years. I used to say my son is like white light, that bright. When he went to jail, I saw a whole other man. I saw a man that was gracious and honorable to us, but a man that people feared because of him having to take his own stance. I used to always pray with him, "I'm here to give you love. They got your body, but they don't have your mind. When you use your mind for other things, you will find your peace. If not, you're not going to make it in here." I went on the inside. I walked with him through juvenile. I walked with him through the County. I walked with him to the State. I walked with him through the Feds. I've walked with him through all of them. People say, "Well, what did he do?" I don't know what he did; that's not on my calendar. But I know what he was and when he died, he wasn't. The last [stretch] before he died, he came out totally changed.

When my son came home, he came home. He started working. He started getting visitation rights of his daughter. He was trying. He was working with the electricians, going to school, getting his daughter, going to church. His whole life had changed. Even with a distrust with the police, he still helped people to come into this program called 2nd Call (an organization working to reduce violence and assist in the personal development of high-risk individuals, proven offenders, ex-felons, parolees, and others). Everything he didn't have in his other life. He was out 90 days and got killed.

When I look at those 90 days, I thank God for giving me the prodigal son returning home because I fought for many years with prayers and tears. For many years, I kept telling God, “Watch over him.” When somebody got shot, I would run up to the scene where they got shot and it wouldn't be him. This is the trauma. Every time there's a shooting, every time you hear somebody doing something, every time you start running; you start crying. You start wandering the middle of the yard at night and you need to get to the scene to see if it's him because he's not answering his phone. That's the trauma we suffer.

‘When you’re a mama, you got that gut feeling.’

I was at work that day he died. When I came home, one of my sons was leaning up against the door and I walked in tired. My husband was already sick; I was tired. I never forget that day. My son is 6’2”. He answered the phone, and he started sliding down the door and he was quiet. I knew Monte was working, so it wouldn't be Monte that died. I looked at him and I said, “What's wrong?” He said, “Mama, Monte got killed.”

He was getting a haircut; walked out the barber shop, they gunned him down in the back. The police didn't call me. It was so unusual. Everything happened to my son at 5 p.m. on a Friday, but no call to my family. We have to hear it from the streets. A friend of ours called to tell us he was shot. The police didn't call us at all. We rode down there to see my baby.

In the report, police held up the ambulance for 15 minutes. That's long enough for my baby to take his last breath. When you’re a mama, you got that gut feeling. I felt like my baby was still living, you all wanting him to die because he had done so much in your city. There were 24 cameras all around; police tell me none of them work. They didn't even let me go to the coroners or see my baby's body for 14 days. [Police] had a picture of my baby and showed me this was my baby back there. They told me, “This is how we're going to have you identify him.” It's all crazy like that for me. When my son lost his life, they call me the preacher. But I was no preacher. I was a mother that was broken. I was a mother that was out of my mind.

‘They make us as a family feel like he never really mattered.’

Today, nine years later, they still don't have nobody. You can imagine the frustration, the stuff we went through for years. My life was a living hell. [Law enforcement] caused me and my family some hurt. They make us as a family feel like he never really mattered. It took me every year to call them. I'm still doing it now nine years later. *You know the hurt and pain it's causing his daughter? You know the hurt and pain it's causing my sons? Why don't you call us? Why do we always have to call you?* When it came to trying to get mental health stuff,

you all didn't give that to us. I was scared. I called the departments, "I don't know who killed my son. I go to work at nighttime. Can you all please send somebody to watch my house because it's dark and my baby died?" They never sent help.

I hold all this in, so my family don't break down. They were so worried about me because I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I didn't know what to do. When I went to my pastor, I said, "I need some kind of help." He said, "When your son lost his life, what did you do?" I said, "I cursed God because I was so mad." He said God took my voice. I couldn't talk because I cursed God. I was like, "God, why did you take him? I'm mad at you." God was like, "Okay, that's what you want to do. Out of all the times I kept him, out of all the prayers you said, I brought him back home to you. He could have been gone a long time ago." It hit me when I was sitting there and realized that I had been waiting for my baby for 14 days to see if it was really him because they [had only] showed me a picture. When I finally looked at my son, I said, "Oh my God, forgive me." And when we got ready to bring him in front of my family, God gave me back my voice right then in front of everybody.

'I can never bring him back.'

This is how I got started. I was like, "God, what can I do?" He said, "Go help other people. Go tell your story." Don't let nobody stop you from telling your story because there's a mother out there that got silenced because their son was a gang member or maybe their son or daughter was in jail. That does not give you the right to disrespect the people who are survivors. I'm a survivor. I have a voice and it matters to me that [law enforcement] do not call us. I won't stop doing this. This is my healing.

That's what changed my life. I can never bring him back. But what I can do is make sure another mother doesn't have to go through this. I will be the voice for her. I will carry her child. I will use my voice. I was like, *my son is gone. What do I do? Do I be mad? Or do I be a voice to say, 'Why don't we come together? Let's stop gun violence.'*

That's how A Mother's Voice¹ came to be. On the back of my shirt is that scripture, Luke 2: 51-52, that says, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man." That's what made it. It was my prayers. It was my village. It was never quitting. It was feeding the homeless. It was praying to people and taking away my problems and helping them with theirs. It was coming out in the sun, knowing you can't walk, don't know which way to go and you just keep walking by faith. That's how A Mother's Voice became.

¹ A Mother's Voice is network of surviving family members who support, listen to, and commune with one another. The organization was founded and run by Yvonne Trice.

Recorded at:
Los Angeles County, CA
06/25/24
10:00 am

I want people to help each other. I want this killing to stop. I want these police officers to pay attention. Don't come in here trying to tell me how to do my story. Because you ain't going to understand my story. Stop telling me, "Do I got another son?" Stop telling me, "It's okay. He in heaven." No, it would be okay if he was sitting right here smiling at me, but, unfortunately, he is not. I don't want that to be your burden or mine, but I want you to tell your story. I told mine, tell yours. And that's what A Mother's Voice is.

