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Wrongly Influenced

The summer of 2011 was a good one. I spent the summer with the people that I loved most, and I was gearing myself for what was to be a wonderful senior year of high school. Many of my summer days consisted of the same routine. I would go and visit all of my family on the west side of Chicago. Though I no longer lived here, this was what I considered home. It was everything I knew. It was everything I was familiar with. There was no other place I would have rather been. Everyone’s homes are right around each other, so I would meet up with my cousins and walk to stores, barbershops, or wherever we needed to go. It was a beautiful thing. We had no worries, and enjoyed the environment we were in. It was care-free. You wanted to enjoy your free time as much as you could before it was time for those dreadful months of school.

In those previous years of high school they described senior year as what would be your easiest year. They told you that all of your hard work would be paying off at this time. Little did I know, my senior year would begin on a tragic note. I was in for one of the toughest times of my life. Two weeks into the school year, I was enjoying my last year with a lot of the people that I would be seeing for the last time. I had no clue that I would soon be seeing a close family member of mine for the last time also. I spent the Saturday of September 17 with my family, as I routinely did. It seemed as if nothing could go wrong in life. After a day of fun with family, my mom and I returned home exhausted, immediately falling asleep when we got there.

Around 6:30 am, I randomly woke from my sleep. Instead of making the usual decision to just lie back down and go back to sleep, I decided to take a glance at my phone. With blurry eyes I noticed a single notification on my phone, which was a missed call from my mom. My first thought: Why would she be calling me when she’s in the next room asleep? It didn’t quite make sense. I initially figured it was a mistake, as she had called me in the middle of the night by mistake before. For some reason, I made the odd decision to just call her back and see what she was calling for.

She answered with a simple “Hello” in a voice that she could only speak in if she was crying or asleep. Being that it was 6:30 am, I chose the latter. “I have some very bad news” she said. My heart instantly dropped but I knew what was coming. I immediately thought that someone had been killed, and had a few ideas of who it could be: one of my cousins. My thoughts proved to be right. “DJ got killed.” A ring of silence lasted for about 45 seconds on the phone. I had no words. I had dealt with the deaths of family members many times before, but had never lost someone to being shot. This was a new thing.

After the phone call was over, I cried tears that weren’t real. They were forced. Being that the situation had just happened, I hadn’t had my real feelings about the situation just yet. I spent the day with all of my family, trying to iron out the details of what possibly could have gone wrong. Many stories came out of this, all which eventually proved to be false. The next week was a roller coaster. I had never experienced a time span that was this emotionally and physically exhausting.

After months of wondering and speculating what caused the incident, disappointment came as my family and I were met with the news that my cousin was killed in a simple case of mistaken identity. I couldn’t believe it. How had we gone through so much stress over a mistaken identity? Was this real? Sadly, it was real, and there wasn’t a thing me or anyone else could do about it.

Living in Chicago, you always hear about the violence and how it affects the city, but you underestimate it until it directly affects you or those around you. The newspaper articles and news stories about city homicides don’t seem real until a family member of yours is on all of them. Growing up, me, my brother, and my cousins were able to freely walk the streets that little kids fear stepping a foot on now. Walking a mile to go to the store and get candy and food at 8 years old seemed like nothing. You never feared anyone would do anything to try and hurt you, and most times they didn’t. Little did I know, not long after my cousin’s death towards the end of 2011, Chicago was in for one of the most bloody years the city had ever seen.

Over the course of 2012, Chicago surpassed 500 homicides, making it the murder capital of the world. This taught me that although my cousin’s killing was a devastating event for me, all it did was fall into the statistics of the recorded homicides for the city. It was just another killing for the city to tally. There were over 500 other people whose families faced the same devastation that mine did. Not many people were paying attention to the murder rate as a whole, let alone one random victim.

These things changed the way I approached life. Chicago became a city that people feared even as residents of the city. It became a war zone. Many people couldn’t leave their porches without being killed. People couldn’t walk to stores anymore. Small kids couldn’t play in the parks, as they were also being killed at a fast rate. It wasn’t a very safe place to be anymore. Over the course of the year, I also saw many of my peers fall victim to homicide. It had turned into an environment where finding out a friend had been killed was no longer shocking. Hearing that 30 people had been killed in a weekend eventually just kind of made me go “Oh, again?”

Chicago summers were once a thing of beauty. They were once the best time of year. Now, they were filled with funeral lines and hearses. They were bloody and brutal. I became a different person. I learned that there were people in the world who are willing to kill you simply for the benefit of their name. Killing you made them more respectable. Though we had all come from the same places, a lot of us were bound to not make it out alive. Now, I’m taking that same walk to stores, barbershops, and more places but it’s different this time around. I’m watching my back everywhere I go. I’m looking through each and every alley, fearing what could happen. It’s one of the worst feelings one could ever possibly have, and a feeling one should never have to experience.

When negative things hit your life hard, the best way to make it out of them is to see a positive light somewhere. But is it possible to see a positive light in losing those close to you to street violence and seeing the city you live in falling apart right before your eyes? Is it possible to see a positive light when the problems don’t seem to be ending anytime soon? Although these situations strongly influenced my personality, I can’t look back on them and learn much because they are still occurring. They’re still influencing my personality because for 3 or 4 months out of each year I have to go back and live through the same thing again. It’s not an ideal situation. The narrative doesn’t quite end here.

I now live life in a composed, yet paranoid way. It’s scary to look at those you love all the time and never know who’ll be the next to go. As sad as it sounds its reality and as much you never want to wish harm on those around you, you have to pray and hope that you yourself don’t become a victim. It’s a horrible way to live life, and I encourage those who haven’t had to experience it to cherish not having to. Our personalities should be influenced by experiences in life that speak positivity and leave us happy when all is said and done.