

A model for the nation: Mothers hope in-progress brick garden will show gravity of gun violence loss



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Comments



Marlene Miller-Pratt speaks the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence in November. Celeste Robinson-Fulcher is to the left.

Photo: Ben Lambert / Hearst Connecticut Media /

NEW HAVEN — There will be more than 600 bricks in the garden, each representing a life cut short by gun violence in New Haven since 1976, many of them by people wielding illegal and gray market guns.

Each will mark the end of a person's life and a family's pain.

Marlene Miller-Pratt and Celeste Robinson-Fulcher, along with other mothers from the city, hope people consider that weight as they come to the New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence, and that families who have mourned a loved one killed by firearms, as they have, can find some peace.

‘It’s not a day that I don’t think about him’

Miller-Pratt’s only son, Gary Kyshon Miller, was shot and killed in 1998 at the age of 20, reportedly as part of a dispute over a firearm. He was a gregarious youth, she said, marked by a silly sense of humor.



Marlene Pratt is photographed holding a poster seeking information about the killing of her son, Gary Kyshon "Kiki" Miller, who was killed on May 20, 1998.

Photo: Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media

“He was very silly. He was my only son. He was the oldest. He was the one that would come in and sit between your legs, so you could rub his hair. He was the one that played jokes on all the other kids. He loved life,” said Miller-Pratt. “For him to lose his life the way he did was tragic.”

She said she raised his children, two of whom were born after their father’s death. They ask about him. When they do something that reminds her of him, she notes it and they take it to heart.

“It’s not a day that I don’t think about him,” said Miller-Pratt. “And this is years later.”

The gun that claimed Miller's life was not found, Miller-Pratt said.

The steady access to guns in the city causes her pain, she said.

"It makes me sick. I'm ready to tackle this problem," said Miller-Pratt. "It's never-ending. It has to end."

Erika Robinson, a West Haven resident and budding fashion entrepreneur, was 26 when she was shot and killed in 2013.



In this file photo, in West Haven in Dec. 2013, Celeste and Gregory Fulcher, parents of Key Club shooting victim Erika Robinson, in her bedroom at their home in West Haven.

Photo: Mara Lavitt / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

Her mother, Celeste Robinson-Fulcher, said her daughter was an innocent bystander at the Key Club Cabaret nightclub in New Haven.

Adrian Bennett, currently serving a 67-year sentence for Robinson's slaying, initially was charged with possessing a pistol without a permit, among other offenses.

That charge was dropped as part of a plea agreement; he ultimately was convicted of murder and five counts of first-degree assault.

Robinson was “a well-loved person, a well-loved person,” Robinson-Fulcher said.

“(She was) an absolute sunshine to the family,” said Robinson-Fulcher.



The New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence.

Photo: Ben Lambert / Hearst Connecticut Media /

‘None of these guns are legal’

The violence that has buffeted New Haven and other Connecticut communities over the years is connected to the flow of guns through the community and access to them, officials said.

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Video: New Haven Register

“In regards to guns in crimes, unfortunately most of the time the guns used are not registered to the assailant,” Appleby said.

According to the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, only about 1.3 percent of federal and state prisoners had obtained a firearm from a retail source, such as a gun store, pawn shop or flea market, then used it in the crime for which they were imprisoned.

About one in five reported carrying a firearm during the offense for which they were serving time, with 43 percent of these individuals reporting obtaining a gun off the street or buying one in the underground market, according to the survey.

About one-quarter said they had obtained the gun from a family member or received it as a gift. Six percent reported stealing the firearm they used; seven percent said they found it at the scene of the crime, the survey showed.

Leonard Jahad, head of the statewide Connecticut Violence Intervention Program, estimated that 80 percent of the shootings in the New Haven area are done with illegal firearms.

Such weapons are often available, he said.

Death by Gun



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There are neighborhood firearms, stored in a grill, a trashcan, a stoop, he said — weapons of convenience for those who need them in an emergency.

Others gain access to guns in the suburbs, trading drugs for the chance to use the weapons, he said.

“None of these guns are legal,” said Jahad.

It’s a rarity that a legal pistol permit holder commits a shooting with their weapon, New Haven Police Assistant Chief Karl Jacobson said, with two or three such cases so far in 2020.

New Haven usually is supplied with guns from Southern states, he said, where firearm-related laws are less stringent.

He also noted the example of the Red Side Guerilla Brims, who allegedly exchanged drugs for firearms in Maine, then brought them back to the city.

Jacobson said he believed people with beefs ultimately drive violence.

Access to firearms is an issue, though; the New Haven department works to seize illegal firearms on a regular basis, bringing in 120 so far this year as of Nov. 12.

There are hundreds of millions of guns in the United States, so people have a supply of weapons to draw on, Jacobson noted.

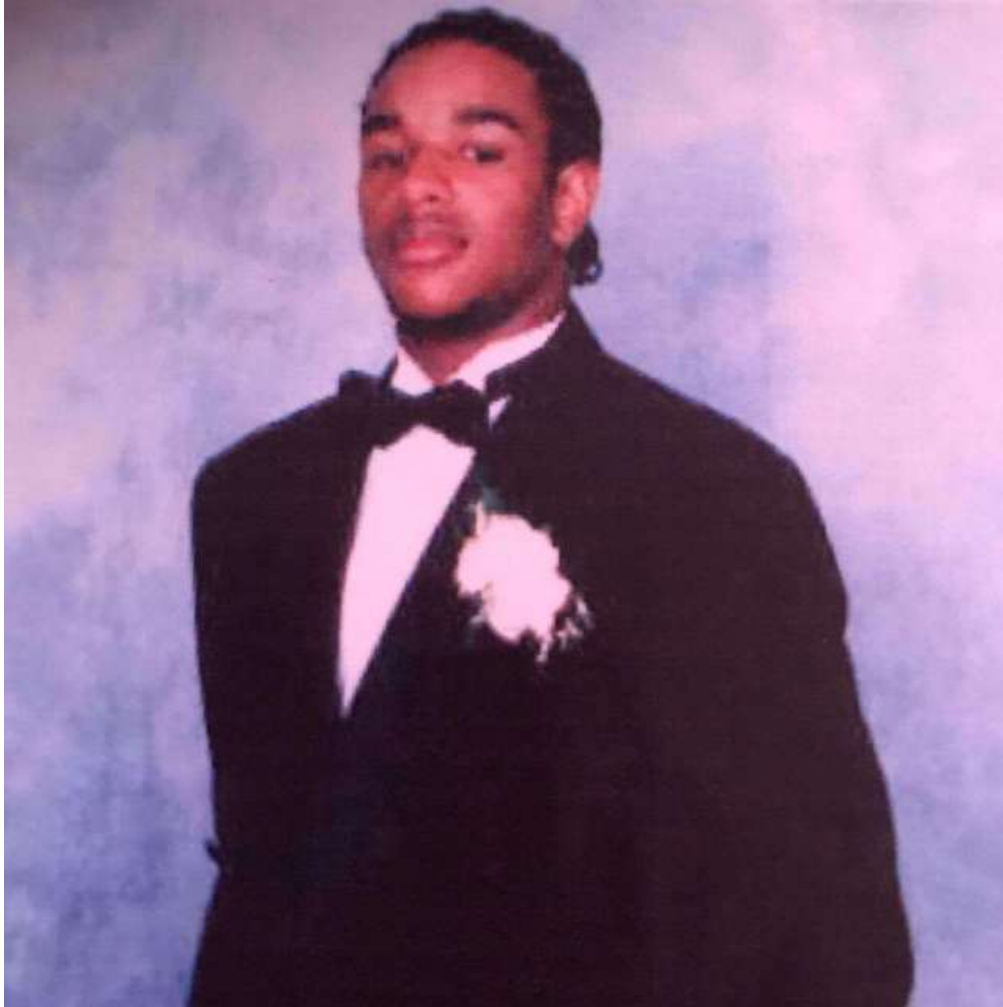
“If we have a population that’s out and has beef and they need a gun, they’ll be able to get a gun,” said Jacobson.

Jahad said the ready availability of weapons helps drive the violence in New Haven and other areas.

Shootings are often about disrespect, he said; in the heat of the moment, a weapon provides the chance to retaliate.

Place for healing

Miller-Pratt and Robinson-Fulcher hope the botanical garden, currently under construction at 100 Valley St., offers residents the opportunity to reflect and the chance to heal, a permanent reminder of those shot and killed — and a reminder to stay on the right path.



Gary Kyshon "Kiki" Miller

Photo: Contributed photo / Marlene Pratt

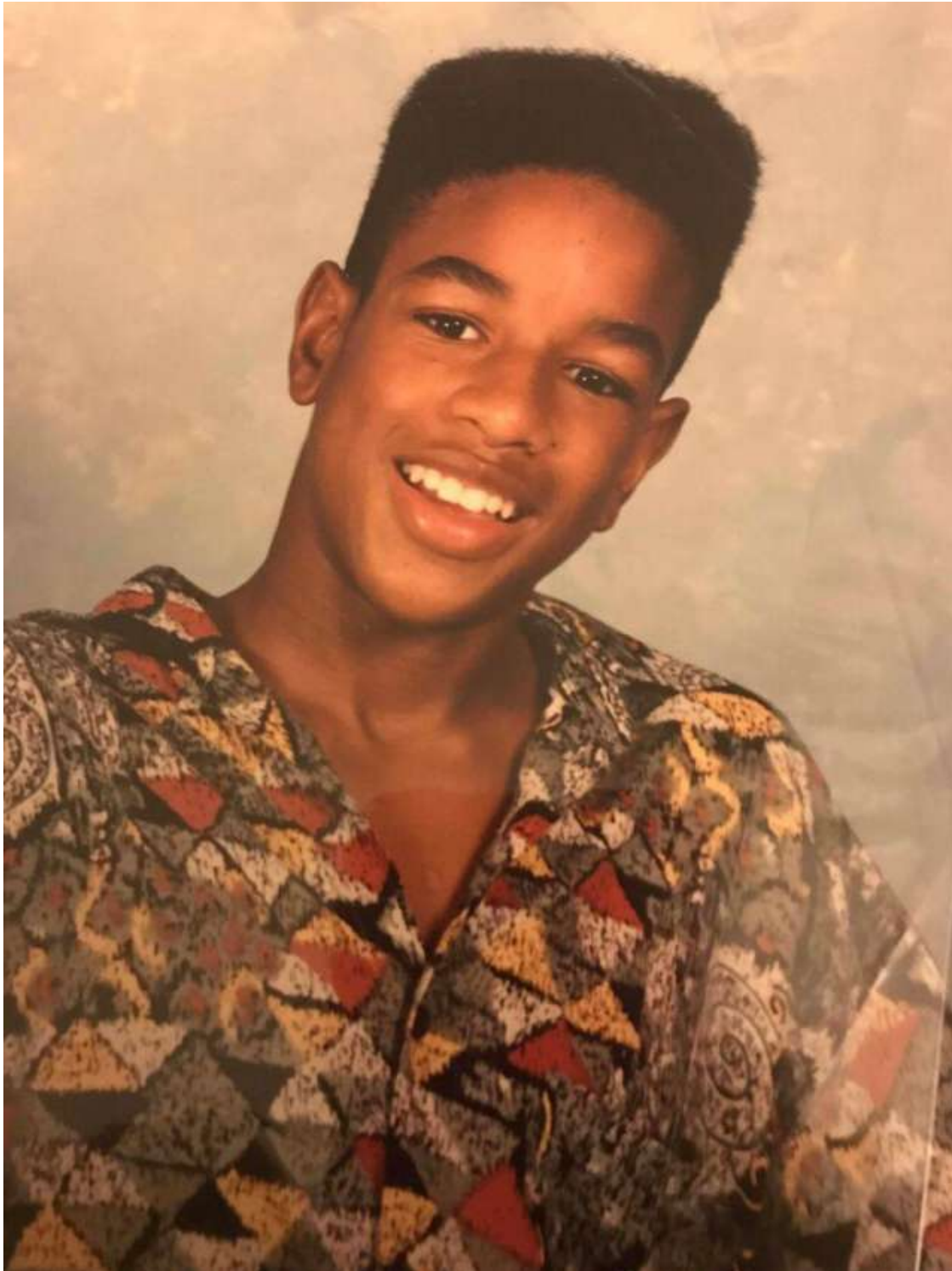
“(When) someone loses a life to gun violence, we see candles in the city; we see people doing vigils. We see all these different things going on. And then, after a week or two, everything just dies, and people forget that there was a loss to the city,” said Miller-Pratt, saying the place would serve as a model for the nation.

“This is a garden of healing; this will be a place where people can come to find healing.”

The names of victims will be carved on bricks in the Magnitude Walkway, leading people through the garden, Miller-Pratt said. A sculpture representing a whole family, visible at the entrance, will slowly disappear over time. Thoughts from mothers who have lost children will be ensconced in view.

Miller-Pratt said she found respite after her son’s death at the Marsh Botanical Gardens, watching the fish and the beauty of the landscape, which inspired the vision for the garden.

Robinson-Fulcher said she helped Miller-Pratt with that vision, along with a core group of mothers.



Gary Kyson "Kiki" Miller

Photo: Contributed photo / Marlene Pratt

With the help of that group, Colleen Murphy-Dunning, head of the Urban Resources Initiative with the Yale School of Environment, and support from New Haven and the state, it's nearing completion. Murphy-Dunning said the hope was to complete the project by the start of 2021.

Miller-Pratt and other organizers are looking to get in touch with families who have lost someone to gun violence to schedule private tours before it opens officially to the public.

Those interested can call the URI at 203-432-6189, Murphy-Dunning said.



The New Haven Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence.

Photo: Ben Lambert / Hearst Connecticut Media /

Robinson-Fulcher said she hopes those who visit the garden are inspired to speak out against gun violence and aid in murder investigations. There's often a code of silence around such cases, but "when you're hit with it, you want every word."

She offered her sympathy to other mothers and families who have lost loved ones.

"When I hear it, I just want to hold that mom," said Robinson-Fulcher. "Just hold them. No words."

A photo of Erika Robinson, who was slain, is displayed in the living room of the Fulcher's home in West Haven in 2014.

Photo: Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

Miller-Pratt said she hoped some visitors, particularly children, would be struck by the sheer numbers of those lost, whether friends or foes.

“Anybody who’s seeking healing — this is the place,” said Miller-Pratt. “It’s going to make a difference.”

Marlene Miller Pratt, whose son was gunned down in New Haven, shown in 2017.

Photo: Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

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