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ONE MOTHER'S BATTLE WITH DRIVE-BY AGONY

Author: *Janet Wiscombe / Staff Writer*

There's fire in the eyes, a look of fierce determination on the face. But the words are delivered without bitterness or anger: "I'm trying to get rid of evil - and evil is all around."

The speaker is Lorna Hawkins. On Thanksgiving eve, 1988, her oldest son Joseph Nathan Hawkins was gunned down by a stranger.

"I got home from work and started cooking. It was dark and raining. At about 8 o'clock, I lay down. Then I heard it. POW! POW! POW! POW! I heard screaming. I ran outside. Joe was across the street lying down. We picked him up and drove him to St. Francis in the truck.

"I held him in the back of the truck. I prayed. I couldn't tell where the blood was coming from. It came out of everywhere... A week later, I pulled him off the respirator...

"It broke us all."

There is a sign in the front window of the Hawkins' small peach stucco home in Lynwood that reads: STOP THE VIOLENCE. It is a message that has propelled the 41-year-old grandmother of six to the forefront of a grass-roots peace and support network predominantly made up of moms whose sons have been slaughtered on the streets.

On Friday, Hawkins received the Black Family Award from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference women's convention in Washington, D.C. She was honored for her lonely battle against gang violence, for helping victims of murder and for starting a cable TV show called "Drive-by Agony," (The program airs Mondays at 8:30 p.m. and Fridays at 7 p.m. on Continental Cablevision Channel 28, and on Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. on Continental Channel 51.)

Today she will walk beside SCLC delegates and new friends at a civil rights march in the nation's capitol in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., who delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech 30 years ago.

"King is my hero," she says. "He stood for nonviolence."

When Hawkins was introduced at the conference, participants got a chance to hear a little about the feisty woman who jokingly refers to herself as Oprah Without the Money.

A couple of months after Joe's murder, she says she got angry. Real angry.

"I was mad. I was scared. I was lonely," Hawkins declares. "Nobody was paying any attention. I thought, 'I'll be damned if my son's going to be just another body. I thought, 'There has got to be someone out there who can help families whose got some GUTS.'"

She looked around. She didn't see anybody. Then she looked in the mirror. What she saw was a crusader ready to go out into the community and talk about violence, and do everything in her power to stop it.

Three years after Joe's death and the first televised interviews with grieving parents were aired, fate dealt Hawkins, her husband, Frank, and their two daughters, another unfathomable blow.

"I was selling computers at the time. On the way home from work, we stopped to get some chicken. We were just getting ready to eat. The phone rang. They said Gerald (her second son) was shot. Then the phone rang again. They said Gerald was shot. They said he was about five minutes from here off Alameda.

"When we got there, he was still conscious. The paramedics said he's going to be OK. They had just put him on the gurney. He half sat up. His eyes were open. I thought he'd be OK ...

"I was holding the baby (one of her grandchildren). I took him home to change his diaper. He was screaming uncontrollably. We drove to the hospital. When we got there, everyone was crying. I knew Gerald was dead.

"They said he was going to be OK. They always say that. It isn't right. You aren't there. You miss that moment ... I remember my daughter said, "We made it before. We'll make it this time."

Four years before, Joe had been shot with a .45-caliber pistol fired from a car full of kids. Joe was 21. The murderers were never found. On March 30, 1992, Gerald was shot by a kid in his early 20s who gunned him down for an '83 Chevy Regal. Gerald was 22. His killer was convicted of murder and received a sentence of 18 years to life.

Since Joe's murder in 1988, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office reports there have been 3,270 murders in the county.

"The kid who killed him was a bad ass," Hawkins says. "He was into drugs, stealing. He'd only been out of jail five days.

"If it wasn't for religion and my work, I'd be flipped," she adds. "I would not be normal. Every day I get up and pray. I'm not very religious. But it's the faith that keeps me going. After a while, you stop crying as much. The pain in your chest doesn't feel like you're going to have a heart attack all the time.

"But I still wake up at 4:30 a.m. with my eyes wide open. I think of Joe dancing. I think of Gerald coming through the gate. And I cry uncontrollably.

"Tragedy either makes you stronger or weaker."

An airing of feelings It is lunch time at a suburban park in Downey, and Hawkins has just arrived with a camera crew from Continental Cablevision where she volunteers her time to tape "Drive-by Agony" and to make educational videos for use in public schools.

The crew had thought it would be a good change of pace to film a show in the park on a warm summer day. Trouble is, the scheduled guests haven't shown up.

Hawkins, a pretty woman who's wearing a cotton shirt and shorts, isn't the least bit impatient. When it becomes apparent that the crew can't stay much longer, she calmly regroups.

She asks a couple of people in the park if they'd like to share their thoughts on violence and crime among young people - and what can be done about it. Within minutes, she is on camera, spontaneously conducting interviews the station can use at a later date.

She is thoroughly poised in her new role as talk show host, putting her guests at ease with a warm smile, an empathetic ear and an outspoken voice.

"Black America, wake up," she admonishes. "Do something. Find out what's going on with your kids.

"All of the kids know what's going on in the streets. Listen to them! Find out what the hell is going on.

"Kids today are lazy, and I mean LAZY. They are overweight. They have no place to put their energy. Parents are confused. They don't discipline, and their kids tear the place up."

Hawkins, the fifth of seven children, grew up in a series of homes in poor neighborhoods in Long Beach. She got pregnant with Joe when she was 15, which upset her dad so much she says she thought he'd have a heart attack. He was very, very strict, and in those days having a child out of wedlock was taboo.

She and Frank, a construction foreman who currently is unemployed, were married in 1968. Their daughters, Francie and Carlotta, are now 21 and 25.

Hawkins says it was always terribly important to her that she provide a stable environment for her kids. She and Frank bought their house 16 years ago and have lived there ever since.

As a child, she recalls feeling overwhelmed with embarrassment when her parents announced it was time to go clothes shopping. That meant one thing: the Salvation Army and public humiliation. She and her siblings would do all in their power to slink into the store unnoticed. To have been spotted by a peer buying second-hand clothes would have been mortifying.

“We were poor,” Hawkins says. “I believe our generation did something to our kids to make them act the way they act. Now kids expect so much, and we want to give them too much. They don't know what it's like to work or struggle. Now they got all this stuff and they want more. They got to have a car, Nikes, gold, earrings, haircuts, concert tickets and they want to eat out all the time.

“They want more and more. It turns to hatred. They join groups. They become cowards. They don't have what the other kids have and they think, ‘I'll just go shoot him. I'll jack him.

“After Joe was killed, Gerald had a very difficult time. He was in a rage. He wanted to lash out. He started hanging around with the wrong kids. He became obsessed with memories of Joe and began writing his big brother's name on all his papers. He wore a shirt that said Joe. He bought a belt with J O E inscribed on the buckle”

He was just beginning to straighten out and feel better when he was murdered, Hawkins says.

Reflecting on the violent crime on the streets of the Southland, Hawkins admits she too could be a violent person. “I handle my anger by working. I work hard, and that tires me out. Then I'm too tired to get mad.”

Los Angeles District Attorney Gil Garcetti calls Hawkins' work with mothers who have lost children to gang violence courageous. “We can learn from her ability to rise above tragedy and try to help stop the violence that plagues us all,” he says.

On the eve of her departure to Washington, Hawkins talked happily about her upcoming trip. But the reality of the double tragedy of losing two sons is never far from mind.

“You expect to outlive your children,” she says softly. “Having them killed is the ultimate.”

On second thought, she says maybe that's not quite true.

“Jesus went through a lot worse death than my sons had,” she offers. “People spit on him. They didn't believe in him. He was nailed to the cross and the whole nine yards. You've got to remember that. Somehow you've got to wash your face and hold your head high and know that everything will be all right.

“You've got to get out there and do something for somebody.”