

'Bullets Don't Have Eyes'

By Cassandra Wynn
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte Police are "stuck between a rock and a hard place," said Officer John Burnette.



Burnette

In an interview with The Post about a week before he and Officer Andy Nobles were fatally shot Oct. 5, Burnette talked about working in rough neighborhoods.

One of his worries was that innocent people often get hurt. "Realistically, the community is dangerous. You have to watch your back everywhere you go. It's not always a comfortable place to be. Bullets don't have eyes. Innocent people end up being victims."

The hopelessness of young people is one thing that concerned Burnette. "It's almost like a disease. What can you do when people feel like prison is a better place to live. I don't believe all the kids feel this way," he said.

Burnette talked of the time he pulled a 16-year-old aside to chastise him about being a negative role model for his younger brother.

"He said, 'I'm not of value to this community. I'll be dead in two years.'" Burnette recalled.

The 25-year-old officer seemed bothered by a disregard for the sanctity of youth. "I've seen a lot of shootings and drug activity. One thing that stands out in my mind is the time we went to a house, entered the den and saw a kid 15-years-old with his brains blown out. He never knew what hit him. It affected me because he was only 15. Even if he had done something stupid, how do you do that to him."

He noticed how a lot of kids have turned to guns to settle violence. "They say, 'I'm going to smoke him,' not 'kick his ass,'" Burnette said.

Not all the kids are selling drugs, Burnette said. "A lot of the kids are trying to be good. But many of them are ridiculed when they try to be good and they end up second guessing themselves.

"A lot of kids are just hanging out all day long. At 2 and 3 a.m., you can see girls walking with a baby in their arms, hanging out."

Attention is not what a lot of kids in his area get, Burnette said. "A lot of parents spend too much time telling kids how bad they are. If you show them a little attention, they're all over you. There's this little kid they call Rock. He's 2. I will ride him around in my car. I picked him up the other day and he sat on my knee for 15 minutes and didn't say a word."

Burnette, who had worked in the community for three years, was assigned to Adam 2 District which covers South Tryon to Morehead Street to Westinghouse Boulevard. It includes eight housing projects.

Burnette had spent a lot of time "troubleshooting."

"I go to community events, meetings. We helped construct a park. It makes us feel good. When we drive by, people wave."

Burnette was asked what bothered him most about being a policeman. His reply:

"You know, it would bother me if I had to kill somebody. That would blow my mind. They have counseling when that happens. I would have to get some counseling. I hope that never happens."

Fairview Homes residents have asked the city to change the name of their community to Burnette-Nobles to honor the officers.

Innocence Leaves Too Soon

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her community.

"I was scared to walk to the bus stop. I didn't know whether (the suspects) had been caught," Shumira said. She worries the incident will make "people think the neighborhood is rougher than it is. It really is not a bad neighborhood."

When Shumira does go out of her house, her grandmother (whom she calls Mom) knows where she is. "I don't know a lot of people. My mom didn't let me go out as much. I played in my complex area."

Shumira figures that her grandmother doesn't want her to get pregnant. "A lot of girls have babies. It's a shame they mess up their lives. Most of them don't continue their education. They stop school."

The weekends, when people get paid and party, are when Fairview Homes resident Tammy Sanders sends her five kids (ages 2-12) to stay with their godparents in another part of the city. With so little to do in terms of recreation, youngsters often just hang out.

"It's boring here," said 12-year-old Shetima Harris, another Fairview Homes resident. Although she doesn't hang out at night, she likes walking around the neighborhood during the day.

"I walk to be walking. Just to be in the house is boring. Sometimes I walk around on my street or go to Greenville or Double Oaks," she said.

Shetima's other outlet comes from her participation in the stepping crew of the Greenville Marching Band.

"There are kids out at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning. Girls 9, 10 and 12 sitting outside," Sanders said.

Indeed, teenage girls with toddlers following behind is a regular part of the scenario. "A lot of them walk the street all night and sleep all day," said Faye Jones, president of the Fairview Homes Neighborhood Association.

The flirtation with danger is what often draws many youngsters in. Jermond admits that some of his friends carry guns. "They bring a bunch of friends to a field and shoot in the air to show you they got a gun. I've been scared and impressed. It depends on who's using it. Some you know won't shoot you and others you get bad vibes about - those kids who don't go to school. I don't go on Edwin Street - not at night."

Although Sanders is working hard to keep her 12-year-old daughter Antoinette Baker out of trouble, she is concerned about influences outside the home. Many of the 12-year-olds Antoinette knows are not virgins.

"They keep telling me to come over to some boys' houses," she said. "I just don't go. I want to wait until after I'm 21 to have a baby."

Sex is something Jermond says he knows plenty about. "This girl (who's also 15), she's sweating me. I don't even need a towel. All I have to do is go get it. I always pack my plastic. I think about the risks of AIDS, crabs and gonorrhea."

Role models, especially male role models, often come from outside the community or the media. Jermond's two oldest brothers, 21 and 20, are incarcerated - one for murder and another for assault. "I feel bad because my brothers are in jail. I want them to set examples for me," he said.

While Jermond's attitude about academics is cavalier, he is adamant about his pursuit of basketball. "I play well." His ambition is to play in the NBA like his idol, Bobby Hurley. But Jermond doesn't play on the school team because he doesn't get the physicals required for participation.

LaMont Martin, 15, is serious about school. An honor roll student, he wants to work with computers. A resident of Fairview Homes, he believes education comes first. Hanging out late at night is not on LaMont's agenda.

"Mom likes me to be in the house before 10 p.m. She works at night. The only times I hang out late is when

we are sitting on the porch," he said.

LaMont said that he has been frightened by the violence. The fatal shooting of a 10-year-old who lived in the community affected him.

"Shootings always scare me," he said. "They had counseling for us at school. It was hard. He didn't do nothing to nobody. He was one of the nicest little boys I know."

The senselessness of the violence is what disturbs LaMont. "I know some who feel like, 'Well, since I'm selling drugs, I will do what I have to do so when I die, I'll have it all.' They feel, 'I know I'm going to die. I'll do what I can so people will know who I am.'"

There are no badges of honor given for living in stressed neighborhoods. In addition to everything else, the youngsters often have to fight labels. "For some, there is the stigma of where you live," Jones said. "People will say you won't amount to anything because of where you live. Teachers have said it."

Overcoming the odds is not impossible. Jones grew up in Fairview Homes, left and married. In 1978, she returned with four small kids. This year, her youngest son is playing football at Livingstone College.

"Raising my kids was fairly easy," Jones explained. "By dark, my kids were in the house. Basically, they called me hard and mean. If they weren't home, I'd go hunting for them. It was embarrassing to them. I was involved in activities with them and we went to church together."

Jones said that many parents in her community don't seem affectionate enough.

"They don't do enough hugging and saying, 'I love you.'"

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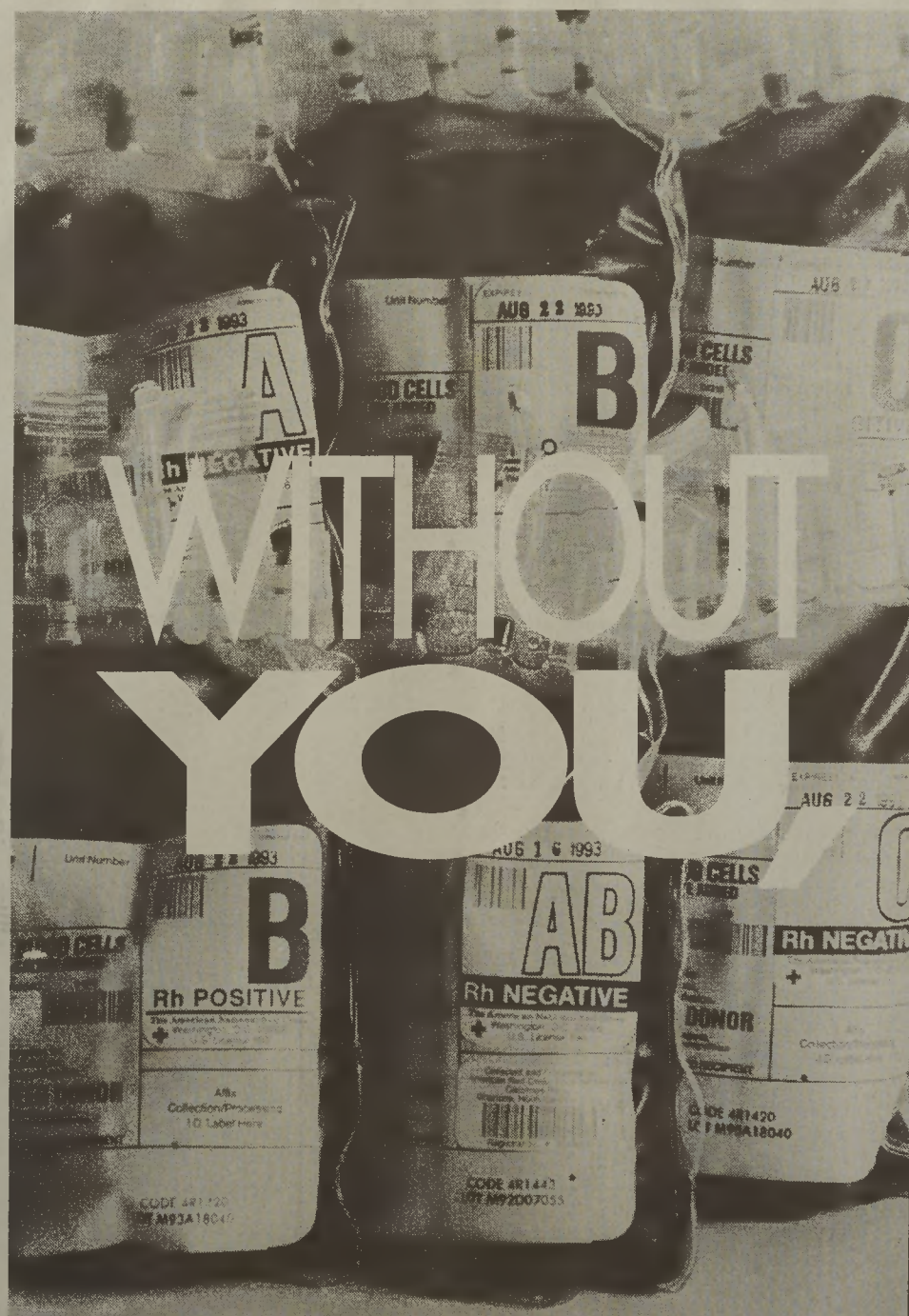
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