SCOTT ELMQUIST

Sayyeda Hall speaks at a vigil held for her son, Malik Banks, who was shot and killed April 13.

A Family's Loss

The violent death of a 21-year-old was his mother's worst nightmare, and family members believe Richmond needs a new approach to crime.

by Laura Ingles

Malik Banks wasn't perfect. His mother, Sayyeda Hall, is the first to admit that. But she says he was kind, loyal, quick to dance and alway eager to help someone with a load of groceries. Basketball was his favorite pastime, he loved retelling the story of the time he met comedian Katt Williams at the YMCA and the upcoming birth of his first son made him want to settle down and find more stability.

Banks died April 13. The 21-year-old was shot and killed in the 1300 block of Coulter Street, where he lived since moving in with his mother and siblings in 2004. The homicide is still under investigation.

As of Sunday, June 2, Richmond had seen 25 homicides, according to statistics from the Richmond Police Department — inlcuding the recent death of 9-year-old Markiya Simone Dickson of Chesterfield, who was shot while playing in Carter Jones Park, sparking widespread outrage throughout the Richmond area.

For Banks' large, tight-knit family, this kind of loss is a first.

"This is the first time that we're going through something like this as a family in this context," says Iman Shabazz, Hall's cousin and a consistent figure in Banks' life. "I've struggled with trying not to ask myself unanswerable questions and trying not to beat myself up and feeling like I somehow failed to provide the kind of protection that could've prevented something like this from happening."

Shabazz, a community activist and advocate for incarceration alternatives, has been examining violent crime and the people impacted by it for years. A program staffer at the office of Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Mike Herring, who announced his resignation last week, Shabazz worked with Herring to release a report that identifies root causes of crime. The 12-page document lays out statistics and poses questions about socio-economic factors like race, housing, poverty and trauma, with the overall assessment that those in power should create policies that address root causes rather than focusing so many resources on reactionary, punitive measures.

In some ways, Banks' story is all too familiar. Hall is a single mother who moved to Richmond in the early 2000s to be closer to family. She gets government assistance to offset the cost of housing, and she and her younger kids live in an apartment that's near Mosby Court, one of the big six public housing developments known for substandard living conditions and high crime. Even though they don't live in a unit run by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Hall says the violence isn't contained within neighborhood lines, and she constantly worries about her kids' safety. Banks' death was her worst nightmare.

Despite being accustomed to the sounds of gunshots and sirens, Hall says she's always done her best to provide stability for her kids. The lights are always on, the fridge is always full, and each child gets a cake on his or her birthday. She grew up in poverty herself, raised by her grandmother in New Jersey because both of her parents were largely absent, reappearing sporadically throughout her life. In retrospect, she says, it's clear that she lived much of her childhood in a depressive state, but as a teenager she wanted to break the cycle.

"As I got a little bit older, I don't know if it was through prayer or just reading, or whatever it was, I just made up my mind to put all my focus on proving that people are wrong and that it's not OK," she says.

Crime *on page 8*

Crime *from page 7*

"A lot of my focus was just pure determination, hating how things were, and proving that I am better. I'm not dumb."

Like a lot of single parents, Hall has to find a balance between paying the bills and being home with her kids. She wanted them to grow up eating family meals around the table, so for years that meant working overnight shifts so she could be around in the afternoons and evenings to help with homework and cook dinner.

Banks, her oldest son, began to struggle in school when he was in second grade. Hall recalls a shift in her son's demeanor and behavior when his grandfather, Pop-Pop, died, disrupting a beloved tradition of visiting New Jersey for leisurely, carefree summers and holidays.

Hall says Banks always had good manners, but his temper got him into trouble so often that he was suspended more than 100 times in elementary school. Last summer, in an effort to address the disproportionate number of black students suspended from public schools statewide, Gov. Ralph Northam signed a bill barring school divisions from suspending students in pre-K through third grade for more than three days. According to a report that inspired the bill, students with disabilities are suspended at about three times the rate of other students.

Hall says even with official diagnoses of attention-deficit-hyperactive disorder and oppositional-defiant disorder, and an individualized education program through the Richmond Public Schools, her son wasn't getting the help he needed. He got bullied in school, and Hall says he was targeted and seen as only his behavior issues.

"I went to all the parent-teacher conferences. All of them," Hall says. "Moving forward, I didn't know what else to do. And nobody wants to be responsible, because it always gets pushed off onto another program or another person."

On Sunday, May 26, third-grader Markiya Dickson was shot and killed during a cookout at Carter Jones Park. A memorial service for the 9-year-old will be held at noon on Friday, June 7, at the Arthur Ashe Jr. Athletic Center.

SCOTT ELMQUIST

Iman Shabazz remembers his cousin Malik Banks while flanked by Tyler Johnson, the mother of the victim's unborn child, at left, and Banks' great-aunt Diane Hall.

Banks graduated from high school in 2016. Later that year he spent some time in jail after joyriding in a stolen vehicle with some friends, and Hall says he described the experience as deeply traumatic. He "thought he was going to die" while he was locked up, and upon his return to civilization he told his mother he wanted counseling to work through the impact of being incarcerated.

At the time of his death he had a steady job, a roof over his head and a baby on the way. Overall, Hall says, he was doing well. Shabazz says he's grateful that, to his knowledge, the deadly shooting didn't occur when Banks was in trouble.

"I guess I feel fortunate that the circumstances weren't when Malik was caught up in something that he'd done," he says. "It makes it tragically unfortunate that he was innocent."

A section from Shabazz and Herring's report about trauma suggests that a person's decision to commit a crime is not always entirely his or her own — it's often a product of the environment and years of those socio-economic factors at play.

"Instead of healthy social skills, a person may adopt harmful anti-social behavior, to protect themselves or meet their personal needs," the report reads. "In this context, crime is not always a function of personal choice. Sometimes crime is a manifestation of a person's effort to cope with environmental and social deficits."

Shabazz says he still believes that addressing and responding to crime should consist of more than blaming and incarcerating the person who pulled the trigger. He notes that either the shooter or the victim could have been anybody's cousin, anybody's son.

But now he's also dealing with the emotions of losing his own loved one.

"It's hard to balance all those things that I know about the community dynamics, the pressures, the conditions, the things that really contribute to the kinds of experiences that people have in the environment where he was killed," he says. "But none of that impacts the part of me that hurts, that mourns, that I wrestle with, because this was my cousin. Someone who I helped raise."

So did the system fail this 21-year-old father-to-be? According to Shabazz, it's not that simple. "I feel like I understand the dynamics enough to know that systematically, things operate the way they're supposed to," he says. "And I would even argue there's a part that's designed not to work in favor of people who are oppressed."

At a recent news conference, newly appointed housing authority director Damon Duncan discussed his agenda for the agency. On his list of proposals was re-establishing a dedicated police force within the public housing communities. Even though Hall and her family don't live in public housing, she questions whether an increased police presence would solve any problems in the East End. Hall says a detective told her that officers were on the scene of her son's death within about two minutes of receiving the call.

"So they were already close by. And being that close by didn't prevent this person from shooting somebody," Hall says. "It didn't prevent that other boy from across the way from getting shot. And it didn't stop those other two people that got stabbed with security there. And it didn't keep that other boy that was over there on Redd Street from getting killed."

Hall goes on to say that efforts to revitalize the neighborhood are causing more harm than good, and as a longtime resident, she feels like the powers that be aren't listening to the needs of the community.

"How about don't put up a store in a neighborhood where people can't afford the food that's in there?" Hall says, referring to the Market at 25th, where her excitement to experiment with fresh produce was diminished by prices out of her range. "How about put up a damn community center, instead of putting up all these houses to displace people? How about doing something to build up the morale of the community?" **S**

news&features

SCOTT ELMQUIST

Randy Blythe, of the metal band Lamb of God, leads a pack of demonstrators playing kazoos and drums in response to a Westboro Baptist Church protest.

Drowning Out Hate

Costume-clad kazoo players and drummers jubilantly respond to the Westboro Baptist Church.

by Laura Ingles

Virginia Richmond, 31, drove an hour and a half Monday morning to attend her first-ever rally. The Spotsylvania resident traveled solo to the Virginia State Capitol to join a crowd of "counter-partiers" and to stand up to members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who invited themselves to Richmond.

The Kansas-based hate group, known for taking its inflammatory anti-LGBTQ rhetoric on the road to insist that things like natural disasters occur because "God hates fags," announced a couple weeks ago that it would gather outside the Capitol to protest the existence of Delegate Danica Roem, D-Manassas, Virginia's first-and-only openly transgender legislator.

It didn't take long for local musician Randy Blythe, frontman of the well-known metal band Lamb of God and friend of Roem's, to take notice. On Friday afternoon, Blythe sent out a call to "all freaks, weirdos, misfits and regular people of good conscience," encouraging them to show up Monday morning for a counter-party. The announcement was clear that the event was a celebration, not a counterprotest, "because that would entail arguing with these idiots (which is USELESS)."

"I just really wanted to stand up for LGBT rights and for Danica," Richmond says after the event ended and people wearing tutus, Halloween masks and rainbow hats began to disperse. "I just really wanted to get involved somehow because she's special, you know. She deserves to be an elected official without Westboro coming and bashing her. It's just wrong."

About a half-dozen members of the Westboro Baptist Church arrived at the Capitol a little before 9 a.m., bearing signs with phrases like "God made you male or female. Be content and obey him." Meanwhile hundreds of others held multicolored poster board with "Queer Jesus loves us more" and "God = Love" written in bright block letters. The atmosphere was overwhelmingly joyful: Blythe conducted while folks hummed away on fluorescent kazoos and drummed on upside-down plastic buckets, and a demonstrator strutting around in an Elvis outfit won the costume contest. The Westboro members scampered off the grounds before 9:30 a.m.

"We crushed them," Blythe told *Style* afterward in a text message. "Total success."

"It was very exhilarating," Richmond says. "It felt good. It felt like it was for the right reason. It wasn't just show up and party, it was directed totally toward Westboro, and it was just exciting."

For Richmond, this demonstration was personal. She recently left a church that she describes as suppressive and "even cultlike," and a couple months later she came out to her friends and some family members as bisexual.

As she pauses to consider a question, a fellow participant in the counter-party breezes past her on the sidewalk and declares "May they burn in hell where they belong" with a knowing nod. Richmond grins.

"I'm just ready to tell the world that it's not right to treat gay people, trans or bisexual people like they're scum," Richmond says. "They're just like everyone else."

On March 1, Roem posted to Facebook: "My response to the Westboro Baptist Church protesting my existence — and please use this quote in its entirety as I put the amount of thought the situation warrants into it: 'Meh.'" She also encouraged supporters to donate to her re-election campaign, which she promoted with the hashtag #Westboro-Backfire.

As of Monday, March 11, Roem had raised more than $30,000.

According to a Facebook post, the donations came from more than 850 people from all 50 states and Washington. She describes them as "an incredible display of people power as every single one of those donations came from individual human beings — not organizations, PACs or other entities." **S**

SCOTT ELMQUIST

Flipping the Script

With different political backgrounds, a gun-owning rural couple wants to change the narrative around firearm legislation.

by Laura Ingles

Given the polarizing nature of the debate, many weren't surprised when Republican legislators gaveled out without a single vote during the General Assembly's special session on stricter gun legislation, postponing it until after the November election.

The political stakes are high. All 40 Senate and 100 House of Delegate seats are up for grabs this fall. Republicans control both chambers by slim margins, and now, more than ever, says Kyle Kondik, director of communications for the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, the two parties seem "more ideologically sorted" on guns.

"The governor and the Republicans who control the state legislature have far different ideas about what to do or what not to do about guns," Kondik says. "It didn't feel like there was going to be some sort of grand compromise."

Despite their different political backgrounds, Prince George County couple and firearm owners Robyn and Dustin Sordelett have found common ground when it comes to gun reform.

Kondik says voters will have a straightforward choice at the ballot box in November: Vote for the Republicans if you want to keep gun laws the way they are, or for the Democrats if you want stricter legislation.

But for some voters, it's not that simple.

Dustin Sordelett, who grew up in Prince George County and lives in the area with his family, was a devoted Republican his entire adult life until recent years. A self-proclaimed country boy, he's a gun owner, hunter and believer in the Second Amendment. But he also supports legislation such as universal background checks and red flag laws, or extreme risk protection orders that permit the court-ordered temporary removal of firearms from a someone believed to be a danger to themselves or others.

His wife, Robyn Sordelett, is a proud liberal and often the instigator when it comes to gun-related conversations in their home. She's an active member of the national organization Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and as a gun owner who freely admits to enjoying a day at the shooting range, she hopes to bring some nuance to the debate.

Robyn says she's "as close to a single-issue voter on this as you can be," and she exclusively supports political candidates who prioritize progressive gun legislation. But for her husband, it's a little more complicated.

Pulled toward the center by his evolution on the gun debate, and disillusioned with the current state of the GOP, these days Dustin says he identifies as an independent, which means there's no easy answer on Election Day.

"Because our system is so divided, I feel like you have to vote one of two ways," he says. "The independent vote is not a good vote, and that's just the current election cycle that we're in."

While a candidate's stance on gun reform is "definitely going to influence" his vote, he has a hard time envisioning himself going blue, and he can't say the issue alone is enough to make him cast a ballot for a Democrat.

"It's definitely a change. It's a gut check, it's a morality check," he says of his own internal debate between the two parties. "You start asking yourself questions you never thought you'd ask before. It's difficult."

Dustin never considered the laws connected to guns until 2007, when he was a student at Virginia Tech. On the morning of April 16, only one academic building stood between Norris Hall, where a gun-

Guns *on page 8*

Guns *from page 7*
man opened fire and killed dozens of people, and Whittemore Hall, where he and his classmates spent hours on lockdown in the basement.

"For me, it was absolutely a wake-up call," he says, adding that he doesn't like to sit with his back toward the door to this day.

His experience adds a level of credibility when presenting an unpopular opinion, he says, especially in his rural community. He acknowledges that he looks the part, with his plaid wardrobe, beard, country accent and propensity for hunting — and that level of relatability helps when he's challenging his neighbors, coworkers and friends to consider a different take.

"When you're one of them, when you're a gun owner and part of the crew or whatever, then they'll listen to it and they don't think you're coming at them in a politically close-minded kind of way," he says. "I'm phrasing it in a way that's not attacking them or the Second Amendment, but asking them, 'What about this? What if you were in this situation? What if your kids were?'"

For Robyn, it's not easy being a political outsider in her community — or, for that matter, being in the minority within the gun violence prevention world as a gun owner. But like her husband, she says she's had the most productive conversations with people she disagrees with when it starts from a point of commonality.

"There are folks who, just the same way that I secure my firearms in my home because I'm protecting my children, they don't secure theirs for the same reason. They want to protect their children, so they have them accessible," she says. "Where the communication breaks down is when we try to make decisions about each other without talking to each other."

Robyn channels her energy into gun violence prevention advocacy, and she's gearing up for the often unglamorous work of an election season. Moms Demand Action aims to show up and support candidates who have received the group's gun-sense candidate distinction, she explains, given to people who include gun safety and gun violence prevention in their platforms. In theory it's a title that can go to anyone running for office, she says, regardless of party affiliation.

"I look forward to the day that a Republican will get the gun-sense candidate distinction. I want that day. It matters to me," she says. "I could not believe more to my core that this is a nonpartisan issue."

But for her, it's also about a culture dominated by certain stereotypes.

"There's a nuance here that we can't quite figure out a language to talk about," she says. "In America, in Virginia, in the South, we have somehow taken the idea of gun culture and conflated it with being an American, being a man."

She knows that the suicide rate among white middle-aged men, especially in rural areas, is on the rise. According to the National American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, white males accounted for nearly 70 percent of deaths by suicide in 2017, and just more than half the people who died by suicide that year used firearms.

"There's something going on with the culture of masculinity in America that we need to talk about," she says. "There's something there rooted in injustice."

Robyn lost her own father to suicide 12 years ago. He didn't use a gun, but she says societal expectations "ate away at him for years," and ultimately got the best of him.

"He was very much a man who was told not to cry, not to emote and to provide for your family and never be vulnerable," she says. "When my husband and I had our son, it was kind of this opportunity for me to think about what it means to raise a boy, particularly what it means to raise a boy in America."

Red flag laws are at the top of Robyn's legislative priority list. A study published in the Psychiatric Services medical journal in 2018 reveals that suicide rates in Connecticut and Indiana have decreased by 14 and 7.5 percent, respectively, since the states implemented extreme risk laws. Here in Virginia, even if she can't change the way her friends vote, she hopes she can at least change the narrative.

"At the end of the day, if you're not going to vote the way I want you to vote, if we're not going to agree on anything, my god, I hope you'll tell me if you're feeling suicidal and I'll hold your gun for a little while." **S**

SCOTT ELMQUIST

Members of Moms Demand Action protest gun violence on Tuesday, July 9, the day of the special session on new gun legislation that Republicans pushed until after the November election.