



# PUSHING PAST PAIN

Sirena Harrell and reporter Nyamekye Daniel share triumph after tragedy

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Sirena Harrell has a reason to celebrate. Through the tragic death of her teen son, she stayed in college and graduated with a 3.7 GPA earning her associate's degree in English education.

Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell



When Sirena Harrell held her baby boy for the first time, she felt what she called, "genuine" love.

As a mother at 17, Harrell said she found the purpose for her life at that moment.

"I felt like I grew up with him. I saw myself evolve from a teenaged mother to womanhood," she said. "He was my best friend, my very first best friend."



Fifteen years later, Harrell's best friend, Isaiah "Zay" Solomon was gone, ripped from her world, killed by the bullets of a faceless gunman.

Mentally, she felt immobilized by pain and shock. Yet, Harrell found the courage to return to school, only a week after her son was killed.

Harrell graduated from Miami Dade College on Saturday with honors. Before the graduation ceremony, Harrell described her accomplishment as being "surreal."

She hadn't quite accepted the moment in her life as reality. "Because of everything that has transpired, this is a blur," she said.

I remembered seeing Harrell on the news after her son Zay was killed while attending his cousin's wake near West Little



Sirena Harrell's son was killed while attending his cousin's wake August 2016.

Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell

River. I was reminded it was August 2016 when she and I spoke.

I could not look into Harrell's eyes because I knew her pain too well. I envisioned her broken spirit as it crawled through the weight of the boulders on her heart, as she stood up for the son on TV, begging for his killer to come forward.

Ten years earlier, my first son, Dakari was also killed. Seeing Harrell's eyes meant I would have to connect to the truth — that the most precious moment ever in ourselves had been snatched away from us for eternity.

When I called Harrell to report on the story of her graduation, I was excited about her win, but as I dialed her phone number, I remembered the delicacy of the situation.

"I am going to ask you about your son," I said, "is that OK?"

Harrell had high hopes for her Zay. He was a Black boy in America, and she wanted to make sure she raised him right, she said.

Zay was a sweet little boy who was connected at the hip to his mother. But with puberty, came a different Zay, a quiet but funny teenager who loved to play sports and who "tested" her all the time.

He wanted to play in the NFL. His mom suggested a backup plan, so he chose a career as an FBI agent. As a single mother, Harrell knew she had to be deliberate in how she raised Zay.

Harrell taught him to be respectful, how to communicate with girls and how to survive in society, a society where so much is pitted against a young Black male. All of that work, she said, was in vain.

Instead of leaving her house to venture out into his own life as an adult, he left that day in August and never returned. Now his body lays in a wooden box, his killer still on the streets.

She was so lost in denial after his death that her fiancé had to make all the funeral arrangements. The death of a child is a traumatic event that has long-term effects on the lives of parents, according to a study by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics.

Harrell suffers from anxiety, as hard as it is for me to put it on paper, 12 years later, I still get anxious, too. Some days at school were tough.

Harrell said she would sit in class in a daze, taking the occasional restroom breaks to scream and cry before returning to class.

As I wrote her story, I took five or six trips to the bathroom to cry for my little Dakari. For years, I suffered in silence — too guilt- and grief-stricken to talk about my pain.

I admired Harrell's valor. She talked openly over the phone about Zay as she sat in the parking lot of a shopping mall. She was hoping to find a dress for her 8-year-old daughter, Kiori, for the graduation ceremony the following day.

"It's still tough, every second is a different emotion for me," she said. I knew. It could be unbearable. Physically intolerable. "You are doing good, you really are," I told Harrell.

Dakari was not killed under the same circumstances as Zay. My boyfriend at the time was watching my son.



Sirena Harrell's son was killed while attending his cousin's wake August 2016.  
Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell

When he brought him back to my house, Dakari was not breathing. He was dead.

Until this day, I don't know what really happened to my first-born baby. I don't have closure. My ex confessed to accidentally allowing him to fall.

He stood trial for second-degree murder and child abuse. The jury found him not guilty.

Dakari's father was killed when he was 10 months old due to gun violence. Only a toddler, Dakari served as my protector.

He would help me carry groceries and help feed his little sister. As I write my body shakes, tears flowing freely. I feel people will judge me again; they judged me before.

I didn't want to live it again. My editor said push through.

Some see me as a failure of a mother, even my mother. The defense attorney called me everything, but a child of God. And I felt like it. I did not protect my child. I could not.

Back then, I found myself stuck in a mental hole. I wanted to go back in time. I know Harrell has dark days. Her parenting skills were also judged.

If she tried to pick up life's pieces she was told to stand still; if she stood still, she was told to do something.

We have the same heartache. We both pretend that we are OK. She copes through writing and performing spoken word, speaking out against gun violence and through fellowship with other survivors, in Parents of Murdered Kids.

As a result of her son's murder, Harrell made the decision to change her focus of study from dental hygiene to education because she wants to make a difference in the classroom with "students who are like her Zay."

Going back to class, was "tough, and that's an understatement," said Harrell. But, she returned for lost Zay and her daughter Kiori. She always stressed the importance of education to her children, and even though Zay was gone, her daughter is still watching.

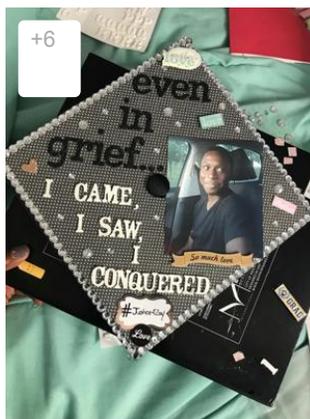
My daughter became the fuel that kept me going. She gave me the will to survive even though I felt like an empty shell or wanted to be one. A mother's love is so deep that sometimes we, as women, forget about ourselves, said Harrell.

"I feel like time is suppose to stop—like I shouldn't be accomplishing this without him," she said. Harrell also added as Black women, "we don't have room to even grieve. We are conditioned to be that strong backbone, that no matter what we have to find a way to get over it."

I tell Harrell, you have to "shine in your moment."

The woman who defines herself as an activist, a mother, a fiancé and a victim crossed the stage on Saturday morning at the University of Miami Watsco Center, wearing one of the two graduation caps that she got custom-made.

"Some women fear the fire. Some women simply become it," is written on one of the caps with an



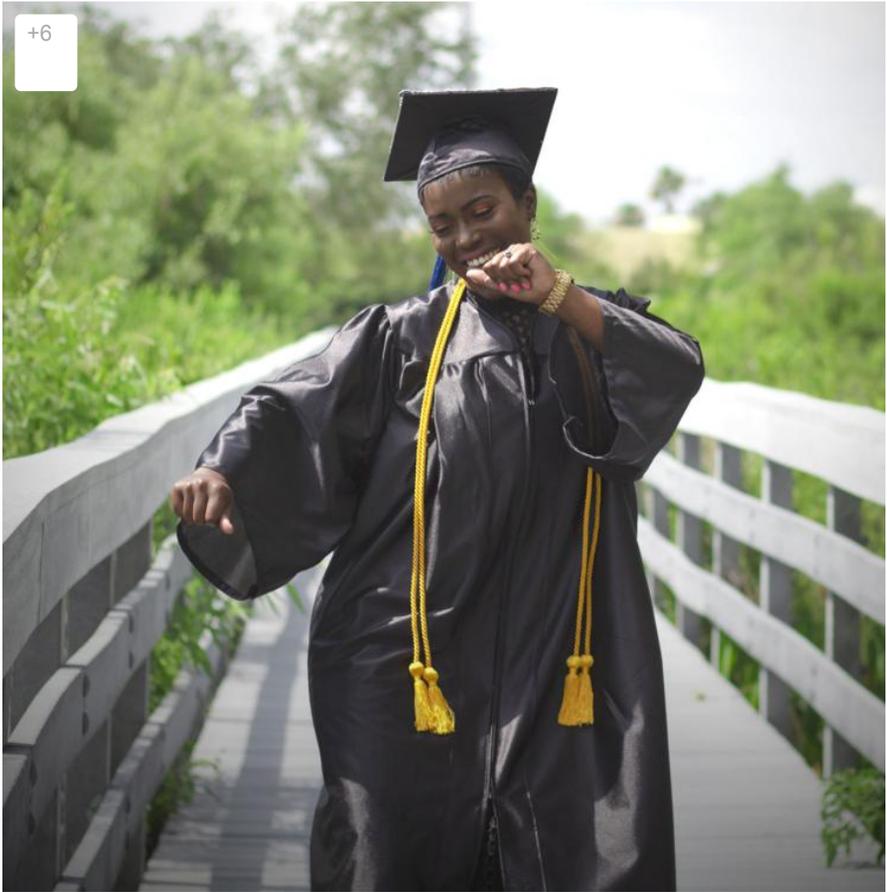
Sirena Harrell's son was killed while attending his cousin's wake in August 2016. Despite the tragedy, Harrell graduated from Miami Dade College on May 5 with honors. In this photo, she holds a graduation cap with her son's picture and the words, "Even in grief...I came, I saw, I conquered."

Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell



In this May 3, 2017 photo, Miami Times reporter Nyamekye Daniel celebrates her graduation from Florida International University, 11 years after her son Dakari was killed. Daniel talks about living with the pain of the death of her child in this story.

Photo by Koli Shot Me



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Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell



Sirena Harrell is wearing a graduation cap with an illustration of her daughter, fiancé and son. Her son, Isaiah "Zay" Solomon, was shot and killed in August 2016. Harrell, went back to class a week after his funeral. She graduated from Miami Dade College on May 5.

Photos courtesy of Sirena Harrell

illustration of her children and fiancé. The second cap has a picture of Zay with a caption, "Even in grief...I came, I saw, I conquered."