

Kids at War

Letter to the Youth

I'm 28, I feel like I'm 38. I been through hell and back. Like most of y'all that shit started way before I ever had a choice. I can't tell you about college or marriage, politics, but I could tell you about the streets. I been a part of all of it. I seen all of it. Honestly all it did to me was leave me tired. I had to fight in every aspect of life. That's rule #1 in the streets is you gonna have to fight. And it's not always gonna be physical, in fact it's hardly physical. You could fight once a week, every few days physically and it still doesn't even come close to how much you will have to fight mentally. Every single day you will fight. Every day you have to worry about surviving.

When you're breaking the law to survive you're at war with your country, you're at war with the streets and you're at war with yourself. Some of the realest shit happens in the street, shit that you can't even fathom, shit that can make or break you. You lose people in the streets. I lost four best friends. Not just regular friends, four people I would have died for. I lost brothers. People glorify that but in real life that shit hurts. In real life that shit changes you, not for the better. That shit makes you different. Plays with your soul.

You lose people in other ways. In the streets people will cross you, switch on you because they trying to survive too. And sometimes when two people are tryin to survive in the streets next to each other, his survival might not co-exist with yours. That's rule #2: survival of the fittest, all bets are off when you tryin to survive. People are always gonna do what they got to do when it comes to tryina survive.

Commonwealth Vs. the Streets

Growing up in America you expect your government, your state, your city, to make sure you have what you need to be safe and to survive. That you have food and shelter. In these urban communities, they're over-run by drugs, gangs, violence, poverty, abandoned buildings and low income housing with slum lords who are not

maintaining proper living circumstances. *We're looking to our government for answers and not finding any.*

Generation after generation is being raised in less than humane living environments. Walking out your front door and steppin into drug-infested streets, with drugs and turf wars going on all around you. Your friends, family and neighbors are being slain in the streets. Waking up to gun shots and police lights and sirens. After living day after day in these relentless circumstances it's next to impossible to not fall victim or become a part of your surroundings or succumb to your living conditions.

As human beings, our first instinct is to survive. In Alaska you have to stay warm to survive. In Africa or other humid areas you would have to stay cool and hydrated. Depending on your environment, you need certain necessities to survive. In the army or military they train you in combat, give you weapons, teach you how to use them so you can survive in a war-like environment.

Growing up in these urban communities, we're living in extreme poverty. Everyday from childhood to adulthood you become used to the drugs and violence, it becomes a part of you. In different circumstances you may have to use drugs or violence to survive your environment. You might have to carry a gun to protect yourself because the government can't protect you from their own city streets. Worse, you may have to use that weapon to protect your home, family, or belongings, because you're trying to prohibit that unsafe environment from coming through your front doors.

Me personally, I grew up with drug addicts for parents. Crack hit my community in the 80s and 90s causing an epidemic that we still fight thirty years later. Generation after generation has been battling the effects and aftermath of the drug epidemic. For some reason crack was mostly in urban communities. A lot of times drugs make you do criminal things because you're desperate. People in these urban communities are robbing, stealing, killing, using and selling drugs and dying in abundance in set locations and nothing is being done. Looking to our government for answers and not finding any. Instead they locking us up. We're met with police brutality. From trying to survive in the controlled environments they put us in.

If they didn't have control over the urban community it would've likely spread throughout the whole city, instead it's being contained to just certain neighborhoods.

They're ok with it as long as it's not happening in their neighborhoods. They separated it, in certain parts of the city, or away from the suburbs. Suburban communities are policed better, lit better, valued differently. When violence spills into suburban areas it's met with force, covered urgently and publicly—sometimes even nationally.

The quadruple murder in Idaho was covered by every news station across the country, every day asking for help until the killer was caught, making the very public statement saying that these types of things will not be tolerated. But they're tolerated in my community all the time. That type of thing happens almost on a regular basis and its being swept under the rug. We need help, we need resources, we need recognition. *Our government is failing our community, leaving us to self-destruct.*

By the time I was twelve years old I was getting locked up. By the time I was fourteen I was part of a gang and by the time I turned eighteen I was shot. I went to jail for a shooting at eighteen. I was back in jail at twenty-one for possession of a firearm. Multiple family members have been shot, multiple friends have been killed or died from firearms. So many names. These were just the people in my life, my friends, family, neighbors, who have all fallen victim to our environment. The government, the Commonwealth, doesn't have an answer for any of it. I see the young kids coming up, the generation behind me starting to become products of our environment, trying to survive with a kill-or-be-killed mentality. I see that the cycle only continues, with nothing in the way to prevent any of it.

Being raised in poverty, crack-infested neighborhoods has a way of hardening you to the core. We're society's misfits, we come from the gutter. You and I live in two different worlds. What's normal to you is anything but to me. What's normal to me is a thing that you couldn't even fathom. Where I'm from somebody being murdered in the streets is normal. You hear these gruesome stories of someone being shot seven, eight times and left to die as roadkill. You hear about people running up in someone's house and tying their family up, robbin them for their drugs and money and having to decide if they have to kill the whole family or not. The shit you hear in the hood be the wildest shit but it be happening. I seen friends turn to enemies. I seen family kill family. Nowadays they wanna get up on their victim to make sure they die. It's a cold world. The shit we see in the hood be worse than the shit they seeing in them wars. They're

training for battles, being prepped on what to expect. Not us, we're seeing this shit walking out our front doors. This shit happen to our families and neighbors.

So who really got PTSD?

They have sympathy for our soldiers but no sympathy for our soldiers. They look at us like we're doing it to ourselves. Like this is our choice to be livin like this. We're traumatized. Our brains ain't wired the same as y'all's. Humans, animals, we all have this thing called adaptation. Where we naturally adapt to our environments. Well our environment is war and drugs. That's why all our community has to offer is violence, drug dealers and drug addicts, cause that's all we seen everyday for years, we grew up in it.

The 80s and 90s were crack era, most of us grew up with parents who were involved in some way by the drug culture. Parents who sold everything in our house to our friend's parents down the street cause his dad sells dope instead of using it. You know what it's like to walk into your friend house and see your TV in his house? Or comin home from school to watch TV and there's a big ass empty space where the TV suppose to be? Or seeing your mom sellin pussy, turnin tricks, your dad the one who's selling her?

We raised with hate and envy from the very start. The only thing that easy to get in the hood is guns and drugs, that's the only thing that's on every street. There ain't no policing, the police got a natural hate for us because they way we're perceived. You know how many times I heard, "it's our own fault we're like this" and "we do this to ourselves"? They judge us by the way we dress and talk. We all do it honestly. It's just way too dangerous when they do it.

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I been selling drugs since I was 14. I sold every drug I can get my hands on but my source of income was crack cocaine. Even though I started selling drugs at 14, my life was effected by drugs long before I even knew what they were. My mom and dad were hostages to crack cocaine. I was taken from my mother, separated from my

brothers when I was 4 years old. DCF deemed my mother unfit to care for me and my two older brothers. It would be a whole year before my mother got me and my brothers back.

My dad was incarcerated when I was born and when I was separated from my family. After my mother got us back, she was clean off drugs for seven years, the only time I remember my family being somewhat normal. My mom used to take us to her Narcotics Anonymous meetings and I would play outside. Sometimes I would sit in and listen to these fucked up stories not really comprehending that drugs were the cause of them. My mom ended up being clean for 7 years. That was the normalest my family has ever been. The only time my mom had a job, the only time we had a real Christmas, the only time my home felt like a home.

That ended the day my dad showed back up. I was too young to know what was going on but my mom started acting different. She started being in and out the house a lot, she would disappear for hours at a time. She stopped paying attention to us and she stopped keeping up on the house. Stopped cleaning, cooking, doing laundry. Most importantly she stopped caring. I use to be out at all hours of the night hanging out. I would see my mom and dad walk by. They wouldn't even notice me or didn't care enough if they did. I was too embarrassed and ashamed to notice them in front of people. They would walk by and I would act like I didn't even know them.

I met my dad when I was 9, or at least that's the first time I could put his face to the word 'dad.' When he showed up, things started to change at home. Him and my mom would run in and out the house all day and night for hours at a time. At 9 I still didn't really understand what was going on. I just knew that my dad was around and I thought it was a good thing. All my friends had dads, my brothers have a different dad so when we all got taken they went with their dad. He would come around once in a while to pick them up and do things with them. So I thought my dad being around was good. He was funny, he was hip, I looked up to him instantly. I just didn't know what I was looking up to.

After a while things started getting worse and worse. We started moving around a lot, only stayin somewhere for a couple years and then movin. We were homeless a few times, staying with one of my mom's friends. My dad started hitting my mom, she

would have black eyes and busted lips. We never really had food. Sometimes we wouldn't have lights or hot water. I would shower at the neighbor's house. We would turn the oven on and leave it open to warm the house. I barely had clean clothes, having to wear the same shirt or socks for days. Growing up like that put me in survival mode.

I didn't get to go back to school shopping. I had to find my own way to eat throughout the days. I stole snacks out the store when I was hungry, my parents taught me how. They would go in wearing these oversized coats, sometimes I would go with them. I never looked at it like there was something wrong with it. I was in survival mode, we all were. There was times when we had nowhere to go and we'd stay with my mom's friends. Even though it was rough I knew my mom loved us. She just was addicted to drugs and that came before everything else. Getting high was her first priority, everything else came second. I don't blame her. I love my mom but she forced me to go into survival mode.

One night I was sleeping on the couch. I had school in the morning. I heard my parents come in the back door, they were whispering. They went out the front door. I didn't think anything of it, cause they do shit like that all the time. A couple minutes later someone started banging on the back door. It sounded like they were using something to bang on it with cause the sound was extra loud. I was only 12 so I was scared. In the house it was me, my brother and my mom's friend who was living with us at the time. I went and got my brother to see who it was. When he opened the door a crackhead was at the door with a rock in her hand, lookin for my mom and dad, sayin that they robbed her for \$40 and left her waitin on the back porch. We tried to get her to leave but she wouldn't. My mom's friend tried to force her to leave. They started fighting and my brother pulled them apart and pushed her out the backdoor. She called the cops and said that everyone in the house robbed and assaulted her. They charged all of us. That was my first serious charge. I was twelve years old and got committed to DYS on assault and battery charges. I got committed to 12-24 months in juvey before I even had a choice. That was my introduction to gladiator school.

Being locked up changed me. It made me grow up faster and it made me look at my family different. I was the only one who went to jail, nobody helped or protected me. I came home with pain in my heart and dreams in my eyes. That was the wrong mixture.

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When I started selling drugs my brothers were already in the game. My friends were either in the game or trying to be. Where I'm from everyone has drugs, it's not about how to find them it's about who has the lowest price.

I say 85% of the crime that goes around in the city is rooted behind drugs. Not just violent but all crimes. Car theft, breaking and entering, assaults, threats, possession of drugs and firearms, and murder, even neglect. Most times when kids are taken from their families drugs has something to do with it. Drugs turned Pittsfield into poverty, into a war zone. People come from all the bordering cities and states to sell and buy drugs. The same way Berkshire County is a tourist county for the wealthy and elite, it's a tourist county for the underworld. People hear about the money that is out there and come from all over to sell drugs.

I lost friends and family all different ages from overdose. I sold drugs to restaurant owners, auto mechanics, school teachers, old ladies, young teens. Drugs don't have any rules. It don't matter if you come from a good home or a good community, it's all the same. I sold drugs for so long that it became a part of who I am. I can't work a regular job cause the money is too slow and I don't have any trades. I don't know how to work. I was my own boss. I came to work whenever I wanted for however long I wanted. I made however much money I wanted. I could choose to stay out and keep makin money. I don't know how to budget because I never had to, I would save for whatever I needed. It was really that simple.

But I lost my soul, I seen people overdose in front of me. I seen people taking from their families, their kids. They would bring in TVs, play stations, rent their car, rent their house, whatever to get high. They even went as far as selling their self. I sold drugs to my mom and dad, I sold to my aunts and uncles, my cousins, nobody was off

limits. It wasn't even just about the money. I knew they were gonna get high regardless, spend the money regardless, so it made no difference if I was the one who sold it to them or not. Least if I had the money it would go to our family, that's how I looked at it.

One thing about people on drugs, no matter what you say or do they won't stop until they're ready. I seen my mom do drugs for years. There were times shit got so bad she would steal from my brother to get high. And one day she just stopped, no meetings no help, she was just ready to be done. After all those years she had enough. My dad gets high to this day. My dad would do anything to feed his habit and he's in and out of jail because of it. I was in jail with my dad on several occasions, we even shared a cell. I got a son now and I vow to never fail him the way my dad failed me.

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We all have our own free will; the ability to make our own choices in life. A lot of time the environment you're in and the people you're around have a strong influence on the decisions that you make. There's a saying that they use in recovery, "If you hang around a barbershop, you're gonna get a haircut." Being constantly reminded of something can have a big impact on your decision making.

Well, growing up in an environment that is crime-ridden usually breeds more crime. We're being raised in these neighborhoods that are drug-infested and crime-infested and they're surprised that the majority of what comes out of these neighborhoods are drug dealers and drug addicts. Then they lock us up and leave us there. There ain't no help. There's all of this gun violence because as soon as you step out your front door you're in a war zone. People are being slain in the streets, people you grew up with. People that you seen everyday for years. We've all come to realize that bullets don't have no names. Kids, women, innocent bystanders are being found victim to gun violence. As a community we're tired of being killed. We're tired of losing people to senseless acts of violence.

As human beings our first instinct is survival. You ask the majority of young black men, they don't feel safe in their neighborhood. So they're carrying guns because they're the only ones that are capable of protecting their self, 24 hours a day,



7 days a week. As a community we're fed up. When people come around shooting, you shoot back because your life depends on it. It doesn't feel like you have too many options, it happens so frequently.

### Commonwealth: Kids at War

Ever since getting locked up when I was 12, I been making wrong choices. When you come from what we come from, sometimes the only options on the table are bad decisions. You can step out your front door and see violence and despair, addicts tryin to chase a high by any means necessary. Kids runnin around with weapons because there's a war zone going on right in our community. The system is failing us. We're stuck in a cycle. We're raising our kids in poverty, crime and drug infested communities, expecting them to navigate through it all. Yeah, there be a few who can and make it out, but there are hundreds that aren't. We're failing them in the community and failing them in court.

Of course they're carryin guns when they go to sleep hearin gun shots and sirens or wakin up to the news of their neighbors being victims of gun violence. Them their self being a victim of gun violence. As humans our first instinct is to survive, and that's what they're out there trying to do. Yeah, there's a handful out there who don't wanna change or aren't ready to. But there are more who want to change but don't know how, don't see any options. All of us are so used to seeing gun violence that we're desensitized to it. It's so common that it's a part of life, no different than buyin a car or goin to school. In our community, gun violence is looked at as a badge of honor. Like in the war you earn your stripes the same way.

Our kids are growin up being taught that and all we have to offer them for a rebuttal is jail time. Time in a cage with hardened criminals away from family and society. To come home worse off than they started. They're handing out years but really handing out a life sentence. After you spend 5, 10, 15, 20 years in prison, you come home and you're socially awkward and don't know how to transition back into society. You come home late 20s or 30, sometimes even 40s, and you have no work experience. You have all this pressure to perform cause of your age or family, maybe

parole, and a lot of times it's too overwhelming. Being in jail is easier. Doing things to go back to jail is even easier.

There has to be a way to pay your debt back to society besides spending years in a cage, treated like an animal, surrounded by animals, slowly turning into the animal they made you out to be. But from the very beginning we were destined to fail. Growing up in an environment where shooting and killing is normal, being shot is normal. More of my friends have been shot than went to college. Growing up like that is traumatizing. We're walking around with PTSD, untreated and constantly surrounded by violence. Everyday that goes by gets harder. As you get older, there's more pressure to perform, to choose a path, to find a way out of the war zone. Pressure to survive, to not die in these streets by a rival neighborhood or by your own neighborhood.

There's pressure to do the right thing and still somehow be accepted by your peers who hold your life on their waist. We're fighting uphill battles and it's steep. There's no help. The only thing they have to offer is a million years in jail or prison. You become a product of your environment. Like a living creature, adapting to your surroundings. And all the Commonwealth can do is declare war: Commonwealth vs. the Streets.

## Lost in the Streets

When I say lost, I'm pertaining to the life style I was living. I was surrounded by darkness, feeling like there was no hope for change. Looking back into my childhood wondering how all these years later my life ended up like this. I felt like I was coming to a dead end and the only way out was to turn around and go back. I lost myself. Morals, integrity, honor, and loyalties were all being questioned. I always prided myself on being humble and level-headed. I surrounded myself with all the wrong people. The closer I got with them, the more I lost who I was. The more I started giving into everything, and the farther away I got from what I stood for.

I had four friends I looked at as brothers. We broke a lot of bread together and for the most part we were loyal to each other, at least in the beginning. We all came from nothing and were struggling on our own paths, going nowhere fast. We sold drugs

to survive. Not cause we had to but because it was all we knew. We been to jail several times. Nobody wants to go to jail but we accepted it, we knew what comes with selling drugs. We knew the consequences if the law caught up with us. But like so many others, our today problems took priority over tomorrow's problems.

People always say that life is hard or unfair, and it is, but a lot of times we create our own problems. We make our own life harder than it has to be. Self pity usually blinds us to the fact that we're doing it to ourselves. When you're hustling, there are two outcomes, not if but when you lose. The first is the law. Ending up in jail is a price that doesn't add up to the money and the time you put in hustling. Those years lost are priceless. Specially if you're a parent. The second outcome is the streets. Losing in the streets is permanent. I have a few friends who were murdered in the streets over the drug game. Most murders are drug or money related. Nowadays an altercation between two people always ends in gun violence. People carry their guns like it was their cell phone. It's frowned upon in the streets to be outside without a gun on you. That where the sayin "no lackin" comes from.

Kiki, Thugga, Half and Sheek. We started to hustle together. We would link up every morning and hustle all day until late at night. Seven days a week, 365 days a year. Yeah we did other shit too but it all revolved around hustling. I was in a long term relationship and we were expecting a child. Instead of making me wanna give up the streets, that just put more pressure on me to perform. To go harder. It made me feel like I had a responsibility to provide a better life for my family. But by tryin harder to do that with hustling it just created an even worse environment for my family. The deeper I went the more it hurt my family. The police following my car. Pulling me over with my family in the car, making smart remarks, giving my girl at the time a hard time. People talking about me on Facebook, the whole community talking behind my back because I was a drug dealer. What I looked at as a way out, others looked at like I was a predator preyin on the weak, and in a way I was. I was usin someone else's addiction for financial gain. They were weak for the drugs. Me knowin that, I used it to my advantage. Never intentionally but that's what it was. In my eyes I was just tryin to survive.

Growin up I didn't have a lot of options. I didn't know how to work, I didn't know how to be a carpenter or a mechanic, I didn't know how to wake up and go to work at seven in the morning, I didn't know how to manage a paycheck. But I watched my parents get high since I was born. I seen all the neighborhood crack heads in and out of my house. I seen all the neighborhood drug dealers in and out of my house too. So when it came time to make money I didn't have anybody putting in a reference for me, but I did have all the dopeboys tellin me to come get money. I did know all the cliental from my mom and dad's dealing, so when it came time it was the natural thing for me to do. Plus I was broke as fuck, stealin from stores to stop my hunger, rockin my friend's hand-me downs, wearin the same socks for 5, 6 days straight cause no one did laundry at my house. I didn't grow up with rules or a curfew. I did what I wanted to, not by choice. I did what I had to. No one made sure I went to school in the morning, no one drove me or picked me up. And usually when I got home no one would be there anyway.

I seen people overdose and die right in front of me, then be mad that you Narcan them cause you wasted their high. I seen someone die of a bad stamp of dope and once the word got out that someone died from that stamp everyone started comin around asking for that same stamp. They actually want the stamp that kills people because they know it's strong dope. I'm 28. I started selling crack at 15. One thing about drugs are they don't discriminate. It doesn't just stay in the hood. That shit is everywhere. I sold drugs to school teachers, lawyers, business owners, rich families. Kids are the main ones.

## Gun Violence

I'm from Pittsfield. I grew up hearing gun shots and living in the aftermath of gun violence. The environment I lived in was survival of the fittest. Kill or be killed. In my community, gun violence is more common than people going to college. I personally have more friends that been shot than went to college. All of them are felons. All of them have been impacted by gun violence.

By the time I was 14, all the people around me carried guns. It was normal to us. Probably the same way that going to college is normal to you. In some communities going to college is a sure thing. Maybe both your parents went to college. Maybe your older brother and sister went to college before you. Maybe they put money away for you so you could go to college. Well in some families there's no college, no funds, just a history of gun violence. My dad was a gangster, my mom a drug addict.

Actually, none of my friends went to college outside of community college. And even then only for a little while. I called my friends and family to tell them that Biden is paying up to \$10,000 of your debt if you owe for financial aid. We all owe money including myself but never actually went to college or had no real intentions of going. We signed up for a check from financial aid and quit after we got it. None of us really thought we could actually go to college.

My first encounter with gun violence, I think I was three or four years old. My mom was dating a street dude. He had his gun hidden in the bathroom. My brother found it and was pointing it at me, pretending to shoot me. He thought it was a toy gun. They walked in on him pointing it at me.

I got shot once in the leg when I was 18. I thought of it as a badge of approval, like that made me certified. But really I barely thought about it, it barely even crosses my mind. Sometimes I even forget that I've been shot because really it was no big deal, it wasn't fatal. I was in the hospital for about 4 hours, they patched me up, put staples in my knee, gave me Vicodin and a date to show up for leg therapy. I never went and the staples came out on their own. I look back now and see how wrong my way of thinking was. How is being shot no big deal?

When I was 21, I was locked up for possession of a firearm. It was my second gun case. I was serving two and a half years. I had almost two years in when my brother got shot. My mom called up to the jail. I was sittin in the dayroom watching ESPN and the C.O. (Correctional Officer) called me to the desk. He told me to call home, it was an emergency. When I called they told me my brother was shot in the neck and my lil cousin got shot in the head. That neither one was likely to make it.

They had just left a candle lighting for our friend C who had died two years prior to gun violence. He was in his early 20s when he died, and left behind two sons. We go

to his mom's house every year on the day he passed to light candles for him. They had left her house to go to the store, and were pulling out of a Cumberland Farms gas station when someone open fired on their vehicle. Someone had followed them and tried to kill them.

I locked in my cell and cried. I prayed for my brother and for my lil cousin. I didn't find out until the next day that my lil cousin only got grazed in the head and that my brother was stable. I couldn't visit him, talk to him, nothing. I couldn't be there for my mom cause I was in jail. My brother was in the hospital for like a week, his daughter almost lost her dad. She wasn't 5 years old and had to see her dad with a bullet hole in his neck. My mom had one son in jail for possession of a firearm and one in the hospital for being shot by one. My mom, my nieces, they were innocent but still victims.

In the end of 2018, I lost one of my best friends. He was also shot in the neck. His was fatal, he died on the scene. He had a daughter on the way that he never got to meet. Or I should say she will never get to meet her dad. He didn't just die, and that was it. He was a son, a brother, a father. His kids will forever have to live with the fact that they lost their dad to gun violence. Long live M. He was 31.

In 2019, my friend was shot leaving a party in North Adams. He was hit in both of his legs. One of the bullets broke his leg. I drove him to the hospital in Pittsfield, 25 minutes away, while he almost bled out in my back seat. I drove doing 80mph the whole way. He kept passing out. I had to talk to him the whole way, tellin him to stay awake, don't go to sleep, while I was on the phone with his family tellin them to meet me at the hospital, that he's been shot. That was my best friend. I was scared for his life. Not knowin if I made the right decision by driving him to Pittsfield instead of North Adams, but North Adams doesn't take care of big situations. They either drive you to Pittsfield or fly you to Bay State. They told him if he got there any later he might have bled out or had to get his leg amputated. He survived though and he's been good, made a full recovery. He was shot seven times a year and a half later. Nine times total on two different occasions.

That's how it works. It's random for the most part. J was shot once in the chest by a small caliber gun and died. He bled out in a snow storm by his self. My brother

was shot in the neck and drove his self to the hospital. My lil cousin has been shot multiple times on numerous occasions. Miggy was shot twice in the chest by the people that came to help him. The people that took an oath to serve and protect. They blame it on his mental health. If he had mental health problems then he needed their help more than ever. Instead they murdered him in front of his girlfriend.

These were a few, not all, a few situations in my life that happened to my immediate friends and family. Every last person in my community has their own experience with gun violence. In some of those stories they weren't the victims, they were the shooters. My lil cousin was sentenced to 18—life for 1st degree murder. He went to prison when he was 18 for killing someone he played with when they were in diapers.

You and I live in the same county, but in completely different worlds. Pittsfield is 25 minutes from Williams College. When M was killed it was 9am. Some of you were probably on your way to class and didn't know someone was being slain in the streets 20 minutes away. You would've never knew or ever even heard about it. People being killed or shot and you waking up and going to school not hearing anything about it. When colleges are selling you on their school they fail to mention the people that are dying all around it. I drove to Williamstown common every morning. Drove past Williams College to take the back way to Pittsfield for the past eight or nine years. I've never been inside the college. I seen you guys walking to and from class, but never met any of you. Two different worlds going on just down the road from each other.

Pittsfield's not Chicago but even one person killed is too much. All of Pittsfield isn't bad, there's a beautiful side and then there's the poverty-crime-infested side. Violence really comes in all shapes and size. It effects all parties involved differently. Gun violence should never be normal, but for some people it is.

To this day I been suffering from losses due to gun violence. I lost friends I hung out with every single day. I have PTSD. It's hard for me to trust people, certain places or situations. I'm aware of my surroundings 100% of the time. I have dreams of being shot. I been victim and I been a victimizer. Sometimes it feels like they're hiding gun violence, making it worse in our community by ignoring it. Pretending it's not

happening. They are intentionally keeping those worlds separate—yours and mine. It's our job to merge them, so that it can't be ignored or hidden anymore.