

NATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE FOR MURDER VICTIMS



Volunteers with ROC the Peace read hundreds of names during a National Day of Remembrance for Murder Victims ceremony on Wednesday.
 PHOTOS BY KAYLA CANNE/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Families of gun violence share loss, hope

Kayla Canne Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The stories shared at a memorial service for homicide victims Wednesday were all too familiar to the crowd that gathered downtown despite the drizzly, gray Rochester skies. ● “Days like this...,” Wanda Ridgeway started to say before trailing off in her thoughts. ● “It’s hard,” someone from the crowd responded. “It’s hard.” ● Sept. 25 is the National Day of Remembrance for Murder Victims each year – or, as some put it that night, a chance for members of this wretched “club of hurt” to gather in their shared grief.

Danita Forney clutches a photo of her son, Da'Marri Shaw, as she talks about the boy. Da'Marri was killed 16 years ago when he was 15 years old.



Rochester remembers those lost to gun violence

Sage burned in the early evening air around the Liberty Pole, an attempt at cleansing and healing. Families — mostly mothers, aunts, sisters and female cousins — reclaimed the names of loved ones lost to gun violence. The stories shared were all too familiar.

Danita Forney spoke of her son Da'Marri Shaw.

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She hit a gut-wrenching milestone last year: Her son has now been gone longer than he was alive. Da'Marri was killed 16 years ago when he was just 15 years old. Forney has a large photo of him on her bedroom wall. She looks at it every day and thinks of an alternate reality where he would come home safe – or at least a world in which she got to say goodbye.

Vicki Lamar lost her son Mark Smith three years ago.

His girlfriend was pregnant at the time and gave birth to a boy Mark has never met. Lamar's grandson is now starting to ask questions: Father's Day passes without a dad to celebrate and on the boy's birthday, his dad isn't there. Lamar said she brings him to this

spot, the Liberty Pole, under the twinkling lights crawling upward. "Look up at the sky," she tells him, "because your Daddy is right there."

Christina Morris' grief is more raw: Her cousin Phylicia Council was killed in the mass shooting at Maplewood Park two months ago.

Morris said she can't move past the resentment that Phylicia died alone. The family thought she was on a path to recovery and was in the hospital parking lot when they heard she was gone. "We would have been there," Morris said. "To let her know and comfort her." Phylicia's mother Stephanie Dinkens held a small tealight candle as the crowd said her daughter's name: Forever Phe.

Sirena Cotton, who organizes the annual ceremony through her organization, ROC the Peace, said she tries to create a space where families can live in their grief without any expectations. There is nothing you can say to someone

who has lost a loved one to help them feel better.

The ceremony allows that grief to be loud and messy in the everlasting search for peace.

Rochester's promise: 'We're not staying in this violence anymore'

On Thursday, Mayor Malik Evans announced some reprieve from this plight: Gun violence continues to fall in Rochester. Shootings are down more than 50% compared to the peak violence seen during the pandemic and continue to lag last year's totals.

"On a human scale that decline cannot be underestimated," Evans said. "That's more than 200 people who did not experience the trauma of gun violence; 200 families who did not experience the trauma of losing a loved one to gun violence or supporting a loved one whose life has been permanently al-

tered by gun violence."

Isaiah Santiago, a city school commissioner, sees a future with more progress.

"There's a promise on Rochester, and that's not violence. That's not poverty. That's not undereducation of our students," Santiago told the families gathered at the ceremony Wednesday. "We need (someone) to stand up and say we're not staying in this slavery anymore. We're not staying in this violence anymore."

A call for freedom under the Liberty Pole.

– *Kayla Canne covers community safety for the Democrat and Chronicle, with a focus on police accountability, government surveillance and how individuals are impacted by violence. Follow her on Twitter @kaylacanne and @bykaylacanne on Instagram. Get in touch at kcanne@gannett.com.*