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## Don't Label Teens Dying in Our Streets – We Mourn Them All

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## Don't Label Teens Dying in Our Streets – We Mourn Them All

**By Laurie Uttich**

UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, September 10, 2014

Michael Brown was “no angel,” *The New York Times* reported, and “a handful” who later “overcame early struggles in school to graduate on time.” Trayvon Martin was a polite, shy volunteer, CNN informed us, while pointing out his 10-day drug-related suspension from school.

Some media sources don't attempt to show both “problems and promise.” Brown was either a “gentle giant” who wanted to start his own business — or a “street thug” who stole cigars and shoved a clerk half his size. Martin was a baby-faced teen who wore preppy Hollister tees — or a pot-smoking, shirtless “gangsta” who wanted a gun. Whatever your opinion, you can find the rhetoric — and photos — to support it.

All of this “news” is supposed to mean something. Depending on the article's intended audience, these characterizations are supposed to make us care less — or more — that two unarmed teenagers were shot in our streets, one recently by a police officer in Missouri and the other two years ago in Florida by a resident of a gated community.

It pains me this even needs to be said, but none of these reports concerning Trayvon's or Brown's “character” are relevant. Two unarmed teenagers were killed for deep-rooted reasons that can't be easily summarized. While we may never learn exactly what transpired, it's clear assumptions made on the teens' appearances at least in part triggered those deadly encounters. And while it may also be true that teens don't carry billboards identifying themselves as armed or not, the key point here remains: two *unarmed teenagers* were killed.

I started to pay attention to the way we categorize tragedies after Trayvon of Miami was shot less than 30 miles from my Central Florida home. The headlines began early on and local reports were simple: “Boy, 17, shot to death in Sanford during ‘altercation,’ police say.”

A few days after the shooting, we were given more detailed accounts about the shooting and about Trayvon. Some were complimentary to his character; some weren’t. Like many, I was frustrated by every new “reveal” about the teenager. “Good” kid or “troubled” kid were just ways to distract us from taking the opportunity to seriously contemplate our country’s persistent racial problems and perceptions, as well as the prevalence of gun violence. (And I couldn’t help reminding anyone who would listen that none of us fits into neat “character” categories.)

Just a couple of months after his death, I noticed another headline: “Mystery Sniper Shoots Honor Student Dead.” There are obvious reasons why this headline received attention — snipers?! — but it was the phrase “honor student” that stopped me. The tragedy was neatly categorized for me, as if the writer had slapped a Post-it on it stating: *This* is a shooting you should care about.

If you Google “Honor Student Shot,” you’ll find millions of hits. Yes, there are repeats and top stories, but the names bleed on, page after heart-breaking page. Some are as close to home for me as Trayvon’s death: “Orange sheriff asks for help to solve honor roll student shooting” in Orlando, and “School security tighter after honor student shot” in Tampa.

Others use students to symbolize all that is lost by violence in our communities, including this tragedy: “Chicago honor student fatally shot a week after performing at Obama’s inauguration.” Hadiya Pendleton, a 15-year-old girl, was killed when a gang member opened fire in a park. She died the day before the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings on gun violence.

Most of the students I read about were unarmed high school or college students; the majority of them just teenagers. They were shot by gang members and relatives, school

shooters and security officers, boyfriends and home invaders. All of them shared the same “honor student” headline. Look, the media tells us, a kid — a *good* kid — has been killed and all of us should mourn.

The media isn’t wrong about that. We *should* mourn. We should weep for our world and the young people who were on their way to change it. It is not all right. It will never be all right. *Teenagers were killed.*

But a headline is not a eulogy. A headline’s purpose should be to help us to determine what’s important in a news event. And while I realize the constant assault of our newsfeeds leads to higher-stake headlines, what’s important is that a teenager — not an “honor student” — *has been killed.*

This distinction — “honor student” or “troubled teen” or a combination of both — should make us as uncomfortable as the defense attorney who asks a rape victim what she was wearing. Turtleneck or tube top? Hoodie or honor cords? It does not matter. *An unarmed teenager has been killed.*

Let me be clear: I understand honor students have rightfully earned their distinctions, and some of them have dodged bullets on their way to Title I schools to do so. Far too many children are still being marginalized — and we stand in awe of those who refuse to fail. When they are gunned down, we need to hold vigils, offer memorials, write eulogies. We need to hold their lives up to the light and shine their reflections on those who follow.

But we can no longer afford to label our country’s children. They are being shot. They are dying. And they are *all* our children whether they are achieving or failing, considering gangs or fleeing from them.

We must commit to protecting each of them. And we must mourn them equally when we fail.

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