



# Video Story Transcript

## Memorial: Youth Violence Then and Now -- Part One

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**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CguU-93JV0>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hi, I'm Susan O'Halloran. Do you ever watch the news sometimes and you're like, enough already! But then every so often, something happens, not things that are just happening to other people anymore. I want to share a story with you about a memorial service I went to in Chicago, November 2011. And a memory was triggered by that memorial, something that had happened long, long ago.

The first thing I noticed was the checkmarks. They had asked us to sign in with our name and then to check "yes" if we had lost a family member or close friend to violence. When I arrived, the memorial service had already begun. I made the long trek from my Evanston, Illinois home, down Lakeshore Dr, across the Dan Ryan Expressway, to the Southside of Chicago and the gothic style church of St. Sabinas. When I walked into that vestibule I heard an orchestra playing inside and I walked up to the sign-in book and I went to add my name. I couldn't check the box. I was fortunate, my life hadn't been touched by that kind of tragedy. But what I saw was hundreds of checkmarks already made. Each check said, "Yes, I've lost a loved one to violence." Well, an usher came up to me, an African-American woman with a wide smile, wearing a black pillbox hat, a black suit, white gloves. She handed me a program, an unlit candle, and directed me to follow her. She walked me past rows of mourners and then she offered me a seat at the end of a pew. I was there. I was at the Urban Dolorosa memorial. Urban Dolorosa means "the city of sorrow," and our city was deep in sorrow.

In those previous three school years, from September 2008 to August 2011, four thousand children had been shot in Chicago. Two hundred sixty-three kids were dead because of violence. Four thousand shot and 263 dead. Congregations of all faiths and other non-profits had gathered together to form Urban Dolorosa to say

we had to stop the denial, the ignorance, the indifference, the hopelessness. They were calling for a comprehensive, coordinated plan to end the blood bath.

Now, I walked in there expecting I would hear community leaders rage about, you know, how decades of injustice and marginalizing whole communities, was a recipe for violence. I thought they would remind us that the very victims of the carnage are the people who are getting blamed. I thought I'd hear politicians who would make speeches about how unemployment, inferior education, and pouring resources into youth and community development, this would benefit all of us. But that's not what I had walked into at all. No, instead, this memorial was a, kind of, sacred musical cane. A mix of opera and choral music, sung in English and Spanish with strains of the blues and African-American spirituals, punctuated by a poetic libretto with an art installation and candlelight and photographs projected images of those left behind. Tear stained faces wide in disbelief or pinched tight in pain. Pictures of people holding each other up - their grief too much to bear alone. My surprise of what this memorial was, quickly melted into a feeling that, yes, this was exactly right. This was how to remember children who would never grow up to be young men and young women.

I remember a poem I read in college, it stayed with me all these years, by the poet Bill Knott; just three simple lines.

*The only response  
to a child's grave is  
to lie down before it and play dead*

And then youth performers walked the aisles and took photographs from people. Photographs of their slain loved ones. And they brought those photographs to the altar and began to build this tall sculpture of smiling children's faces - a mound of grief growing before us. And then they scattered all about as the names were read. "Rahim Washington, Eva Henry, Jose Corona..." Each name pierced the air!

And those youth performers, one of them came right by me. A 16-year-old girl with a round face, a very solemn face, so close her hand was brushing my shoulder and she lit her candle and she leaned over and lit mine and then gestured with her head for me to light the candle, the man beside me. And all of a sudden, candlelight was swimming up and down the pews of St. Sabinas as more names were read. "Alanzo Jones, Kabauro Ottowani, Arianna Gibson..." It was as if I could hear a drumbeat underscoring every name, every life. And then, this teenager blew out her flame, and poof, poof, poof, all of the sanctuary, flames gone, blown out. And she handed me her extinguished candle and left. It took me a moment to look into the aisle beside me and see her shoes were still there. All up and down the aisles of St. Sabinas. No more teens, just their empty shoes. My heart collapsed, gave way to the sound of a beating drum, and the memory flooded in.

Nineteen sixty-five. The first time I saw him, he was playing the drums or I should say an upside-down waste basket. I had met Cecil 46 years before. We were both 15 years old and we were at the YCS regional conference. YCS. Young Christian Students. I had met, I had joined the local group at my school that year and I decided to go to the regional conference. It was held at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana just about an hour and a half outside of Chicago. Oh, it was a whole week at the end of summer. Seminars and speakers and panel discussions. It was such great fun. And most of all it meant friendships with kids from all over the city and neighboring states. And since things were completely segregated in the 1960s, that meant for most of us it would be our first interracial experience.

Now the night I met Cecil, we girls decided to sneak out of our dorm. We were going to sneak out of our dorm and go to the boys' dorm after curfew. For someone like me who rarely broke the rules, this was high adventure. We dressed in dark turtlenecks and long pants. I could almost hear the theme music from the I Spy TV show. Wah wah wah wah. We actually crawled on our bellies, like, pulled ourselves with our elbows across this long empty field that separated us from the boys. And when we got to the boys' dorm, those boys were in ecstasy... And not at all interested in us. Cecil, of slight build and wearing glasses and his friend tall, thin Joe, had instructed the other boys, who were white, and how to turn their metal wastebaskets into drums. And they'd given them the steady pulse that most of the boys could handle. And then Cecil and Joe, they played on top of their beat. Now Joe was like the master of ceremonies. He'd tipped back in his chair and drum between his legs and the call out to the boys and encourage them. "That's right. You're doing it. That's right. That's right." Master of ceremonies.

Cecil was the serious one. He would cock his head to one side always an ear down to the drum. Monitoring if the intent and effect were one in the same. His rhythm seemed to come from the base of his spine, crawl up his back, push his arms from behind so fast that his hands would blur. These boys looked so blissed out, their faces seemed to say, "Yes. What you're playing goes with what I'm playing, goes with what he's playing. Yes, yes, yes. We're in this together. Yes."

Well, after that regional conference, at the end of the week. We had small group discussions throughout the week. Oh, Cecil was in my group so I saw him every day. And we talked about group leadership and school spirit and racial stereotyping. And sometimes after that seminar Cecil and I just weren't done; we had to keep talking, piggybacking off of each other's ideas. We walked the cinder running track back behind the classrooms.

Cecil'd say things like, "They should have a UN for kids!" And I go, "Yeah!" I'd agree. "Yeah! I wish we could meet kids from China and Africa and France!" Having just met kids from the other side of the city, the other side of the color line, we were ready to take on the world. And then by the end of that week was Friday night dance. Now in my neighborhood the thought of dancing with a boy who was black, it would have been unheard of. An impossibility, but by the end of the week, hey, Cecil was my pal. Of course, I would dance with Cecil.

And when Cecil came towards me. He was shorter than me. He looked tall and elegant. And he took my hand like it was a jewel. And he walked me out to an empty space on the dance floor and we began to slow dance. Now in my neighborhood, slow dancing meant the boys and girls would fall on each other and kind of move sideways, swaying like zombies. But with Cecil slow dancing meant walking coolly, purposefully, covering that dance floor three, four times with space between your bodies to twist and dip. Cecil would duck under my arm, he would twirl me in light circles. He would graze his hand across my waist as he circled me. I looked great just standing there.

Well, after that regional conference, I joined citywide YCS. And so did Cecil. We had meetings. We had more dances. We had picnics at the lakefront. We had press conferences to announce our newest initiatives but, most of all, what we did was plan study days, kind of like the regional conference. We bring kids together from all over the city and we would study, look at some kind of social justice issue. And once Cecil and I co-chaired a study day examining the black power movement. Ah, the day was exciting and contentious and scary and thrilling. We got people thinking and some people really upset and angry. And I just remember afterwards sharing a Coke with Cecil and the two of us sitting there saying, "We did it! We did it!" Though, I don't think either of us quite knew what we had done.

I remember that last leadership meeting in 1967, we were juniors in high school. It was the last meeting that Cecil attended. One of our adult mentors suggested an icebreaker for the beginning of the meeting. He said, "Why don't you go 'round and everybody say how they want to be remembered. You tell us what you would want written on your gravestone."

Well, Katie went first and she said, "I want my gravestone to say she was alive." And I went next and I joked I want my gravestone to say she IS alive. And everybody started laughing. And then Cecil said. Cecil said. Cecil said, "What?" See, he's after me and I thought this mixture of pride and self-consciousness because I made everybody laugh so I don't remember what Cecil said. I mean he was the good listener not me. What did Cecil want on his gravestone. It became so important to remember.