

Reckless use of guns imposes pain on families on both sides in slaying

04/27/2007

So many youngsters, so many guns.

Here came a parade of boys in leg irons and handcuffs and brightly colored prison jumpsuits, their heads bowed and their eyes streaked with tears.

They had done something horrendous, and they seemed to realize it. They certainly realized they had ruined what should have been the best years of their lives.

Because of their actions, especially the reckless use of handguns by two of their group, Jajuana Cole, who was only 13 — younger even than them — was dead.

Four of these five kids, whose ages ranged from 16 to 19, were sentenced last Friday in New Haven Superior Court, four days after the gunfire at Virginia Tech. You could still hear those echoes.

Judge Richard Damiani, who often finds himself facing youngsters such as these and sending them off to prison, was visibly frustrated by the parade in front of him. This was even worse than usual.

"They're cowards," he said to the spillover crowd of Jajuana's family and the defendants' families. "They went out at night, talking big, talking trash, to shoot up a neighborhood. And then they ran away."

Damiani noted they were so full of themselves that they brought along a video camera to film themselves in action.

"They kept that video like the killer at Virginia Tech (Cho Seung-Hui, age 23), like a trophy," Damiani said angrily.

Damiani wanted to make sure those five kids saw and heard and felt the pain from Jajuana's family.

And so even though the kid who fired the fatal shot, Daniel Carter, 19, would not be sentenced until this past Monday, he was brought into court with the rest of his buddies. (He got a 40-year sentence.)

The defendants also faced a photo board showing a smiling effervescent child, from her baby days to young girlhood. This was Jajuana's life, until they ended it.

The Coles filled the jury box, an appropriate place for them. One by one, they came up to make a statement.

A box of Kleenex had been set out at the table where the Coles would speak. Another box was provided at the jury seats. The Kleenex were sorely needed.

Jajuana's mom, Sonda Whitfield, made it to the fourth paragraph of her written statement before she reached for the Kleenex.

When she got to the part about visiting Jajuana's grave on her 14th birthday to tell her, "Happy birthday, we love you," she broke down.

A minute earlier she had said, "My soul hurts, my heart is broken."

When the four kids were called one by one to stand before Damiani for their sentencing, it was time for their families to weep.

Rashiem Menafee is 16. His father, Reggie Menafee, told Damiani his son was "not a bad guy." He quoted his boy saying, "Dad, it wasn't supposed to happen like that." (The boys all said this was a neighborhood dispute and Jajuana was not their target.)

Damiani imposed a 15-year sentence, to be suspended after he serves nine years.

Then it was time for Torell Boyd, 19, to take his medicine. He had hoped to be a courtroom officer one day, but now he was in chains, surrounded by such men.

Boyd got 15 years, suspended after he serves 8½ years.

He was followed by Lamont Swint, 18. He had wanted to be a doctor so he could "help kids." He got an 18-year sentence (he had a separate larceny conviction), suspended after he serves 10½ years.

And then up came Tremayne Sanders, 17, who fired five shots into that crowd of girls. His attorney, Walter Bansley III, recited the list of horrendous shootings Sanders witnessed at an earlier age.

"Where do these guns come from?" Bansley asked. "We have a war on drugs; what about a war on guns?"

Sanders got 40 years in prison. The courtroom erupted in a mass wailing.