

## ***So their deaths won't be in vain***

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As the large extended family of Dashon Harvey lined up in front of the Metropolitan Baptist Church to begin the mournful procession past the open coffin of their dead young man, funeral director Macon Cotton III made a simple request for pallbearers.

"I need six good men to step forward."

It was like the first bell toll of the message that resounded through Newark yesterday. Over and over again, through three funeral services in three different Baptist churches in three distinct neighborhoods, the message kept ringing. The good people must step forward. The good people must fight back.

"Everybody is ready to fight a righteous fight," Mayor Cory Booker would say later en route from the funeral for Terrance (T.J.) Aerial to the service for Iofemi Hightower.

"We have no choice. We're being challenged now. This is a defining moment in the history of this city."

The funerals yesterday for the three college students shot behind Mount Vernon School last weekend certainly felt like such a moment. All the churches were packed with regular parishioners, the women resplendent in their Sunday hats and the men in their understated dark suits, and people of all colors from the community. A small army of ushers, the women in nursing white and the men in black, handed out programs and moved the lines through the viewings. A bus carrying 80 students and staff from Delaware State University had a police escort. Government SUVs carrying Gov. Jon Corzine, U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, state Sen. Richard Codey, Booker, the Newark council, Newark Police Director Garry McCarthy, Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo, Essex Prosecutor Paula Dow and Essex Sheriff Armando Fontoura caravanned between funerals.

There were overflow crowds at each church, and Newark motorcycle police and Essex sheriff's officers kept traffic at a minimum through the crowds of onlookers and television cameras.

The funerals for Harvey and Aerial were held at two of Newark's biggest churches, Metropolitan on Springfield Avenue, and the New Hope Baptist Church on Sussex, both filled to capacity. The funeral for Hightower was held in the tiny Grace Temple Baptist Church, where her grand-uncle, police chaplain John McClain, is pastor. At each venue, there were groups of activists wearing "Enough is Enough" buttons, or "Stop the Killing Now."

A group called Morticians That Care held a signs saying "How Many Body Bags Will It Take?" The New Black Panther Party handed out leaflets saying "Get Ac tive. Get Involved."

At each service, the dead stu dents were remembered as sons and daughters and friends. They were remembered for their smiles and the energy they brought to life. And the emptiness of their deaths.

"Love your children," said Renee Tucker, the mother of T.J. "Hug your children. Tell them you feel them and you understand them. Because one day, they may not be there. And you will never have that chance again."

But in each venue, the overriding message was the same. The deaths should not be in vain. The deaths should galvanize the community against the violence of this city.

"If we stand together, we will break the back of the devil who is trying to break the back of this community," said the Rev. David Jefferson Sr.

Dressed in a navy blue militaristic cassock with gold epaulets, buttons and sash, Jefferson promised "Victory is still in the hands of Jesus Christ," as his congregation stood and applauded.

Harvey's body was laid out between poster-sized pictures of him and floral arrangements of crosses and hearts. Jefferson told the overflow congregation the family wanted an upbeat service in keep ing with the way Dashon lived his life. As the young man's coffin was closed, the organist kicked up and the congregation sang and clapped through "Lord Help Me to Hold Out."

It was then that Booker took what was the first of three turns at church pulpits, gaining momentum in preacher-mode at each stop.

"The devil can try to come up in here and take away who we are, and we must say no," Booker said to another ovation. "Martin Luther King said, 'We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.' And we will no longer be silent."

As an example, he cited Dashon Harvey's family and asked that Newarkers follow their lead. "They said, I will not curl up in a little ball. I will not run and hide." He recalled how James Harvey, Dashon's father, stood in front of the national media one week ago, defiant to the still unapprehended criminals who killed his son, and "in his worst possible hour, and gripped the podium and said 'Enough is enough.'"

Newark City Councilman Ron Rice Jr. took a softer approach in his speech to the congregation. He asked the community to return to its roots of "looking out for one another."

"Through all our tough times, through slavery and oppression, when we had no money, we looked out for one another. We helped one another. Let us now come together as a community and move forward as a people."

These sentiments echoed through all three services by all speakers.

At the funeral for Aerial, Corzine promised, "We will overcome. We will stand for what is right," to a chorus of "hallelujahs" and applause.

Sen. Menendez said only the efforts of church, community and government ensure such a tragedy will "never, never, never, never happen again," to more applause.

Booker, growing more emotional as the day wore on, cited Scripture with the best of the Baptist preachers, as he spoke of Newark as the "promised land" and speaking of the three dead students reminded listeners of "a child who will lead us."

"I tell you, Newark, this tragedy will not define us," he said. "We will define us. Our children buried today are not the exception to the rule, they are the rule. Long live Newark!"

Booker talked of the courage of Natasha Aerial, who, "on her hospital bed after being shot in the head, leaned forward and summoned the police" to tell them what she saw.

The courage of Hightower was evident. Her body, in an open casket, showed the effects of a brutal knife or machete attack, with the cuts on her face and arms barely masked by mortuary makeup.

On a day of faith and healing, and talk of good overcoming evil, and beating back the face of the devil, the wounds were a reminder of what this city is up against.

"There are hard days ahead," he said. "This isn't going to be easy and it's not going to go away overnight. There were gunshots fired again last night.

"But this is combat. We're going to have to fight for every inch of ground. We have to sustain this momentum and sustain this energy."

Sustain. A good word. A word of endurance and strength. A word of life.

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