

In Southeast, a Courageous And Promising Young Man Is Lost

The phone call came on a Saturday morning. It was a friend, Melissa Perkins, mother of three girls living off Stanton Road in Anacostia. "We've had a tragedy in the family... "Lil James was hit by a car and killed...a few hours ago." Melissa, James's aunt, had no further details.

The next morning June 14, I found what I was looking for in the Post—a 125-word news item on the second page of the Metro section "SE Boy Dies After Being Hit By a Vehicle." It was a bare-bones account of two cars colliding. The driver of one car lost control and the vehicle jumping the curb, killing James Perkins, 14 and injuring a woman.

I knew James Perkins as a recipient of a computer donated to him a few years ago by First Time Computers, a nonprofit I run that provides computers to low-income families. Not long before the accident, I had spoken with James's father about finding James a job with my organization. Just two days before. I had attended the graduation exercises at John Hayden Johnson Junior High School in Southeast. There was James, one of three students invited to sit on the stage with the school's teachers and staff for the ceremony. He was the salutatorian. When it was James' turn to speak, he read his address in soft tones to a packed school auditorium. The principal announced that James would attend



James Perkins, 14, died June 13 after being hit by a car. He was the Salutatorian for his class at John Hayden Johnson Junior High School in Southeast.

Thurgood Marshall Public Charter School.

James humbly accepted several awards, then walked tall in his dark suit as he led the recessional.

James's accomplishments were all the more impressive considering the challenging circumstances he faced. Shootings are frequent near the housing complex where he lived and the regular flashing lights and blare of police sirens can distract from school work. Twice in the past two years, stray bullets have come through the windows of his building; once, a bullet nearly hit James's cousin. Police came to his apartment to dig the bullets out of the walls.

When James was struck by the car, he was on his way to Thurgood Marshall to take his placement tests for the fall. The woman reported hit at the scene — thankfully not seriously — was his mother. Services were held June 20, 2009 at Matthews Memorial Baptist Church —just a few steps away from where James died.

An unexpected death — in any form, in any community — is difficult to bear.

But tragedy that takes the life of a promising young man who had triumphed over the odds in Anacostia is especially brutal.