

Commentary: Walking While Black

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 22 March 2012 15:27



The outcry over Trayvon Martin's senseless death is absolutely right and just -- his family, ourselves, will not feel at peace until this wrong has been rectified.□

Every parent raising Black sons knows the [dilemma](#) : deciding how soon to have the talk. Choosing the words to explain to your beautiful child that there are some people who will never like or trust him just because of who he is—including some who should be there to protect him, but will instead have the power to hurt him. Training him how to walk, what to say, and how to act so he won't seem like a threat. Teaching him that the burden of deflating stereotypes and reassuring other people's ignorance will always fall on him, and while that isn't fair, in some cases it may be the only way to keep him safe and alive.

But sometimes it isn't enough. It wasn't enough to protect [Trayvon Martin](#) . Seventeen-year-old Trayvon's English teacher said he was "an A and B student who [majored in cheerfulness](#) ." Trayvon loved building models and taking things apart, his favorite subject was math, and he dreamed of becoming a pilot and an engineer. Instead, he was gunned down by a self-appointed neighborhood watch captain vigilante who profiled him, followed him, and shot him in the chest. His killer, George Zimmerman, saw the teenager on the street and called the police to report he looked "like he's up to no good." At the time Trayvon was walking home from the nearby 7-11 carrying a bottle of Arizona iced tea and a bag of Skittles for his younger stepbrother, leaving many people to guess that the main thing he was doing that made him look "no good" was wearing a hooded sweatshirt in the rain and walking while Black. George Zimmerman's decisions made that suspicious enough to be a death sentence.

Now there is [widespread outrage](#) over the senseless killing of a young Black man who was doing nothing wrong and the fact that the man who killed him has not been arrested. People are trying to make sense of the series of gun laws that allowed

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[George Zimmerman](#)

to act as he did—starting with the Florida laws that allowed someone like Zimmerman, who had previously been charged for resisting arrest with violence and battery on a police officer, to get a permit to carry a concealed weapon in the first place. Many more questions are being raised about Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law, which also has been described as the “shoot first, ask questions later” law, and gives the benefit of the doubt to Zimmerman and others claiming “self-defense” by allowing people who say they are in imminent danger to defend themselves. Some states limit this defense to people’s own homes, but others, like Florida, allow it anywhere.

As Josh Horwitz, executive director of the [Coalition to Stop Gun Violence](#), says, this law “has turned common law—and common sense—on its head by enabling vigilantes to provoke conflicts, resolve them with deadly force, and avoid ever having to set foot in a courtroom.” The fear in [Trayvon’s death](#)

is that this is exactly what has happened so far: that the story told by witnesses, phone records, and Zimmerman’s violent past and earlier complaints during his neighborhood patrols shows an overzealous armed aggressor who followed Trayvon even after police told him to stop, chased Trayvon down when the frightened boy tried to walk away from the stranger following him, and then shot the unarmed, 100-pounds-lighter teenager while neighbors said they heard a child crying for help. The prospect now that Zimmerman might never set foot in a courtroom for the shooting has caused widespread frustration and fury.

Just as sadly, [Trayvon’s death was not unique](#). In 2008 and 2009, 2,582 Black children and teens were killed by gunfire. Black children and teens were only 15 percent of the child population, but 45 percent of the 5,740 child and teen gun deaths in those two years. Black males 15 to 19 years-old were eight times as likely as White males to be gun homicide victims. The outcry over Trayvon’s death is absolutely right and just. We need the same sense of outrage over every one of these child deaths. Above all, we need a nation where these senseless deaths no longer happen. But we won’t get it until we have common-sense gun laws that protect children instead of guns and don’t allow people like George Zimmerman to take the law into their own hands. We won’t get it until we have a culture that sees every child as a child of God and sacred, instead of seeing some as expendable statistics, and others as threats and “no good” because of the color of their skin or because they chose to walk home wearing a hood in the rain. And we won’t get it until enough of us—parents and grandparents—stand up and tell our political leaders that the National Rifle Association should not be in charge of our neighborhoods, streets, gun laws, and values. In

[Trayvon’s case](#)

, his father Tracy speaks for what his family needs: “The family is calling for justice. We don’t want our son’s death to be in vain.” I hope that enough voices will ensure that it is not.

[Marian Wright Edelman](#) is the founder and president of the [Children's Defense Fund](#). □

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