

Crime NEWS

A tale of two murders: Connected or not?

Part One of a Series



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Tiffany Gooden.

Fewer than six miles west of the office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel at Chicago's City Hall sits the corner of West Madison Street and North Kilbourn Avenue. It is part of the neighborhood of Austin—a disregarded,

neglected backyard obscured by the magnificent opulence of the Chicago loop and kept quietly hidden from the marveling eyes of the record 46.2 million tourists to which Emanuel proudly laid claim in 2012.

On March 29 of that year, Emanuel announced a \$7 billion revitalization of the city that would “touch nearly every aspect of the city’s infrastructure network.” In his accompanying speech, Emanuel pledged “stronger communities and a better quality of life for all of Chicago’s families. That’s what I mean by building a new Chicago.”

In December 2012, Crain’s Chicago Business reported that the YMCA in Austin was closing its doors. Less than four months later, Chicago Public Schools announced the closure of four of its schools in the neighborhood. According to the Austin Talks Newsletter, educators at Francis Scott Key, Louis Armstrong, Horatio May and Robert Emmet schools all received notice of the closures on March 21, 2013. The concern of teachers and staff was not so much for their jobs, but the children who would be forced to walk “on their own at a farther distance through an area known for gang activity.”

Elce Redmond is the Organizing Director of the South Austin Coalition, a community organization that has been mobilizing residents around Austin’s economic and social issues for the past 37 years.

“There were fights to save the schools, there were fights to save the YMCA, there were fights to address the drug and crime problem with jobs,” he told Windy City Times. “But the city, the county, the state, no one wants to really hear that. They don’t want to solve problems, they want to increase the amount of people going to jail and that makes a lot of money for folks, but it doesn’t address any of the concrete issues of the community. None of these leaders want to do that at all.”

It was in this environment, on March 28, 2012—the morning before Emanuel’s pledge to build a new Chicago—that a 22-year-old transgender woman of color named Eisha Love, along with another young trans* woman who has since been identified by friends and family members as Donta “Tiffany” Gooden, 19, were allegedly subjected to a verbal and then physical assault by two men at a Citgo station on the Austin corner of West Madison Street and North Kilbourn Avenue.

Love and Gooden fled in Love’s vehicle with the two men allegedly pursuing on foot. Two more men reportedly joined the chase in a blue Pontiac. One and a half blocks north of the Citgo, Love lost control of her car. It jumped the curb, striking the lower left leg of one of her pursuers. Using male pronouns and Love’s birth name, the arrest report stated that, at the time, Love was “in fear for ‘his’ safety.” According to Love’s mother, a group of male bystanders at the scene of the accident told Love “we’re going to get you.” [For the full report on the Eisha Love case, see last week’s Windy City Times print and online editions.]

Love was subsequently placed under arrest at the District 11 police station on West Harrison Street on a charge of aggravated battery. An April grand jury then indicted her on a charge of “attempted first degree murder” with “intent to kill.”

Soon after Love was arrested, another incident happened that may be related. One block east of the Citgo, a rusty viaduct crosses Madison at the corner of Kenton Avenue. It was under this viaduct that some of the transgender women who were engaged in sex work (locally referred to as “on the stroll”) with 23-year-old Paige Clay say they last saw Clay getting into a car with an unknown man or group of men. On April 16, 2012, less than a month after Love’s arrest, Clay’s body was discovered half a mile away from the viaduct in an alley in the 4500 block of West Jackson. She had been shot through the head.

An LGBT advocate and former child welfare worker who asked to be identified as “John” told Windy City Times that he was the man who identified Clay’s body at the morgue and then had the task of informing her family of her death—a memory that haunts him to this day.

“Paige loved life. She was a strong-willed individual,” he told Windy City Times. “Paige wanted to work in the fashion industry. Paige had the skills to be successful on so many levels but didn’t have the services and support mechanisms around her to do that and that’s why she had to resort to the kind of life that she had. We have a public school system that has let trans* people down. It’s not inclusive enough to trans* individuals and is doing nothing help nurture them. Trans* women of color come out of it totally unprepared and they have to rely on prostitution as a means of survival. We may not like to think about it, but it’s their truth. It’s their reality. It was very disheartening for Paige to go on job interviews in retail stores and—even though she was very well put together and more than qualified to do the job—to be denied because she was trans*.”

At the time of Clay’s death, Brian Turner was a social worker with Taskforce Prevention and Community Services which has provided HIV and STI preventative services in Austin since 1990. In that capacity, he became close to Clay and her death devastated him. He organized a community forum to discuss violence against transgender women of color later that month. During the event, Windy City Times reported that a Taskforce outreach worker said “it saddens me that Paige was brutally murdered and no one cares.”

Turner pushed Chicago Police Department (CPD) investigators for answers and even started a Facebook page demanding justice for Clay with the goal of ensuring that “another of ours won’t be swept under the rug.” The page asked anyone with information to get in touch with him.

It was then that Turner said he received an unexpected phone call.

“The CPD contacted me at Taskforce and told me that I was hindering the case and that, if I did not stop, they were going to lock me up,” he told Windy City Times. “The detective never said his name but he did threaten

me.”

“I don’t find that hard to believe,” John said. “Bottom line, I don’t care how many gay and lesbian officers or LGBT liaisons they have, I believe the CPD is an entity that is still very transphobic. They have no concern in finding out who did what in Austin because Paige was a trans* woman. That’s just how they operate.”

Donta “Tiffany” Gooden may have been another victim connected to the Eisha Love case. She was the one reportedly in the car the day Love was arrested. In an interview with Windy City Times, Gooden’s mother—who asked to be identified as “Mary” and prefers to refer to her daughter as Donta—said that both Clay and Gooden were friends who spent a lot of time at Gooden’s home before Clay’s murder. “[Paige] was calling and coming over,” Mary said. “They were kicking it, like women kick it, switching each other’s outfits. That’s just what they did.” She added that the two girls looked very much alike, so much so that when Clay’s body was discovered, Mary’s family members and friends were genuinely concerned that it was Gooden.

According to Mary, while growing up, Gooden was exceptionally smart, graduating at the top of her class following a three-month educational program that she attended. “Donta got a diploma and everything. I was so proud,” Mary said. “And we were so very close. But what with peer pressure and neighborhood pressure, the streets were calling.”

She asserted that Gooden only expressed her feminine identity when going out onto those streets. “I knew what Donta was doing,” Mary said. “But all you can do as a mother is love your child for who they are, no matter what.”

When Clay was found dead, Gooden became noticeably frightened. According to Mary, for the following four months, she would only go out on the stroll as the sun was beginning to rise in the morning. “I knew my child was scared,” Mary said. “But Donta didn’t want me to worry.”

After Clay’s funeral, Gooden told her mother that she had been in the car with Love. Despite Mary’s repeated questions, she offered little beyond that.

Mary and the family were also trying to cope with the Memorial Day death of Mary’s mother. Gooden had told her aunt that she intended to go back to school and get herself together so that she could help shoulder some of the bills.

On the morning of Saturday, Aug. 11, 2012, Gooden and her mother had been enjoying time together as they usually did. Shortly after midnight on Sunday, Gooden inexplicably left the home with a group of

neighborhood friends. “It was unusual because Donta had stopped going out at night,” Mary said. “I don’t think she was going out on the stroll.”

It was the last time Mary would see her daughter alive. “I just remember Donta’s smile and, after that, I never seen my child again,” she said.

When Gooden didn’t return home, Mary frantically called everyone she knew before filing a missing person’s report with the CPD. “First thing they said was ‘you sure you don’t want to give it another day or so?’” Mary remembered. “But I knew something had happened to my child. There was an emptiness in my soul. All I could do was pray.”

For two days, she heard nothing. Three blocks from where Clay’s body was found, there is a line of three abandoned buildings on the corner of South Cicero Avenue and West Jackson Boulevard. It was on the second floor of the center building that Gooden’s mutilated body was discovered on Aug. 14, after complaints about an unpleasant smell. She had been stabbed multiple times. “They stabbed my child in the face,” Mary said. “They chopped at Donta’s neck; there were stab marks around the back area. It was just a mess.”

CPD investigators told Mary that Gooden’s blood was found in the front hallway leading to the second floor, as if she had been dragged up there. Provided with no more information, Mary desperately tried to piece together the last hours of her daughter’s life. “I figured that Donta might have got there and realized it was a set up and got snatched in there,” Mary said. “They had pulled the stairs down in the back of that building so there was no way out. So whoever did this knew the area. They knew Donta could holler as loud as she wanted to but, on a Sunday morning, nobody was going to hear.”

Witnesses on the floor below said that they heard Gooden fighting for her life. Mary asserted that within three weeks after her daughter’s death, the crime scene was torn down. Today, all that is left is an empty lot conspicuously located between boarded-up buildings.

Mary remembered that shortly after her death, a transgender friend of Gooden’s told her that threats had been leveled against her daughter’s life. “She said that somebody in a green van was looking for Donta,” Mary stated. “They were saying they was going to kill her. They were saying they were going to ‘get ‘his’ ass because ‘he’ was riding in the car’.”

Next Week: Part Two examines walking the streets of Austin.

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