

1 GVP39, Ashanti Hamilton

2 [...]

3 D: Please state your name.

4 A: My name is Ashanti Hamilton.

5 D: And how old are you?

6 A: And I am forty-five years old.

7 D: You getting around the age where you forget. (laughter) And I know you've experienced gun
8 violence, would you share your story?

9 A: Yeah, so I've, you know, I grew up on the, on the East Side of Milwaukee, [in Saveland
10 Park]. So, you know, so I have a number of stories that kind of related to gun violence. But I was
11 going to start with the earliest one.

12 D: Sure.

13 A: You know, the very first funeral that I, that I went to, right, was because of a homicide due to
14 gun violence. My earliest memory of a funeral, my earliest memory of a death, was because of
15 gun violence. And it was somebody that was pretty close to our family and, you know, in those
16 neighborhoods, in that time period, you know, you're, the people that you grow up around are
17 your extended family, right? And I had a next-door neighbor who was closer to me than a
18 brother. You know, we did everything together and he had an older brother. And I think it's
19 important to say his name just cause I think in these types of situations because that was so long
20 ago, [...] it feels good to remember him, right? And to talk about him, you know, because he was
21 such a strong presence in the neighborhood. Everybody looked up to him. His name was
22 Sheffield. Sheffield Johnson. And you know, everybody looked up to him. He had a car, right,
23 and it was one of those nice cars, duce and the quarters. And, you know, he was the

24 neighborhood big brother and the literal big brother of one of, you know, of my best friends. And
25 we had this bar in the neighborhood that still exists, it's called [...] it's right [in Saveland] we
26 used to have to walk by [it] going to school, it was (inaudible) or you know, right on MLK and,
27 and Ring it's Martin Luther King Elementary now. But you know, you walked through that
28 neighborhood today, everybody remember it as (inaudible), right? And neighborhood kids still
29 go there. And so, there was a fight at the bar one night, and somebody pulled out a gun and shots
30 were exchanged, and he got hit and he died. But it hit the neighborhood hard because he was,
31 because he was who he was. He was well respected. He always looked out for the little kids and
32 you know, he was just, he was just cool. And so, having this emotion kind of go through the
33 neighborhood, going to a funeral at such a young age and seeing how people reacted to that. It
34 kind of, it set the pace for a number of funerals that I would have to go to like that of you know,
35 just, young men cut down in their prime, you know, due to gun violence. And you know, it was
36 kind of demoralizing for a long time, because as I got older and we started to see the
37 neighborhood change and you know, this kind of influx of the crack epidemic kind of came to
38 the neighborhood and it was, this is like, one of the first neighborhoods that you know, had a
39 organized, you know, drug kind of distribution like, process, right. And so there was you know,
40 turf battles and all that type of stuff, and to watch that whole thing go by and then watch my little
41 brothers and sisters, right, get involved in it. And then to see them have children, right, and then I
42 got nieces and nephews who are now losing their parents, right, to this and there's no other word
43 to use other than to call it an epidemic, right? And you know, and as much as people want to call
44 them criminals, and, you know, these are drug dealers and they were this or they, you know, they
45 were just kids growing up in the neighborhood to me, right? They were just, you know, (pause)
46 just young people, right? You know, trying to grow up in an environment where, you know,

47 where a mistake or an argument could cost you your life. And, you know, and now I'm seeing,
48 you know, the effects both the perpetrators, the shooters as well as those who lost their lives to
49 gun violence, how it affects both people. So I have two nieces, and this is [...] I'll call it, "The
50 Tale of Two Nieces," right? So, I have two sisters who have children by, one by young man who
51 was sitting outside a bar having a good time who was, I don't remember if he was celebrating his
52 birthday or one of his friends' birthday, and they were just sitting outside in the car. Fight breaks
53 out, outside the bar. Shots go off, go into the car. He gets hit. He dies from his injuries, and she's
54 just a baby. And my sister is distraught cause they were in a relationship at the time. They had a
55 young baby. She was, and this that young love, right. So, you know, so it really affected her and,
56 but even to this day, his daughter, her daughter, my niece, is seventeen years old now. Has a
57 really strong relationship with his family, her father's family. And she's still, you know, just
58 because of the stories and she's still very affected by his loss. They still visit him in the, at the
59 cemetery. But that loss to her is like, such a strong presence in, in like, in her life now and you
60 know, this need of having a father figure in her life. You know, and just the instability that that
61 kind of created her, you know, her entire life. And then I had another sister who, who had a
62 daughter by a young man who actually got into a shootout with, with some other young men. Hit
63 them and then got into a shootout with the police department, all right? Barricaded himself in the
64 house and, and full-blown shootout. And, but felt as if this was, you know, not only did he have
65 some issues personally, but you know, felt as if this was the definition of being a man, right?
66 "Drawing a line in the sand, well I won't take any mess from anybody and if need be, then I will
67 have to defend myself to the death with a," you know, "with a gun." But now he's locked up and
68 he's been locked up for almost thirteen, fourteen years now. And probably won't, won't be out
69 for another thirteen, fourteen years. So, so she grew up without having him you know, in her life.

70 But, but seeing the mentality and how this kind of permeates a community and why people make
71 the decision to try to, you know, handle their, their situations with, with a gun. And the aftermath
72 of that. All right? And, and I'm looking at it generationally now, cause I'm, I'm a little long in
73 the tooth now, alright? I can see it generationally, how as a child myself, witnessing this, how it
74 affected my generation and then how those came after me you know, you know was swimming
75 in that same environment and how it got to the point where it is now, where you know, it was, it
76 was uncommon then, but you know, still had an effect to a point now where it's so common,
77 where man, it's, it's leaving a traumatic stain, you know, on our, on our community. And you
78 know? And I'm, I'm seeing it play out and already in people's lives even today.

79 D: What do you think we can do to change that?

80 A: So, one of the things I think is important for us to do now is to recognize the traumatic
81 experience that so many folks in our community have gone through. And allow for a healing
82 process to occur for them because I think right now what we're doing is we're attempting to
83 define them based off of their behavior right now, without really taking a look at how they got to
84 that space. And there has to be a, kind of a intervention, identifying that that happened and
85 giving them what they need in order to heal that. Because if they don't begin to value
86 themselves, then they'll continue to try to solve the issues that we see, you know, that we see
87 play out in some very heartbreaking ways. So I think one is recognition, you know, of how we
88 got here. They're not animals, right? They're not, (pause) you know, they, they get called all, all
89 kind of names in the book, but they're human beings that went through very traumatic
90 experiences and never got what they needed in order to heal from that. And, and if you, if you
91 listen to them and if you talk to any of them, right, I mean I have a, I have a brother that's in
92 prison right now. For a homicide, right? And you know, for (pause) you know, I think a lot of

93 people would say, “Hey, your brother’s a monster.” Right? “Your brother is a...” and he was a
94 young, he was a young man, he was eighteen years old. The person that he shot was his friend,
95 right? They knew each other, they hung out together, they you know, so, you know, what
96 happened between them was two people who shouldn’t’ve had a gun in the first place, wrestling
97 over because they’re fighting over something else, wrestling over a gun, the gun goes off and,
98 you know. So, if you can, if you can imagine two families, right, that know each other, right,
99 they are friends with each other, not just those two young men, the families are friends. And
100 having to deal with the death and a funeral, and like, how do you go through that process, you
101 know, so, they, this affects an entire community, you know? So, you know [...] there’s a [...]
102 humanity that needs to be brought back to this type of situation because unless we start dealing
103 with what happened to bring a community to the place where it is, where these types of things
104 are commonplace. We’ll never get to a point where we start to change the direction of what we
105 see in our communities.

106 (pause)

107 D: Does your niece—

108 A: That was a little bit more than I even thought I was going to share. I wasn’t even going to
109 share that story. (laughter)

110 D: Does your niece and your sister forgive the, the father that shot someone and is now currently
111 in prison?

112 A: pause) The, you mean, my family member or the?

113 D: Your family.

114 A: My family members do?

115 D: You said she's going through a lot. Do you think she's angry with her dad? Or she forgives
116 her dad?

117 A: Oh yeah, you know, I think she forgives her dad. I think we're in one of those situations
118 where it's your, "It's my dad." Right? And there's a kind of a, a forgiveness that you know, only
119 a daughter could give, right? I mean she, you know, to the point where she's a, you know,
120 because his street reputation is bigger than life, you know, there's a sense of pride that's there.
121 You know? About that. Because you know [...] as much as we talk, you know, gun violence in
122 our community, by and large that gun violence is directed at each other, right? We're shooting
123 each other in the street. You know, he had the, you know, the kahunas, alright, to, you know, to
124 face law enforcement and come out, you know, alive and dadada. You know, so there's a story
125 that, you know, that kind of builds off of that. You know, which is, you know. So, I, yeah, I think
126 she's forgiven him, but she's affected by his absence.

127 D: Of course.

128 A: And, and I don't think that that is the best example for her to grow up into or to, you know, to
129 look for in, you know, in a man [...] that's not the example, and you know, and the best person
130 to tell her that would be him.

131 D: Yes.

132 A: Right? You know, and, and I think he would probably be in that place now, you know, having
133 spent over a decade locked up, just like, you know, "I don't know what I was on when I was out
134 there doing that, but I would definitely trade a different situation from doing that and being in
135 here now. I would've made different cho- if I would've been in my right mind." I think he would
136 tell her that story. You know, he would try to teach her that lesson. You know, but this is the, the
137 illness that kind of gets perpetuated because, you know, this is what we end up idolizing. And so,

138 yeah, so, what I would you know, and I think it plays out in her behavior too, and the choices
139 that she's making you know, for, you know, boyfriends and you know, what she's attracted to
140 out here. And so, you know, so, it takes [...] it takes work.

141 D: A lot of work.

142 A: Yeah.

143 D: That would be in, a close family care counselling.

144 A: Mhmm.

145 D: That's a lot of work. Needs to be, it needs to happen, but it's a lot of work.

146 A: Yeah.

147 D: Do the family in which your brother and the other family were friends, do you guys, did they
148 forgive your brother?

149 A: (pause) Nah, that's deeper. Right? There's a, I think the family members on both sides are
150 working through, you know, just recognizing what happened. And being able to move on from it.
151 But, you know, they were very adamant about, you know, going to court. Making sure that he
152 was punished. Making sure that you know, just, and, and you can't blame them. They wanted
153 justice for their, for their loved one.

154 D: But it was an accident.

155 A: Yeah. Yeah [...] it was an accident. But this [...] is the problem with losses like this, right?
156 With losses like this, you [...] feel like the [...] answer or [...] the only way that justice is served
157 in a situation where you lost somebody that you loved, the only justice is a long sentence or
158 death for the person who, who was, was responsible. I don't think that we've matured enough,
159 right, to understand how justice could look in other ways. And, you know, and that's why I think
160 there's still sore spots, right, with healing, you know [...] in that situation but, you know [...] put

161 the shoe on the other foot, you know, and, and you're the one that lost. You know, that's why
162 [...] I just can't put a judgement on it, you know what I mean?

163 D: Right.

164 A: You know, and I think there are some family members who have, who, who understand the
165 scenario, who understand the situation and you know [...] and have grown past it. But I think
166 there are others who, who are still struggling with that, you know. And, you know, and I think
167 just, both [...] as a family and as a community, I think that's something that we have to, you
168 know, we have to face head on. We have to face the outcomes of the actions of this gun violence,
169 right? And, and the impacts that it has, you know, and face those and, you know, and be honest
170 about them. And, and deal with the outcomes. This is severely traumatic. And, so no, I don't
171 think there's any finality that, as far as forgiveness and you know, and understanding that's, you
172 know, in that, in that case.

173 D: Okay. What would you say to law makers that you think could help reduce gun violence?

174 A: One, I think it's far too easy for people to, to get guns. We, we, we have easy access to all
175 kinds of weapons, you know, all of the [...] young men that I talked about recently, you know, in
176 the last you know, few years, these were young folks, right? That [...] they wouldn't be able to
177 just walk into a store and just get, none of them was, you know, bought their gun at a gun store
178 and pulled out a ID and you know what I mean? Like, none of them got there, you know, their
179 access to a weapon, you know, legally. So, you know, I'm, so we, we've created an environment
180 that, you know, floods our community with guns and you have people who are not mentally
181 ready to handle a gun. They don't know how to, and they're not mentally ready to solve disputes.
182 And they have a gun, right? And so, I think that's the biggest problem. The biggest problem is
183 just the access to gun. What would normally have been you know, a pushing match, or

184 somebody cussing each other out and at worst, if they would've got into a fist fight and that
185 would've been at worst. Now, all of those situations, everybody has a gun. Both sides. And then
186 we, you know, they end up using those guns because, you know. So, the very first thing is limit
187 the access to these weapons because one, it's not making the community any safer, you know, by
188 flooding the community with, with guns. And then two, spending more resources on preventative
189 methods for interrupting violence. I think that there's a way of recognizing and predicting who is
190 probably going to be a victim of or a perpetrator of violence. And then, you know, having the
191 strategy for dealing with that. We have to be able to do that if you don't want to spend all your
192 time chasing people who actually committed crimes, so. Yeah, I think those are two very
193 concrete things that can be, that law makers could do.

194 D: Is there anything you'd like to add?

195 A: I guess the [...] only thing I would like to add is that we can't continue to go down this road.
196 We can't continue to do things the way that they've always been done and then expect for it to
197 miraculously, somehow change course. And we're still doing the same things that we've been
198 doing over the past you know, two or three decades. You know? We have to do something
199 different and so, you know, and a lot of people get upset about, you know, asking for resources
200 to be shifted in different ways, you know, because you know, people like putting money into law
201 enforcement and into corrections if they feel as if punishment is the way of changing people's
202 behavior and that obviously has not worked. And I would hope that we could take a more
203 humane approach in trying to recognize that hurt people hurt people. And so, let's build a system
204 where people stop getting hurt. You know? And give them the support that they need in order to,
205 in order to heal.

206 D: Thank you, that was great!