

## Putting a face on tragedy: Mothers in Charge's book profiles the moms of young murder victims

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NO ONE WANTS to be reminded of someone else's loss.

But when we'd rather turn away, Mothers in Charge is there, reminding us of children's lives cut short, killers on the loose, and the all-too-common problem of violence, particularly gun violence. With their signature white, spray-painted T-shirts, they have become a regular presence at rallies, marches and other events around the city. Many of their stories are familiar, having been blasted in newspaper headlines and on TV screens. Yet, the mothers prevail, recounting their children's stories and pressing for justice and for an end to the senseless bloodshed that happens these days with mind-numbing regularity. The last time I watched these remarkable women in action was during the presidential primary season as they met with then-candidate Hillary Clinton at the West Philly YMCA. It was clear to me that the New York senator was moved by what the women were telling her. How could she not be? One by one, they shared their stories, presenting plastic-covered photos of their deceased children - a final gesture of a mother's love. Now, the mothers have something more durable than those laminated placards to illustrate the unspeakable horror that their families have experienced. A new coffee table book, "Faces of Courage" (Harrowood Books, 2009), profiles members of the group. The stories are gripping. To read them is to descend for a moment into a mother's personal hell. *As if every new day weren't a reminder that her oldest daughter is gone, Doris Saunders wakes up every day at the exact time her daughter died: 3:03 a.m. . . . Kia (Chakia Saunders) went with her friends to a party in the East Germantown section of Philadelphia. She called her grandmother to tell her how much fun she was having. But not long after the party ended, outside shots were fired. Two bullets hit Kia; one hit her best friend.*



The book reveals intimate moments in the lives of these women, the kind of details that don't always make it into the news reports. *Mia Turman remembers vividly the gruesome autopsy photos of her daughter A'Layiah. The photo of her daughter's lifeless body on the table. The one showing A'Layiah's battered face covered with bruises . . . Turman's grief was compounded by the fact that the man she loved, who was most responsible for protecting A'Layiah - her father, Anwar Salahuddin - beat her to death. Turman, eight months pregnant with the couple's second daughter, was asleep in the next room. A'Layiah's crime: she broke a \$500 video game console her father was playing.* To be honest, I dreaded reading this book. I expected to find too much anguish. And it is there, all right, there is no escaping that. But with all that sadness, I discovered something else - inspiration. The women pictured on these pages are survivors. They are mothers who have experienced the worst blow a parent can face, yet they found not only the strength to go on, but to become part of something larger than themselves.

These mothers found a way not only to live again but to give back. And one way they do it is by not allowing their children to become faceless statistics. *He was fly, a ladies' man, "todo un Casanova," remembers his mom (Margie Garcia): He would sing and he would dance. Una persona bien alegre, one who would make you laugh. Next to him, heartthrob Mark Anthony was no match . . . He went out on a Friday night and never came back. He wasn't supposed to go out . . . work was waiting for him early next morning. But on that April night in 2003, as he came out of a Kensington club, Alexander Garcia was shot multiple times in the back.* Betty Ann Clark, whose son Timothy lived in Tacony, posed for her portrait next to a metal fence decorated with a white fuzzy streamer, flowers and a rhinestone-studded sign with the word "love" on it. Her son was killed two years ago while walking to the neighborhood 7-Eleven to buy snacks. The sadness in Clark's eyes is palpable. But she's wearing lipstick and studded jeans. *"I advocated for my son all his life, and I am not going to stop just because he's gone," she says. "I will always be his voice. We're the only ones here for our children and we have to speak up for them."* Dorothy Johnson-Speight founded Mothers in Charge after her son, Khaaliq, was murdered over a fight for a parking space. After watching the news and noticing similarities between her son's murder and that of another victim, Johnson-Speight tracked down the other victim's mother, Ruth Donnelly. It turned out that both of their sons had been killed by the same man. The two women banded together and founded Mothers in Charge, which now has more than 300 members. Last year, the group opened a victims-service center in North Philadelphia. Earlier this year, Johnson-Speight testified before a congressional subcommittee. And at 6 tonight, the group will mark its sixth anniversary with an event at the Hyatt Regency on Penn's Landing. Before the night is over, another mother will tell her child's tragic story and in that sharing, hopefully ease her own pain and that of others.