

**Jerome, Richard and Devan Stuart, "1 Punch, 2 Lives Destroyed: Shown mercy by the mother of a classmate he killed with a single blow, Thomas White now warns kids about the cost of violence,"
People Magazine, 30May05, pp. 83-84.**

Teenage violence and homicides are usually blamed on gangs, crime and drugs (city officials sometime find these easy excuses). But often they stem from jealousies and accusing gossip, boy stuff or girl stuff, "he says; she says."

An incident at Ridgeville High School in Orange Park, Florida is an example.

The war between Thomas White IV and David Baez began, like so many petty adolescent squabbles, over a girl. In 2003 Baez, then a 15-year-old junior... accused a female classmate of trashing his pals in a series of e-mails. She showed the exchanges to her friend, Thomas White, and for two weeks the youths spat insults at each other in the school's halls.

Tensions escalated until the final bell on Sept. 12 of that year. As Baez walked to his locker, White came up behind him. A friend shouted a warning, but Baez turned and White floored him with a sucker punch to the face. He didn't get up. "I didn't know anything was wrong," recalls White, now 19, "I just thought he was knocked out."

Somehow that one punch had separated two vertebrae at the base of David Baez's skull and caused hemorrhaging. As he lay in a comma, his parents, Edgar and Maria stayed by his side: "We prayed and prayed, but he never woke up.... I felt his last heartbeat." After eight days, David, "a fine student who planned to study architecture, was dead." "I can still feel like it was yesterday," says Maria, 46, who works for the Urban League.

Revenge is the typical response for the families of many brutally assaulted victims these days. Thomas White was initially charged as an adult for the crime of manslaughter which could bring a 15-year sentence. Prosecutors were prepared to offer an alternative punishment considering the age of the defendant. If he would spend just three years in jail, speaking with other teenagers about the dangers of uncontrolled anger and youthful violence, he could serve the rest of his time (12 years) on probation. But, first, the victim's family must give assent. Maria Baez not only agreed but offered a tearful plea for leniency to the judge.

I just listened to my heart... In prison, Thomas would just learn to be criminal. How does anything good come of that?

Her husband, David's father was not so sure. Young White, a football player who planned to join the Navy so he could see the world had been in trouble for fighting before. He regrets not stepping in when he heard about the boys bitter argument. "I gave David space and didn't intervene. That will haunt me forever." And he wonders if Thomas can be rehabilitated, "A tree that grows crooked will never be straight."

Maria twice came to visit Thomas in prison. "I thought she was going to be mad at me," he said after

her first visit. "But she wasn't." Instead she expressed her grief. "I told him I still feel angry about what happened. And I asked him how he was doing."

From prison, White wrote Maria a heart-felt apology (mostly included in this article).

A fifteen-minute documentary, *Death Blow*, pictures the events leading up to, and the fight itself, along with interviews of both families. Every few weeks the video and Thomas travel around northeast Florida warning kids about the consequences of teen conflicts and uncontrolled anger.

A strong person is one who will walk away. All it takes is one punch to change your life forever (White tells young audiences).

After his talks, Thomas takes questions, and the answers do not come easily. "What's the toughest part of jail?" one student asked. "I'm not allowed to hug my mom," Thomas responded.

It's hard to measure the impact of these presentations, but one 12-year-old seventh grader, Ashley Coleman agreed with her friends to do more to avoid conflict, and put it this way.

He says, she says—a little bit of drama and someone can be gone just like that. People take their lives for granted.

Maria Baez, a mother who has lost her son, concludes: "Maybe this happened so we can make a difference in Thomas's life. I just want to know he's learned his lesson."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Remember some time in your life when you expressed anger inappropriately or with violence.
2. Imagine being Thomas or David, their friends or their families for a minute. What impresses you most?
3. How would you, as a teacher, staff, or youth worker, respond to a bitter argument in the hall the day before this tragic fight? How would you want your children, or students in your youth group, to respond?
4. Edgar Baez lives with deep regrets about not intervening. What would you have done if your son mentioned an argument with another youth?
5. What can families, schools, and youth groups do about such violence and all that it entails?
6. What do anger management training and faith principles have to do with such situations?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Even among gang members, violence sometimes comes down to "he says, she says," careless rumors or malicious gossip. To understand this we need to understand the power of cliques and peers, the influence of romantic and violent media, the need for respect or "juice," and our failure to

empower teenagers for significant action and achievement.

2. Anger management manuals and training have been developed for teenagers. They have proven to help in tough places. We should make better use of them.

3. Jesus and other religious leaders, not only taught against senseless interpersonal violence, but modeled resistance and alternatives to it.

4. It is not enough to shake our heads sadly over adolescent violence and killings. We all have something to do about its prevention.

Dean Borgman c. CYS