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## EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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### TRUTH IN LOVE

## Elijah's Life Matters

**By Parris J. Baker**  
**September 2022**

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*Editor's note: Following is Part 9 of a series on community violence. It is based on an interview with Vanessa Belen, mother of homicide victim Elijah Jackson.*

It is an inconceivable, evil, repulsive thought. It should never even enter the mind of any mother. It is an unimaginable, soul-piercing consideration that produces incredible pain and distress. Compressed in my heart, hidden deeply in places that can only be created by your children, was this massive scream that no one could hear. Because it wasn't real, yet.

Things like this happen to other people. I discuss those awful things while buying coffee, scrolling through my Facebook and Instagram posts, or reflecting on indiscriminate random thoughts that ain't nobody's business but mine and God's. It progresses like scenes in a movie, precipitously ... everything slowed to a stop. Everything stopped but the anguish and the ache. I discovered that it never stops.

I arrived at the crime scene, my mind and my soul searching frantically to find my son. Elijah's friends are reluctant to tell me the news; I'm trying to confirm my deepest fears that it is Elijah lying on the ground. I was immediately drunk with denial. But I knew; somehow, I just knew and just like the actors in movie dramas I found myself slumped on the ground. "What do I do now?" Trust me when I tell you, there is *nothing* that can compare to or prepare you for the moment when you learn of the death of your child.

Baker: I recently spoke with Ms. Vanessa Belen, co-host of Chatting with Sonya & Friends, a commissioner with the Pennsylvania Governor's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs, a member of Unified Erie and City of Erie's Strengthening Police and Community Partnership (SPCP), a property manager for Beacon Communities, LLC., and the surviving mother of her son, Elijah Jackson, who was fatally shot at an outdoor party on July 24, 2015. Our dinner discussion centered on her relationship with son Elijah, the possible antecedents of his untimely death, and solution-focused strategies to reduce gun violence in Erie. I am so indebted to Vanessa for her courage to relive this tragedy and her ongoing commitment to the reduction of violent crime in Erie. This essay tries to capture various moments of our conversation.

Belen: I named my son after Elijah, the prophet of God.[1] Elijah means God is Jehovah and Jehovah is my God. I thought that would be a cool name for him. Elijah and I have a very special, irreplaceable mother-son relationship. Just before Elijah was killed, he told me, "*I just got it right with Jesus! I'm trying to be good now.*" Things appear to be going well.

What people don't understand is that nothing and no one can fill the void created by his death. I miss Elijah every single day. I wish people would stop evaluating my grief and trying to help me "get over it." You *never* get over it. I am retraumatized every time I hear about another young man killed, another mother who has lost her son or daughter to violence.

And for all the well-meaning and concerned folks who want to help survivors, Belen offers this advice: Let the people who are grieving bring you into their space by invitation. You cannot push your way into the grieving process nor are you entitled to be there just because you're a family member or because you care. Everyone grieves differently. You must wait patiently and allow the surviving person to invite you to share their grief. Know that you are *being vetted* by the grieving person; to see if you are trustworthy, if your intentions are sincere, that you really do care, and if you are a person of integrity, someone who will respect boundaries.

Baker: Somewhere in the evening's conversation I shared several discussions and recently released JES essays regarding possible causation and correlations of racially segregated and residential violence or "Black-on-Black" homicides, community conditions conducive to crime and homicide, and the fact that most homicides are committed by people who know each other.

Belen: When it comes to the color of the offender their skin color does not matter! What really matters is that there is accountability and judicial justice toward whoever committed the murder. If justice isn't found in the courtrooms, there will be accountability and street justice. Much of the violence everywhere, but particularly in Erie, is connected to retribution and retaliatory events – an

ongoing saga of pain and suffering that destroys our communities and ruins the future of everyone involved.

Elijah knew the people who killed him. This is not uncommon, that the offender and the victim knew each other. Elijah was not the target. There were indications everywhere, in the school and in the community. This stuff doesn't occur in isolation. Lots of people knew what was going on, who had a beef with who. The tensions between all the teens were palpable.

Baker: Vanessa acknowledged her attraction to and fondness for the Kansas City Chapter of Mothers in Charge, Inc.[2] Mothers in Charge was originally founded and launched in Philadelphia by Dr. Johnson-Speight in 2003. The Kansas City chapter was an initiative developed and implemented in 2013 by Rosilyn Temple, who like Vanessa, was a desperate mother in need of a community liaison to help navigate the noise and the numbness of the moment. The vision of KC Mothers in Charge is a *KC community safe for all, where families are empowered and supported*. Their mission is *to reduce violent crime through prevention, education, and intervention, and to guide and support the families of victims*. Their programs have three key areas of focus: (1) victim and family services, (2) offender reintegration and recidivism reduction, and (3) community outreach and education.

Taking a page from the KC Mothers in Charge, Belen bluntly stated that the 3Ps need to get off their butts, hit the streets, and put boots on the ground. The 3Ps are parents, pastors/priests, and politicians. We need to hold both the parent and adolescent offenders and adult offenders accountable. Pastors, after officiating our children's funerals, need to become and remain more visible in the community. Finally, we need to hold elected officials accountable for the promises made to decrease violence. After they get into office, their political promises and their administrative performances seem bifurcated.

Belen: Our kids have a right and deserve to be heard and to be happy. The pandemic exposed a lot of unhappy, depressed children. We need to pay critical attention to our children; the perpetrators of violence are getting younger. We have a lot of work to do. Learn to *talk to* children and parents. Learn to *talk with* children and parents. Stop lecturing and quit talking at the children and the parents.

My final question of the evening was the following: Do you believe things will get better, that we can reduce violence in Erie? Vanessa quietly smiled and confidently answered, yes, things will get better because Elijah's life matters! Presently, the Elijah Jackson Memorial Scholarship is being developed. This scholarship will be awarded to a graduating senior from the Erie School District who has demonstrated a commitment to nonviolence and violence reduction in

Erie. If you would like to participate in the development of this scholarship, please respond to me by email: [baker002@gannon.edu](mailto:baker002@gannon.edu),

[1] 1 Kings 17.

[2] <https://www.kcmothersincharge.org/what-we-do>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



Dr. Baker can be reached at: [baker002@gannon.edu](mailto:baker002@gannon.edu).

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