

A couple of months ago, I was sitting in bed watching a Ted Talk by Luvvie titled **“Get Comfortable with being Uncomfortable”**, and in this TedTalk she talked about feeling as if she was always the one to shake up a new environment. Meaning, she was always the *one* to speak out against injustices in the environments she was in. She named this kind of person a **“professional trouble maker.”** She said, for a line of dominos to fall *one* has to be first. Someone has to be the **bold** one. Once that *one* falls...it’s almost certain that the rest will follow suit.

I am often the first domino to fall. Being the first domino takes courage. It does not mean you aren’t afraid, it means that even through you are afraid you don’t mind disrupting the comfort at the expense of whatever it is that you may be sacrificing. Being a domino is about defending someone in trouble, sitting with the kid at lunch who is alone. **Being a domino is about being uncomfortable.** When they say yes, say no. It’s a sacrifice. But don’t worry....she says as long as you can **mean it**, can **defend it**, and **say it with love**...the sacrifice is always worth it. She says **in a world that wants us to whisper...I choose to yell...**

That’s one way the whole domino effect works...but it also works another way. Sometimes we don’t choose our purpose...our purpose chooses us.

Growing up I was fortunate in many ways, but there was nothing that could stop me from experiencing the inevitability of losing a loved one to gun violence. I attend a private, Catholic school in the “good part” of town. The sun seems to shine brighter, and the air is light. My school is surrounded by an antique fence that’s just high enough to reach above the fourth graders’ ponytails. During the day, that gate keeps us safe in our sheltered world. However, after 3:30 pm we go our separate ways, and the gates mean nothing. My world outside of high school is completely different, which was true for majority of my friends. Most of my family comes from the south side of town. My friends attend public high schools, and the air outside of my home is just a little thicker. I live close enough to the city to hear the emergency sirens, but not close enough to hear the gunshots. Since I’ve been in high school, crime rates in my city have skyrocketed. Gun violence is the major contributor.

By the time Junior year rolled around, six teenagers I knew had fallen victim to this violent epidemic. It seemed like I was offering my condolences or watching my friends grieve every other week. So, it should have been no surprise when I got that text, but it was. On August 3, 2021, I got a text that read, “Braylon died.”

Braylon died. I quickly called a friend our ours, who was at the scene, and she confirmed that a few moments earlier, Braylon died due to the injuries from the bullets. My best friend in the whole world, my confidant, and my “big brother” was gone just 1 month and 4 days before his 18th birthday. Those words pierced my consciousness and shattered my heart. How was I to go on without my best friend? We planned on being the aunt and uncle that spoiled each other’s

kids. We planned on attending each other's graduations. We were surviving in a pandemic so, how could gun violence be the thing that took him from me?

For two months, I lived in a state of complete shock and heartache. Each heart beat hurt a little more than the last. If I'm being honest, I wasn't quite sure if I was going to make it. I thought that I was going to DIE from heartbreak. I started junior year knowing that in 5 days ... after 3:30 hit... after I left those gates. I would be attending the funeral of a person I thought I had the rest of my life with. If you have never experienced this, look to the sky and thank God for keeping your loved ones off that list because it is the most painful thing I've ever had to endure.

October rolled around and it was time to begin a program my mom signed me up to participate in, LITE Memphis. They help minority students turn their entrepreneurial aspirations into reality, whether that be non-profit or for-profit. I already had a for-profit business, so I wanted to do something to give back. Through research I realized that certain facts about the murders in my city remained consistent through each case.

Black youth were murdering black youth. There were victims on both sides of the gun.

That realization was the spark that ignited "the moment". You know, that moment you realize what you were born to do. Yes, I found my purpose under tragic and unfortunate circumstances, but I found it. It was at that moment that I decided I wanted to change for my community and the generations to come. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Be the change you wish to see in the world.". I decided to be that change.

So, I founded Operation R.A.E., a youth-led non-profit organization whose priority lies in creating impactful programs that provide safe spaces for youth to learn about the dangers of

gun violence. We also advocate for gun violence decrease, especially that related to inner-city youth. Every day I wake up, I get to wake up and be a voice for the youth in my city, ***even the ones who no longer have a voice.***

This is what keeps me going. So, yes those antique gates protected me while in one world, but it was stepping outside those gates that allowed me to experience the change I needed to grow into a person who laughs in the face of adversity.

I give God all the glory and honor, but man does he work in very mysterious ways. If you would have told me on August 3, 2021 that anything good could have come from this I would have asked you “Have you lost your mind?”. If I have learned anything from Braylon’s death...it would be. “Everything has its purpose.” I believe wholeheartedly that I met that gentle giant for a reason.

Through my work I have encouraged many people to join me in the fight against gun violence. From there, they invited or inspired others to join. So on and so forth. I was the first domino in my community...and the rest **will be** history and **OUR FUTURE. Your future.** When we leave this arena today and you return to your daily lives in which...**remember one**

small act can ignite an entire movement. Just have the courage to get it started. Be a DOMINO.