

Patty Somlo

OUTTA HERE

The first time the officer told the boy to drop the bat, the boy began to walk forward. He was just under five feet tall, so the bat may have looked longer than it would have appeared, if held by a boy of greater height. The boy, people in the neighborhood would later comment, had dreamed of becoming a baseball player.

By the second time the officer ordered the boy to drop the bat, the boy had narrowed the distance between them. The officer wasn't aware that the late afternoon sun had started shooting rays directly into the boy's dark brown eyes. Traffic had grown heavy on Seventeenth Street, two blocks south of Martin Luther King, Junior Boulevard, where the boy stood clutching his bat in a field infested with weeds and discarded soiled napkins and soda cups, outside an abandoned low-income housing project. The racket caused by cars and trucks passing made it hard for the boy to hear what the officer had been shouting. When the boy looked toward the officer, the bright glare from the sun made his eyes ache and tear, forcing him to drop his gaze.

Still, the boy continued moving toward the officer. Folks in the neighborhood would later claim that even though he had some disabilities – or *challenges*, as some preferred to say – the kid was one of the friendliest and most sociable kids many had ever met. His mother worried about him for all the obvious reasons a parent fears for a child, and especially a special needs kid, but also because he had never learned to keep his distance from strangers, who might do him harm.

The third time the officer ordered the boy to drop the bat, the boy believed he had gotten close enough to hit the ball. He turned slightly to stand sideways and moved his feet eight or so inches apart, the way Billy “the Bomber” Boggs, the famous baseball player who'd grown up in the neighborhood and returned there to live after he retired from the game, showed him several times.

As he lifted the bat, the boy heard a loud cracking sound. No one saw what happened before or after that sound, but a second and third cracking sound followed. The boy was bleeding by then, so heavily it was impossible to see where the blood was coming from, and his short, somewhat pudgy body had fallen, and lay curled practically in the fetal position on the ground.



The shooting of DaVon Richards rocked the neighborhood, a principally African American enclave whose tree-lined residential streets fanned out east and west from MLK Jr. Boulevard. DaVon Richards, as everyone in the neighborhood knew, could not have hurt a fly. He'd been born fourteen years before with what his mother described as a sweetness almost impossible not to love. His intellectual challenges became more and more apparent as time went on. At first when DaVon went to school, some of the kids, usually boys, made fun of him. In those days, everybody referred to DaVon as *slow*. But DaVon didn't realize that he was being bullied and before long, the toughest kids began to look out for him.

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In the first hours and days after the white police officer shot and killed DaVon Richards, firing three times, folks in the neighborhood felt numb. The police department claimed that DaVon, a black, intellectually challenged fourteen year-old, had threatened the officer with a bat that could be used as a weapon. A memorial was started for DaVon with flowers, a handful of toys, including metal trucks, and several baseball gloves. Family, friends and people who lived in the neighborhood gathered in the weed and trash-infested field where DaVon had been shot. The media dutifully arrived, along with the mayor, city councilors and the area's congressional representative. Baptist minister Calvin Butler set up a stage, podium, microphone and sound system, then invited people to come up and share what they remembered about DaVon.

Ali Mansour, who owned the neighborhood's one convenience store, stood up first. People were surprised to see Mr. Ali, as the older residents called him, crying.

"DaVon came to my store every day," Ali began, speaking haltingly because he couldn't stop crying. "He wanted to learn how to use the register, so I showed him."

Surprisingly, Ali then started to laugh.

"I must have showed him a hundred times," he said, shaking his head and smiling. "He couldn't remember how to do it. But he always wanted me to show him, so he could learn again."

Ali stepped away from the microphone to wipe his eyes. He blew his nose with a light blue handkerchief pulled out of his pocket and then came back to the podium, leaning toward the microphone and saying he was sorry. He stopped crying long enough to explain, "DaVon wanted to learn because he said he planned to open his own store one day."

The tributes went on throughout the afternoon and into the night. As speaker after speaker spoke about the loving boy, who unlike most people never complained, got depressed or had a bad word to say about anybody, something became clear to Billy Boggs. In middle age and carrying a hundred pounds more weight than when he'd gone almost overnight from being a poor black kid to a major league, high-salaried baseball player, Billy had long ago lost contact with his two grown kids. He had barely known them when they were growing up because he'd focused nearly all his time and attention on baseball.

A few years back, Billy had started spending time with DaVon, his mother being a good friend and DaVon not having a father around. Sometimes, Billy thought of DaVon as his adopted son. He'd taught DaVon to throw and catch, run and hit the ball. The bat DaVon had been holding at the time of the shooting and failed to drop had been a present from Billy for DaVon's thirteenth birthday.

The last speaker stepped down. Without thinking, Billy began making his way to the podium. He didn't have a clue what he wanted to say, as he moved the microphone up and tapped the end to see if it was working.

He looked out at the crowd. The faces were black and brown, white and Asian. So many people had congregated in the field that folks were now spilling out onto the sidewalks. Some even stood across the street.

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Billy still didn't know what he was going to say, as he continued to study the crowd. But then he let himself picture DaVon in his mind, wearing the Giants jersey Billy had given him, the one that had started to get too small.

He could see DaVon, concentrating so hard his forehead had wrinkled up. And then he remembered the thing DaVon nearly always did, whenever Billy sailed an underhanded pitch towards him. Just before DaVon stepped his right foot forward and swung the bat, he mimicked what the play-by-play broadcasters shouted when a ball was hit out of the park. "It's outta here," DaVon loved to yell.

The sun had set by the time Billy told that story to the crowd. He let them know that DaVon assumed he would get a home run every time he hit the ball. Billy asked the crowd if they had any idea what knowing DaVon had taught him. Following a few murmured and several shouted responses like, "Love, man," and "Joy," Billy answered, "No. It was hope. DaVon Richards taught me about hope."



It only took two weeks for Billy Boggs to raise enough money to build the diamond and buy enough bats, gloves, shoes and uniforms for all the neighborhood kids that wanted to play ball. The city council, with unprecedented speed, helped push through the required permits to have the housing project torn down and that vacant, weed-infested lot readied to become a new city park.

Billy recruited several police officers to coach in their off-duty hours. He wasn't naïve enough to believe, as some folks thought, that the DaVon Richards Park and the MLK Bombers would change the world or do all that much to address the deep-seated issues that ended up stifling and snuffing out too many young lives.

But as he prepared to swing the bat for the pitch to commemorate the start of the Bombers' first season and the opening of DaVon Richards Park, Billy Boggs smiled. The bat kissed the ball and Billy watched it sail, over the diamond, past the outfield and beyond.

Billy heard a familiar voice shout, "It's outta here." He used the back of his hand to wipe the tears away from the corners of his eyes. Then he looked up, imagining that the ball had just bounced and then stopped on the rough surface of a large and blindingly radiant star.

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