

1 LaDarren Starks VGV 88 8/20/2022

2 D: oh, I am too. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

3 L: Well, my name is LaDarren Starks. I'm 37 years old, I'm an African American male from
4 Mississippi originally. I moved up here about 13 years ago and I've been working with young
5 people ever since.

6 D: Wow.

7 L: Yeah.

8 D: And what race are you?

9 L: I'm African American.

10 D: And what neighborhood generally do you live in?

11 L: I stay on the Northside of Milwaukee.

12 D: Okay, so is it like the Harambee area, the Midtown area?

13 L: The Midtown area

14 D: Okay.

15 L: Yeah, the 76th area.

16 D: Okay, yep midtown.

17 L: Yep.

18 D: How long have you lived there?

19 L: I've been here in this area; I've been in this area for about three years.

20 D: So, do you remember what happened with your experience with gun violence?

21 L: Yes ma'am.

22 D: Please share.

23 L: Okay. It was back in 2002 I was here on vacation from Mississippi, I had just finished my
24 junior year of high school and I was going into my senior year when me and my sister left that
25 same day the last day of school, and got on the bus and came here to visit for the summer. But in
26 the back of my mind the whole time I'm like, I'm leaving Mississippi and I'm never coming
27 back. Nobody knows this but this is in the back of my mind so, I get here and I'm living with my
28 dad, that's why I'm coming. My biological dad stays here all his brother and sisters and stuff like
29 that. So, I have a lot of family here. When I got here when I got with one of my cousins, one of
30 my older cousins, and he had a stolen vehicle. Now, this was my first time ever being in a stolen
31 vehicle and when I came—when I made it here that day I think it was like March 24th of '02 and
32 I knew something was weird about the car because the steering column was covered but he had a
33 key but the steering column was still covered but it was hot so I'm like okay, I was just trying to
34 make it make sense. So, eventually, after a few weeks, he eventually came out and told me that it
35 was a stolen car that we were riding in and I'm like wow I'm 18 at the time, you know 18-year-
36 old we hardheaded. My dad did tell me, "Son, you do not need to be hanging with your cousin."
37 And I didn't listen, and what ended up happening by July of that same year, July the 19th is when
38 we were riding down the street and we were just minding our business we weren't even messing
39 with anybody or nothing, they weren't shooting at us, but we heard gunshots. So, as we were
40 driving, I ducked down, I remember ducking down, and then when I raised back up to look and
41 see where the shot was coming from, I got hit in the back of the head. The second bullet hit me

42 in the back of the head and right then and there my life was changed forever. Ever since that day
43 Ms. Debra.

44 D: Wow.

45 L: My life hasn't been the same since that day, since that day—since that gunshot that day? My
46 life hasn't been the same.

47 D: So, what happened, did the car pause and that's why you got shot, or were you guys still
48 driving and the bullet came and still shot you?

49 L: We were driving. We were still driving; we hadn't stopped we were driving. I remember my
50 cousin stopping when I got shot.

51 D: Wow.

52 L: Because when I got shot, I immediately knew something was different because I couldn't
53 move. I couldn't move and I could say anything. So, I could see my cousin yelling, "Call the
54 police, call the police! He's just been shot in the head, call the police!" and I'm just lying there
55 moaning I'm just lying there moaning like "Oh, oh" I couldn't say anything and so next thing
56 you know I remember the police coming cutting my clothes off me asking me questions I could
57 say anything, I remember putting me on the stretcher, put me in the ambulance and when they
58 putt the oxygen mask on me I blacked out.

59 D: Wow.

60 L: I blacked out and when I woke up again, the next time I woke up I was in my room looking at
61 the ceiling.

62 D: A hospital room?

63 L: My own, I was in my room looking at the ceiling and I can remember I couldn't talk or say
64 anything so my family that was there they would squeeze my hand to let me know—I would
65 squeeze their hand to let them know that I hear them. So, my mom rushed here from Mississippi
66 my dad my stepdad my family from Michigan, they for all over because they thought I was going
67 to die.

68 D: Wow.

69 L: Yes ma'am. And the guy wasn't shooting at us, what I later learned when I was leaving the
70 hospital, what I later learned is it was some young people shooting dice on the corner and the
71 guy lost his money. The guy lost his money, and he wanted his money back. So, the guy that had
72 the money he tried to rob him, so he was running and then the guy was shooting at him. Also,
73 another—I was 18 at the time a 12-year-old got shot in the back that same day.

74 D: So, when, you may not know the answer to this but what general area were you in when you
75 got shot?

76 L: They7 told me 45th and Meinecke.

77 D: wow.

78 L: Back in 2003 how that neighborhood was? It was rough over there.

79 D: I mean I know Milwaukee but I really—I mean I know I can picture it, but I can't.

80 L: Yeah, it was broad daylight, it was broad daylight kids were outside playing everywhere it
81 was a lot of people outside, but for them to be shooting in broad daylight like that? That was
82 awful.

83 D: So, what you're saying is the guy who lost his money was trying to steal his money back from
84 the guy who won?

85 L: That won the money, yes. And that's how the streets are though, that's how the streets play.

86 D: So, it sounds like everyone who was involved with the exception of you were youth, they
87 were under 18.

88 L: Not sure how old those young people were.

89 D: Okay.

90 L: Not sure. Not sure how old those young people were but the other young man that got shot he
91 was 12 and he got shot in the back a long with my getting shot in the head.

92 D: How would you say this experience has affected you, your family, and your community?

93 L: Oh, well I would say it has affected my life to the point where I no longer want to be a gang
94 banger, a drug dealer, or anything like that, I want to help my youth and because of me getting
95 shot that turned my life around. Originally, I had a different plan for my life and God turned it
96 around and made me a youth minister and now I work with the youth, and I've been here since
97 2008, and I've been working with the youth since 2008. I've been a crisis stabilizer for eight or
98 nine years. I worked in several group homes. I'm a teacher's assistant right now going, I'm
99 actually enrolled in UWM and I'm going to start my classes out there and finish my bachelor's
100 degree in social work.

101 D: Wow, so will you go on to be—instead of a teacher's assistant a teacher or will you go
102 become a social worker, or what?

103 L: I plan to become—I have two options that I’m deciding I want to become a full-time special
104 ed teacher because the experiences and the wisdom and knowledge I have about life I share with
105 my young people and they—I originally was planning on working with the school system for a
106 couple years I’ve been there five years now so I like—I’m not going to say I like it, I love it
107 because I’m able to inspire young p[people not only the young people but even my colleagues,
108 even my colleagues. My attitude toward life, the gunshot changed my attitude towards life. I
109 used to take life for granted but now when I look at life and I see how precious it is and now I try
110 to teach other young people and other individuals how to appreciate life.

111 D: Wow. So, how would you say this has affected your family?

112 L: My mom was devastated. I can almost imagine that at some point she felt like you feel about
113 losing your son, because she thought she lost me. She thought—when she, by the time she made
114 it—my mama left Mississippi so fast she didn’t even pack any clothes. She didn’t even pack any
115 clothes. When she made it here, she had to buy all new clothes. She didn’t even pack any clothes,
116 that how devastated she was you know about—I’m the oldest of four I’m the oldest of four so
117 I’m—I was, at that time still her baby I’m 37 and I’m still her baby though.

118 D: (laughs)

119 L: So, I’m still her baby but it affects my family to the point where we weren’t we always have
120 been close, but I think the gunshot brought us even closer because we found God, my family
121 found God and that kind of you know propelled us to come even closer.

122 D: That’s beautiful how you said that that is really cool.

123 L: And I love serving and I love serving my community one thing I learned after the gunshot
124 because a lot of people were saying you know, “LaDarren God has something he wants you to

125 do.” And I never heard this nobody told me thins until 2002 when I got shot. After I got shot that
126 was the first time somebody said God got something he wants you to do with your life and I
127 found out that my calling is to the young people in the street. My calling is to young men that’s
128 out here stealing cars, the young ladies that with them, the families that’s been affected by it, all
129 that.

130 D: And how do you—would you say that this, your experience affected your community?

131 L: Well when we talk about, we’ve been talking about gun violence they were just talking about
132 gun violence on the news yesterday so, we can go all the way back to 2002, that was unnecessary
133 shooting it was two lives, not only two people that got shot but there was two separate families, it
134 was three separate families that were affected by one, by one gunshot. By one person choosing to
135 pick up a gun instead of handling their problems in a different kind of manner. He chose to
136 handle it with a gun and so, that’s—in the Black community, I’m going to say in the Black
137 community because I’m from the Black community and I’m still in it, that’s how a lot of people
138 deal with their problems. They go to the guns they go to the knife they go to gang banging and
139 jumping on people like that’s what they go to when they have a problem and sothe—in 2021 and
140 this new mind frame we have new ways of dealing with things, it’s a different way you can deal
141 with your problems you don’t have to always pull your gun out or pull your dukes out when why
142 we can’t just talk it out? Why you can’t huff and puff and walk away and come back and try
143 again? Why can’t you go outside and run? Why can’t you go downstairs in the basement and list
144 the ways instead of punching the tv and putting holes in the wall? So, we just have to find
145 different strategies on how to deal with our emotions and our anger.

146 D: You said that well, and I think what was so powerful was when you said three lives were
147 affected by one bullet.

148 L: Yeah.

149 D: Or in this case two bullets.

150 L: Right, right right right.

151 D: And that was deep. How do you think this situation could have been avoided, and I think you
152 touched on that, but did you want to expand on that answer?

153 L: We can. One thing is we have to learn how to make better decisions when things aren't going
154 the way we think it should go. Because you have to think about it, you have to think about it Ms.
155 Debra, if my mom, my dad, my entire family was affected by me getting shot, okay, then you've
156 got another young man that gets shot, now his family affected, then you've got this young man
157 he's going to jail. So now his family is affected, were all affected by one bad decision. And so, if
158 we can learn how to make better decisions while were angry? Woo, we're going to save a lot of
159 lives, Ms. Debra.

160 D: You are absolutely right. Was the person—and you know what I'm going to do I'm going to
161 cut off my camera so all they see is you.

162 L: Okay.

163 D: Was the person who shot you was he caught?

164 L: He was caught.

165 D: Whoa.

166 L: He was caught.

167 D: What happened what was the—

168 L: Okay so, the way the situation went a miracle happened, I'm going to tell you that, I was only
169 in the hospital for three and a half weeks. I had been shot in the head, paralyzed, not able to
170 walk, not able to talk, not able to use the bathroom on my own, not able to do anything once I
171 started receiving physical therapy and occupational therapy I started to get better and better every
172 day and the doctors were amazed they said: "It's a miracle that's your alive because a lot of
173 people don't live after being shot in the head". What was your questions again Ms. Debra I'm
174 sorry? I got off track.

175 D: Oh no, that's okay I asked was the perpetrator caught?

176 L: Yes.

177 D: And you said it was a miracle.

178 L: Okay so, when I got out of the hospital, I stayed here for another two weeks at my mom's, and
179 she was going to go back home, and I was coming with her. I didn't want to leave so I ended up
180 going back to Mississippi and by the time they got ready to have court, I wasn't able to testify.
181 They caught the young man and locked him up, but I wasn't able to testify because I didn't see
182 the young man that was shooting, all I can remember after being shot, all I can see is the
183 silhouette of the person holding the gun, I can't see any features nothing. All I know is that—

184 D: Wow.

185 L: A young Black man with a gun in his hand, that was all I can see. So, I wasn't able to come
186 back here and testify so they had to let him go. They had to release him.

187 D: So, what was the miracle?

188 L: The miracle was the doctors told my mom that I was never going to walk again or talk again.

189 D: Wow. And we're looking at the miracle, I'm interviewing the miracle!

190 L: You're interviewing the miracle right now.

191 D: Wow.

192 L: Yes, God.

193 D: Wow.

194 L: Mhm.

195 D: What do you think we could do to eliminate or lower gun violence?

196 L: Well, one of the things we've been talking about for years is stiffening up the gun laws. I
197 think in Wisconsin alone, and Milwaukee per se, I think when they passed the law and said that
198 we can openly carry and all that stuff, we—in the Black community, we thought it was a big
199 mistake that they did that. One of the things we talk about is stiffening up gun laws and the
200 penalty for these things. If we look back Ms. Debra over the years I say the last eight years, the
201 last eight years how many young people, not the older generation it's a lot of young people it's
202 the older people that's getting killed and being affected by gun violence but a lot of it is our
203 youth, our future. A lot of it is them, so two of the things I think we need to stiffen our gun laws
204 and the penalties and our policy. We need to, some way somehow, we need to get in the system
205 and rewrite some things.

206 D: I agree. Do you have anything you'd like to say to elected officials or the community?

207 L: Well, what I would like to say is to the elected officials, I know everybody can't—that's not a
208 job for everybody. But at the same time, you have a lot of people that live in poverty and live
209 below economical means where they look to the politicians for help and for support. So, if we

210 could get more of our politicians to reach back into our Black community, to help us, to rise up
211 against the violence, not just gin violence but violence period, were talking about gun violence
212 because it's a lot of gun violence in the Black community and I'm going to say this, I feel like
213 we need to rewrite some of the laws and the policies and some of it needs to be from the voice of
214 African Americans and young African Americans. One thing I'm learning is that the youth have
215 a lot to say, they have a lot to offer and if we don't develop and open up a platform for them a lot
216 of them would never use their voice and I would like to build more platforms for the youth to
217 speak out against gun violence because I just had a student about two years ago go through the
218 same thing I went through, he was stealing, they call it shacking now, so they were shacking him
219 and two of his friends they were trying to steal somebodies car and he's the only one that got
220 shot in the head and he died.

221 D: Wow.

222 L: Yes, at fifteen years old.

223 D: Oh man.

224 L: And this was just a couple of years, one of the students. One of my students. Yes ma'am.

225 D: I'm going to ask you because I had me in there, I got so wrapped up in your story I forgot to
226 cut my video off (laughs).

227 L: (laughs) Right.

228 D: Tell me again your name, your age, your race, and your gender, and what area in Milwaukee
229 do you live in?

230 L: Okay, my name is LaDarren Starks I'm 37 years old, I'm an African American male from the
231 Northside of Milwaukee along the Midtown area.

232 D: Okay, and you've lived there how long?

233 L: I've actually been in this area longer than three years I've been in this area for about five
234 years I want to say, yeah.

235 D: And when you—I know you were in the hospital for three and a half weeks.

236 L: Yes ma'am.

237 D: But what was it like, that rehabilitation stage? Could you describe that?

238 L: Oh, yes ma'am. That was one of the most emotional times in my life. When I looked in the
239 mirror and I've seen that my figure my face figure had changed because they cut my head open
240 to see was the bullet in my head so when I got a chance to look at my head it was swollen on one
241 side and my eye was closed and I didn't even want to look at myself. I didn't even want to look
242 at myself it was hard to look at myself. And it was one day when they put the little electricity on
243 my foot and on my leg after they told me I wasn't going to walk again, they were putting it on
244 my leg and my toe wiggled from the shocks that they were doing on my foot, and it moved. And
245 I said "wow," and "my toe wiggled" I got so excited. I said "Yes"—I told them right then and
246 there I said, "I will play basketball again, I will walk again" and lo and behold I was able, by the
247 time I left out of the hospital I had to learn how to learn how to do everything with one hand.
248 Originally, I was born right-handed, but my gunshot (pause) rehabilitated, so originally, I was
249 born right-handed but now I'm left-handed because of the gunshot.

250 D: Wow.

251 L: Yes ma'am.

252 D: That's deep. Is there anything that you'd like to say specifically to our community?

253 L: Well, I would love to see more advocates for gun violence and for our youth that's been
254 affected by gun violence. Over the last five years, ten years, I have seen two year old get shot in
255 the head, five year old get shot in the head, eight years old get shot in the head, ten year old get
256 shot in the head, 12, 14, and the list goes on and it seems as if a lot had not been done about the
257 gun violence in our community every day. Everyday. So, if I could say anything to the
258 community and to the advocates of the community one thing I would say if we could build more
259 platforms for our youth to have a voice that would be awesome. That would be awesome because
260 a lot of youth feel like they don't have a voice, they feel like they don't have a voice and if we
261 could build a platform even larger platform, and I know its different platforms in our community
262 that work for youth, we need more, we need more. I'm asking for more and it starts right here
263 right now, right here right now.

264 D: It does. And I'm going to ask you to share your story one more time about exactly what
265 happened because I don't want to be on camera when you share it, I want them just to have you.

266 L: Okay.

267 D: So, tell us what happened.

268 L: Well, it was back in 2002, the summer of 2002 where this tragedy happened. I was originally
269 visiting Milwaukee from Mississippi and to be with my family to be with my dad and this was
270 something that we did every year. This was something we did every year and I always said when
271 I got old enough (pause) Milwaukee. And so the summer of 2002 my cousin when I made it up
272 here one of the older cousins quickly came and we started hanging out and when he pulled up

273 and I went outside to see the car he was in, I saw that the steering wheel column was broken, and
274 this was my first time being in a stolen car and seeing actually seeing a stolen car and being in a
275 stolen car and so my cousin had, we rode around for weeks and weeks and I still didn't know
276 whether or not the car was stolen or not. And so, after a while, he told me that the car was stolen
277 and so now were riding around in a stolen car. Fast forward to July the 19th that day and I forgot
278 to mention this that day I got shot, that morning, the morning leading up to the gunshot my dad
279 gave me and my little sister some money took us shopping took us out to eat and by me being 28
280 I got an ID made, so I just had gotten my ID made to have identification while I was here on
281 vacation and so later on that day my cousin came and I didn't want to leave with him I didn't
282 want to be in the car with him so I was trying to get my dad's car and (pause) I could get my
283 dad's car so I ended up getting in the car with my cousin. As we were riding we rode through a
284 shootout and as we were riding through the shootout I heard the gunshots so I ducked down in
285 the car to see who was shooting and when I raised back up to see who was shooting I got hit with
286 the second bullet and right then and there my life changed forever, ever since that day my life
287 has not been the same since. My life has been completely, completely different ever since July
288 the 19th 2002 ever since that day. Right then and there I was paralyzed on my whole right side of
289 my body I had—I was rushed to the hospital and immediately went into surgery, something I
290 was thinking about concerning this story a couple of days ago when I got shot and I'm in surgery
291 I was thinking my family didn't even know where I was because my police took my cousin to
292 jail and my dad wasn't notified until the next morning. My dad wasn't notified until the next
293 morning so when I was in the ICU for three or four days, unconscious, not knowing whether if I
294 was going to live or die, my family was devastated by this one act of rage, this one act of getting
295 mad and not knowing how to deal with their problems so I was affected and I've been affected

296 for the rest of my life. I was told that I would never walk again, I was told I would never talk
297 again, and I just want to thank God that I'm able to share my story with the Voices of Gun
298 Violence community today.

299 D: I am just flabbergasted when I hear it that we're sitting here interviewing a miracle (laughs).

300 L: Yes ma'am.

301 D: That's over—that's just it's unbelievable. Please share, because I definitely want to get this in
302 there what, how did you become involved with children, what motivated you to want to work
303 with youth?

304 L: One of the things about the youth is when I was in the streets I used to, I didn't mention this
305 but I used to gangbang, sell drugs, and stuff like that and so the youth was attracted to me when I
306 was in the streets doing the wrong thing, and so, now that I'm on a different path the youth are
307 really, they are really attracted to the way that you know I have empathy and compassion for
308 them. Me getting shot made me want to be a counselor. They said when I got ready to go to
309 college they said, by the way, I still graduated from high school after I got shot, I still graduated
310 from high school and I graduated from college so I did go to college after being shot in the head
311 and after learning how to read, walk, talk, and do everything all over again like a baby.

312 D: Wow.

313 L: So, it was the me getting shot is what made me want to work with the youth because I just it
314 was like an epiphany. Like when I got out of the hospital it was like my heart was just beating
315 "youth", like just help people I just want to help people and I find myself more so helping the
316 youth, and then when I got into social work and then I realized the working with the youth is
317 really important. At that time and still at this time (laughs).

318 D: Well I want to thank you for sharing your story and thank you for letting me go further with
319 the recording because I wanted that with you and not me there, I'm not sure they could cut me
320 out so that's why I wanted to be double sure and then got it without me there (laughs). They can
321 eliminate my voice part but I'm not sure about that taping part so, that's why I asked you to do it.
322 The story was so powerful that I forgot to cut off the video (laughs)

323 L: (Laughs) Oh God thank you, thank you, Lord. Thank you. (pause) she said she forgot to get
324 off video.

325 D: (laughs) So, is there anything that you want to add that you can think of before I cut off the
326 recording?

327 L: I just want to say thank you for the opportunity to be able to share my story again with you
328 guys I am flabbergasted to be doing it, I love, one thing about it, I love telling my story my
329 testimony because it has made me a better man, a better leader, a better father, a better person in
330 general, so, thank you for the opportunity.