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Amir Locke, a young man finding his way

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Amir Locke's room in Dallas was full of things that felt out of place in a young man's space, his aunt Linda Tyler thought as she helped Amir's mother pack the remnants of his life.

It had been full of mementos — family photos from the mall, elephant figures that a beloved grandmother collected before she died, a miniature basketball set from his godfather, an L-shaped desk Tyler had given Amir at least a decade prior. All this was proof to her of Amir's "old soul."

"To help my sister put away her child's things for the final time ... to go with her right before the week of the funeral to get his suit and she said to me, 'Is this the last time I'm going to shop for my son?' Overwhelming," Tyler recalled.

Locke lived in Texas with family but grew up in the Twin Cities and visited often. He was 22 and transient, a high school grad who shrugged off college to chase a career in music, a food delivery driver suspended between cities, searching for purpose.

The morning of Feb. 2, a police SWAT officer quietly turned a key to the downtown Minneapolis apartment where Locke lay beneath a blanket on the couch. He had been sleeping over with his cousin, 23-year-old Marlon Speed.

There was no knock at the door and no wait for a response. Nine seconds flash between the moment police burst in and when they shoot Locke. They note he had a pistol in his hand.

Two months later, prosecutors said they declined to charge Mark Hanneman, the officer who pulled the trigger, because they didn't feel they could get a conviction under state law.

Amir Locke's death rekindled years of tension in a city where rioters once torched a police station and caused an estimated \$500 million in damage after Minneapolis police officers killed George Floyd.

Family members fear he will be defined by his death. There was so much more to him, they say, and so much left to be done.

"No parent would ever imagine that their kid would die such a horrific death. You really didn't think he would be gunned down like this because you live life in such a way that you would avoid these things," Tyler said.

Locke was not the subject of the warrant that sent police to the apartment in the Bolero Flats building. Those investigating the death of a St. Paul man a month earlier eventually arrested Locke's 17-year-old cousin Mekhi Speed, Marlon's brother. Mekhi lived with his mother in a different apartment in the building. Police have not offered evidence that Locke was involved with the St. Paul homicide or that he was close with Mekhi.

As a musician Locke experimented with trap music, an unflinching brand of hip-hop typified by graphic allusions to drugs and gangs, but he had no criminal record to suggest his artistic aesthetic bled into real life. Family members say he had a permit for his gun and carried it for protection while delivering for DoorDash.

Locke's father, Andre Locke Sr., learned of his son's death when authorities arrived at his house later that morning. He called Locke's mother, Karen Wells, who flew from Dallas. Amir's brother, 24-year-old Andre Locke Jr., ran his hands over his brother's five bullet wounds as his body lay in the medical examiner's office; the wounds felt as big as bottle caps.

As mass protests echoed Amir's name across the Twin Cities, his funeral was held at the Shiloh Temple in north Minneapolis. The program was heavy with national figures. Not every relative who wanted to speak got a chance.

At rallies, Andre Sr. described the futility of drilling into his sons how to behave around police if they were just going to be taken by surprise while they slept.

Amir Locke was born Nov. 11, 1999, at St. John's Hospital in Maplewood, with fat cheeks and a mat of dark hair. The young family started out in St. Paul, but his parents moved to the east metro suburbs of Maplewood and North St. Paul seeking peace and quiet for their sons.

Throughout their childhoods, brothers Andre Jr. and Amir were inseparable. In family photos, the boys sit cross-legged in matching sweaters, pose back-to-back in oversized hoodies, and practice synchronizing their footwork in African drum and dance class.

Amir Locke, left, and his older brother, Andre Jr., were two years apart and inseparable growing up. Both were passionate about music, often promoting each other's songs.

As young boys, they would roam the halls of Sonic Edge Studios in Minneapolis with cousin Eryk Loffman, 24, keeping themselves entertained while their fathers recorded rap and hip-hop.

They played video games, shot hoops at the park and tumbled around with Loffman's dog at his house in north Minneapolis. Loffman described his cousins fondly as mischief multiplied, always cracking jokes and pushing buttons. The three relied on each other through family instability in their early years.

Andre Sr. served a period in prison nearly 20 years ago, when the boys were around 5 and 3. He and Karen Wells later divorced when their sons were teenagers. Andre Jr. and Amir lived primarily with their mother. A large safety net of aunts and uncles with careers in film, finance and fundraising gave them advice and pocket money.

"It's been hard for them, but with [Andre Jr. and Amir], as long as they had each other, they were just fine," Loffman said.

The boys came of age during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Amir was 13 when Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida. Wells took the boys to a rally for Martin, where she tried to impress upon them how history was in the making.

"Amir was very moved by each of the things that took place during the George Floyd uprising, and also Breonna Taylor, and also going back to Trayvon Martin," she said. "When he looked at those people, he not only saw himself. He saw me, he saw his brother, he saw his uncles, saw his grandfather. And yes, we have trained them to respect the law, and to make the right decisions to make it home safely, but as he became older, he spoke out. He didn't hold his tongue, and he spoke out about things that were unjust to him."

Andre Jr. was more the gregarious performer, according to their parents. Amir was softer and circumspect, with a fear of being misunderstood. He gave football a try at Como Park Senior High, but he soon fractured his collarbone. Both brothers gravitated to their father's love of music and transferred to St. Paul's High School for Recording Arts.

The first time Andre Sr. overheard his sons' music, he was walking past the room where they were mixing and started bopping to the beat. It astonished him to learn they made it.

Andre Jr.'s brand became Andre Phoenix. Amir was Big Seemo. They wrote, sang and produced, making trap and hip-hop, pop and soul. They promoted each other on social media and taught their father how to use home recording equipment. They made him an Instagram account under his stage name, Buddy McLain, and encouraged him to release his own music.

"He gave you what he wanted in return," Andre Sr. said. "He gave you respect, and he ended up earning that respect back from us."

Through middle and high school, the brothers hung out with their friend Rashaan Davis. They'd go on summer vacations together and pop off fireworks in the street on the Fourth of July. After high school, both rented rooms in the St. Paul home of Rashaan's parents, Kirk and Michelle Davis.

Yasmin Davis, Rashaan's older sister, remembers grown Amir as content with solitude, always mixing music in his room late at night. He was constantly thinking but had to have his thoughts coaxed out of him. When Amir did open up, he would share a glimpse into his spiritual pursuits — numerology, crystals, cryptocurrency, the manifestation of dreams through work and willpower.

In addition to his music, Amir wanted to do something for society. He registered a limited liability company called Saving the Youth. The idea was to design clothes and use the profits to develop a studio program teaching kids to express themselves, survive high school and reject the call of the streets, Michelle Davis said.

It had not gotten off the ground by the time Amir was killed.

Amir had no interest in a 9-to-5 job. His mother didn't always agree with his dismissal of college, yet she never wanted to force it on him. Instead, his parents talked with him about becoming a man, said his father: about building credit, buying a house for equity, learning how to handle a gun to protect himself and his eventual family.

Toward the end of 2019, Wells relocated with Amir to Texas, where she worked in real estate. Andre Jr. joined them a year later. She said wanted her sons out of the Twin Cities to avoid rising crime.

There were also opportunities in music down South. Amir had been a fan of Cloud 9 Empire, an indie label managed by his cousin Marlon and founded by rapper G-H60d, who like him moved from St. Paul to Dallas.

To support himself, Amir continued to drive for DoorDash, spending long stretches alone with his thoughts.

"I just hit the road up by myself they asked me why I left," he sang in his song "Traacherous." "Gotta do it one day in this life, take some different steps."

In late 2021, Amir returned to visit his father and the Davises. He stayed the holiday months, occasionally couch-hopping with friends and cousins his age. He had been planning to travel back to Dallas just days before he was shot, his parents said.

Family members speaking in public have been united in their plea that the Twin Cities keep Amir's name alive but that protests should not turn violent or destructive. Privately, they are furious.

Amir's older paternal cousin Reginald McClure is a federal law enforcement officer. There was a family of legal gun owners, he said, with gun safety impressed on Amir early on in life.

McClure has watched the police body-camera footage of Amir's shooting over and over. In the final frame before the gunfire blast, Amir can be seen rolling into a fetal position. His right hand extends from beneath a blanket holding his FN Five-seveN pistol pointed, at a 45-degree angle, toward the ground. The index finger extends straight along the slide.

CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS

Zoomed-in body-camera footage shows Amir Locke, covered in a blanket, briefly picking up a gun before Minneapolis police shot him while serving a search warrant on Feb. 2 in Minneapolis.

It is a textbook grip for safely handling a gun that one does not intend to shoot. McClure said he noticed that right away.

Andrew Tyler, Amir's paternal uncle, views his nephew's killing as a contemporary chapter in America's ongoing story of racism, not unrelated to slavery, segregation and the continuing culture wars on school boards torn over whether to teach the viewpoints of minorities.

"The worst place that a Black man can exist in America is in a white man's imagination," he said, recounting the sincerity with which his white friends asked why his nephew had a gun, or what he was doing in an apartment when he didn't live there. The answer, Tyler said, was that Amir had a right to have a gun as a law-abiding adult in America, and crashing on a cousin's couch is a normal thing that people do.

"He wasn't afforded the opportunity that most men get," Tyler said. "My nephew didn't even get the sheets off his head before he was blown away."

The family's loss is worsened by the sense that Amir's obituary with Estes Funeral Chapel was shorter than it should have been. His life hadn't really taken off. He'd died with ideas half-formed in his head of making a mark on the world.

Amir's parents plan to carry his legacy forward by pushing a state and federal ban on no-knock warrants.

"He'll save lives," said Andre Sr. "He's already saving lives."

Wells vowed also to keep fighting for justice from Hanneman, the officer who killed Locke.

"The Minneapolis police officer that executed my baby boy on 2-2-22, be prepared for this family. Because every time you take a step, we're going to be right behind you," she said Wednesday after prosecutors announced there would be no charges. "Continue to have your restless nights because I know you do ... because the spirit of my baby is going to haunt you for the rest of your life."