

## Justus's Mom Brings Leading Lady To Tears

by PAUL BASS | Mar 12, 2015 3:01 pm

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Posted to: [Arts & Culture, Theater](#)



PAUL BASS PHOTOS

Mom, left, meets actress, right.

Catrina Ganey wanted to know what it's like to lose a child to a random bullet. Tracey Suggs knew all too well.

Ganey (pictured at right) wanted to know because she's in rehearsal at Long Wharf Theatre to play the role of Lena, a woman who raises a teenaged boy — a grandson — only to see him shot dead by someone who meant to shoot someone else. The [stage, screen, and TV actress](#) plays that starring role in [brownsville song \(b side for tray\)](#); the [play opens March 25](#).



Tracey Suggs (at left in top photo) has played that role in real life since July 29, 2006, when her 13-year-old son Justus was shot in the head while riding his bike home from a carnival in the Hill. Justus [died from his injuries](#) after [10 days in a coma](#).

Suggs has wrestled with the grief every day since. She also has found the strength to press on with her life.

Suggs, who happens to love seeing plays, agreed to speak with Ganey during a break in rehearsals to advise her on the role.

They met at Wednesday at B Natural Cafe on Orange Street. Ganey told Suggs about the fictional 17-year-old Tray, the grandson her character raises in *brownsville song*.

“He’s a back talker ...”

“Boys!” Suggs interjected.

“... but she loves him. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her Tray wasn’t just a statistic. He was somebody. He was my baby. He had a name to him. He was not just some black boy running around.”

Suggs spread cream cheese on a bagel.

“I’ve lost five friends to murder,” Ganey said, speaking of friends when she lived in Detroit after growing up in D.C. “That’s five too many.”

“I can relate,” remarked Suggs. “I’ve lost a few family members to murder.”

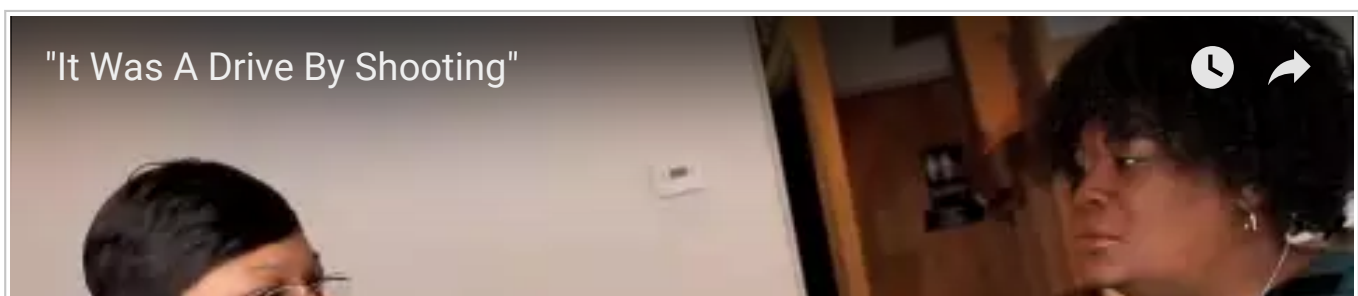
“I think I put [those losses] in the back of my mind for a long time. You deal with things and move on,” Ganey said. “This play made me kind of revisit some stuff. I’ve been actually going through a lot of stuff in my own head about my own life and people I’ve lost.”

The actress looked Suggs in the eye.

“How do you get through it?” she asked. “How do you deal with it? How do you push through?”

Another 45 minutes would elapse before Suggs paused to take the first bite of that bagel.

## Carnival





She began by describing Justus — the shy boy who loved to fish, who befriended picked-on kids, who built bikes out of parts found in bulk-trash piles, who gave away a new bike to a younger neighborhood boy who lacked one, who dreamed of owning a repair shop. Suggs moved Justus and her older brother from Newhallville to the Annex to escape street crime. As the boys grew older, she needed more room; she lost her job when a nursing home closed. The Section 8 apartment available to them was on Davenport Avenue in the Hill, where Suggs grew up. The family moved there. It was the mid-aughts; gun violence was out of control.

“Do you mind my asking — how did he lose his life?” Ganey asked.

“It was a drive-by shooting.”

“He was just in the way?”

“There was a carnival at a high school here, Career High School. They had it in a field. It was two blocks from my home.”

Justus had wanted to attend the carnival two days earlier, but Suggs lacked the money. Justus’s brother subsequently gave him money to attend on July 29.

It was 5 p.m., and Suggs was thinking about how she was trying to give Justus more independence. Justus flinched as his mom reached to him. “I can kiss you,” she remembered telling him. “I’m your mother.’

“OK mom. I’m going to meet Keith at the carnival.’

“Be back between 8 and 9.’

“He was like, ‘OK.’”

As 9 p.m. approached, something felt “not right.” Usually Justus would stop by the house to eat or check up on Suggs’ health problems. She went out looking for him. No sign of him on the street. He didn’t answer his cell phone.

Back in the apartment, she heard someone calling her name and banging on the door. She answered.

“They said, ‘Miss Tracey, Justus need you. He’s been shot.’

“Now my mind goes black. All I can remember is running back and forth not knowing what to do.

“I go around the corner. I never actually got to see him there. Before I could get to him I was stopped by an officer ...

“I remember the officer telling me, ‘If you cross my crime scene, I’m going to have to arrest you.’ Lord have mercy! ‘You’re going to arrest me for wanting to get to my son?’ It got the crowd riled up.”

The rest of the story was somewhat of a blur. The scene at the hospital. Friends from the neighborhood telling her what happened, how some Hill kids had gotten in a beef downtown earlier in the day with a boy from another neighborhood, how the boy drove into the Hill that evening and started shooting at kids, how instead of hitting his targets he hit Justus in the head, another boy in the hand, a third in his pant leg. Police caught the shooter, who was 16 at the time. He [received a 29-year prison sentence](#).

## A Prayer



Suggs has told the story many times, in public and in private. She still had to choke back tears as she spoke to Ganey in the coffee shop. Ganey gave up; she dabbed at her cheeks with a napkin as tears flowed.

“Do you still dream about him?” she asked.

“All the time,” Suggs responded.

She spoke of breaking down in supermarket aisles passing Justus’ favorite foods. She spoke of staying awake two or three days at a stretch sometimes.

She spoke of losing part of her soul, of fearing getting close to people out of fear of losing them, too.

She spoke about how, two-and-a-half years after Justus’ death, [her nephew was shot dead outside a Newhallville barber shop](#).



Suggs spoke as well of life moving on. She didn’t mention the community [anti-violence events](#) in which she has [participated](#) as New Haven commenced years of wrestling with how to stop the killing of the city’s young people. Suggs didn’t mention how she gets herself to work every evening, cleaning John C. Daniels School near her apartment.

She spoke instead of how her 7-year-old granddaughter Kevonna has claimed Justus’ room as a shrine of sorts. Suggs has kept his stuff in the bedroom. She hasn’t moved out of the apartment. She and Kevonna go together to visit the grave of “Uncle Justus,” of whom Kevonna speaks as though they’d met.

And she spoke of a prayer she recites every night: “Lord, I have laid him down to sleep. His soul is now yours to keep. Until again we meet and say, ‘I love you’ before we sleep ...”



Ganey retrieved a notebook. She wrote the prayer down, word for word.



Suggs retrieved a photo of Justus.

Ganey took a look. “I would have spoiled this child to death,” she declared.

“He was spoiled,” Suggs responded.

She gave Ganey the photo. Ganey promised to frame it. “Every day when I go onstage [for *brownsville song*], I’m going to say that prayer and look at that picture,” she promised.



Suggs finally got around to the first bite of her bagel. The mom and the actress discovered they both like shopping at dollar stores. They exchanged numbers, made plans to hang out, posed for a snapshot. Ganey rushed back to rehearsal; the rest of her bagel wrapped to take home, Suggs headed back to Davenport Avenue. Next month she heads to Long Wharf, where the theater has invited her to a performance of *brownsville song*.

*Previous coverage related to “brownsville song (b-side for tray)”:*

- [Eyeing Breakthrough, He Explores City’s “B Side”](#)
- [Can “Second-Chance Society” Compete With Big \(Prison\) Business?](#)
- [The Organic Truth, From Trayvon To “Tray”](#)

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