

JARRELL'S DEATH

Dear Friends and Family,

October 2008

At the end of August, a new volunteer and I dropped in on the Atkins family, the first family I met in Southeast, DC. Upon our arrival we were greeted warmly by Mr. and Mrs. Atkins and Jarrell, their cousin who lived next door. I had just recently gotten to know Jarrell and this morning he seemed particularly happy and talkative.

The purpose of our visit was to organize rides for the annual Atkins family barbecue to be held the next day. A brother in the family who has "made it" would host the barbecue at his house in the Maryland suburbs, and he asked us to shuttle some of the family members who otherwise had no way to get there. We were happy to oblige, hopeful for the added bonus of getting some authentic soul food out of the deal. Although the conversation during our visit centered mostly around logistics, friendly banter, and "catching up," it was punctuated with serious discussion about the most recent neighborhood violence and one of the couple's sons who has been incarcerated for some time. Before we left, we prayed together as usual, and I noticed that Jarrell solemnly voiced a few serious intentions. After a warm goodbye, we drove away, riding high on the graces of a good visit.

The next morning, I was told that Jarrell had been shot and killed around the block from his home, just two days before his 28th birthday. When I received the news, I was shocked and saddened. Although A Simple House has dealt with death in the past, street violence has never claimed someone I knew so well. I sat for a moment,

speechless, trying to put words to the feelings you feel when death steals someone quickly and unexpectedly from your presence. I was surprised by my own emotions because, until then, I thought I had seen and heard it all. No matter how accustomed—or how hardened—we may become to the effects of drugs and crime, the tragedy of a violent and untimely death always breaks through. It disrupts the peace we have struck with our world and challenges the meaning we give to our lives.

As reality sank in, I said a prayer for Jarrell and began to feel relief and consolation that he opened his heart to prayer during his last day here on earth. Moreover, I was awestruck and honored that we were given that moment to share with him.

That week, we participated in two major family events with the Atkins clan: the family barbecue and Jarrell's funeral. The barbecue went on as planned, and two months later there is still talk about the barbecued pork, inflatable moon-bounce, and the soul-train dance line. (In case you're wondering, I stunned the crowd with a moonwalk/robot dance-move combo the likes of which this city has never seen. In fact, I'm sure they'll never want to see it again, either.) A few days later, we celebrated Jarrell's life with the family during his funeral and helped prepare a repast at their house afterwards. Despite the difficulty, this week was a time of great family love and unity. But the fact remains that Jarrell is a casualty of a violent street culture. For the young men in the family still caught up in the street life, I pray his death is a catalyst for change in their lives.

Throughout both of these events, we were warmly welcomed and thanked for our presence and help. I was touched to be welcomed so deeply and graciously into the Atkins family because culture, upbringing, and skin color routinely remind me that I would not belong to

such a family if not for Love. As missionaries, we depend on the invitation of others to enter into their homes and into their lives. We are undeservedly given the honor of being a guest in the lives of those we serve, but with Jarrell's death, I am beginning to see that this is a loaded invitation. How can I possibly prepare myself to meet the loneliness, despair, rejection, loss or whatever else I might find on the other side of that door?

Then again, who knows my worries better than Jesus, the Great Guest? Just as we depend on the invitation of others, Christ depends on our invitation. He stands at each of our doors, waiting to be invited in and to be counted as part of our family. Once invited, He listens as we talk, experiencing our joys and our pains as His own. Although He sees how messy our homes are, He does not force change. He does not bust in, broom and dustpan in hand, insistent that we get to work. He is simply interested in us. Once He's got our attention, however, He counts on our participation to make us new, to reset our priorities, and to change how we look at our lives and ourselves. When we finally realize Who is sitting in our living room, how can we neglect picking up a little for Him?

All relationships revolve around an invitation. Though there is uncertainty on both sides of the door, there is no love, growth, change, or joy in life if we never cross the threshold. Jarrell's death opened my eyes to the incredible importance of the invitations we receive. When families open their doors to us, who bring only groceries and watermelons, do they get any closer to opening their hearts to Christ, who brings salvation? The "success" of our ministry has little to do with how many watermelons we deliver or if each grocery bag is dropped off on time. The life of a Christian, like the life of Christ, has only one

focus–relationship with the Other. Our success in life depends ultimately on the love in our encounters, which in turn depends on our encounter with the One True Friend.

In Christ,

Ryan Hehman