

A mother found a home in a Norfolk gang. Then they shot her in the face and left her for dead, prosecutors say.

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The intersection of Redgate and Claremont Avenues in West Ghent, where a garbage man found Brianna Arrington's toddler son in the pouring rain around 5 a.m. April 24, 2020. As seen Friday, June 18, 2021. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

NORFOLK — Shot in the face, stabbed in the head and nearly drowned with bleach, Brianna Arrington had been dying for about nine hours by the time someone found her.

It had been a gang hit, and the 20-year-old mother was supposed to die early in the morning on April 24, 2020, prosecutors said. Presumably, her would-be killers thought they'd finished the job after shooting her in the right eye, sending a bullet into her skull and out her right ear.

Arrington's attackers then drove her 2-year-old son more than five miles and abandoned him on the street, according to police. A garbage collector found the toddler wandering alone about an hour before dawn in West Ghent.

Somehow, Arrington lived. She spent weeks in the hospital in a coma, lost her eye, and is deaf in her right ear. When she testified at a December court hearing, eight months after the attack, she still had a slew of scheduled surgeries and was taking dozens of pills every day.

When she testified in court, she removed her prosthetic eye to punctuate the pain she was living with.

"She was beaten by all of the members of the gang that were there. She was pistol-whipped. She was stabbed multiple times, possibly strangled," prosecutor Katie Beye said at a July court hearing.

"She's lucky ... to be alive."

By living, Arrington escaped being one of 48 people killed last year in Norfolk homicides, the highest number in 13 years and 34% higher than the average over the past decade.

Nonfatal shootings like Arrington's also jumped last year. There were 202 of them, 28% more than the year before.

Those numbers have climbed even more this year. So far, both homicides and shootings are higher than they were at the same point in 2020. Shootings have skyrocketed 75% in the first five months of this year compared with the same period last year.

Gang violence is constant and persistent in Norfolk, although it's difficult to get an exact handle on how extensive it is and how it's changing. In general, police don't track gang crimes in the formal way they do with their underlying criminal offenses, like murder or robbery.

The FBI and the Virginia State Police publish data about local law enforcement agencies, including the Norfolk Police Department, but neither break out gang crimes. They're lumped together with all the murders, shootings, robberies and burglaries that aren't gang-related.

Plus, Norfolk police for years have been unwilling or reluctant to publicly talk about gangs in the city.

Behind the crime statistics are people. Like Arrington and her toddler son. She is but one of 244 people shot in Norfolk last year, and her story shows how one event can devastate not just the victim's life but those around them. Violence radiates, its tragedy rippling out from victims to their family and friends to the community as a whole — pressing relatives into service as caregivers, forcing children into foster care and psychologically scarring everyone.

In Arrington's shooting, the bullet somehow missed her brain, something the prosecutor in her case described as a miracle. When she finally woke up from her coma, she started talking to police. She would tell detectives her story over the course of many days.

Part of a family

Arrington told the detectives she was working two jobs: at a BP gas station and at Tidewater Community College. Still, she and her son were homeless.

She'd started hanging out with the Outlaw Bloods gang members about six months before the shooting. Through a boyfriend, Arrington met 18-year-old Skylar "Thump" Webb who then introduced her to the other nine people accused of attacking or trying to murder her — all of them gang members, according to police.

Arrington said she didn't think they were a gang, not at first anyway. They let her crash at one of the gang's two headquarters: an apartment in the sprawling Arlay Point apartment complex, commonly known as "Glen Myrtle," which is near the Glenwood Park neighborhood and about a mile south of Naval Station Norfolk. Like Arrington, Webb and her friends seemed like they were down on their luck but surviving by taking care of each other.

"I wanted to be a part of a family," Arrington testified in December. "A lot of us didn't have nowhere to go, and I thought they was just looking out as family as far as helping each other. That's all I wanted to be a part of. They gave me a place to stay. I was homeless. Me and my son didn't have nowhere to go, and that's where I went because I thought they were cool people."

But they weren't a family, prosecutors said. They were in a gang — the Eastside Rollin' 20s Outlaw Bloods. The Outlaw Bloods are a predominantly Black gang with roots stretching back decades to the original formation of the Bloods in South Los Angeles.

"I said I wanted to be part of a family. I didn't want to be any part of any gang."

Brianna Arrington

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But Norfolk's local affiliate, or set, was new in 2020, according to Beye, the head prosecutor in Arrington's case. In fact, before the investigation into Arrington's shooting, at least one Norfolk gang detective didn't know about them at all.

Despite being new, Norfolk's Outlaw Bloods got off to a fast start. Within months of forming, they'd established a clear hierarchy, with the local boss reporting directly to Bloods leadership in L.A. That boss, Brandon "Sayso" Winnegan, now 31, had tapped Toporshia "Lawless" Hodges to be his right hand and lead the women in the gang. To that end, they'd set up a Facebook Messenger group the women used for roll call to check in daily with Hodges.

And every Friday night, all the gang members met at Brown's Glen Myrtle apartment to do drugs and other "gang activities," Beye said.

“This is not some local homegrown set that’s popped up ... (merely) calling themselves a ‘gang,’” the prosecutor added. “This is, in all the traditional sense, an organized criminal street gang that is actively recruiting and committing criminal acts for the benefit of the gang.”

Including “multiple acts of violence,” Beye said.

Eventually, Arrington learned they were a Bloods gang. Three or four days before she was attacked, they asked her to join. Arrington hesitated.

“I said I wanted to be part of a family. I didn’t want to be any part of any gang.”

During her testimony, Arrington didn’t make clear whether she proactively agreed to join the gang or if the Outlaw Bloods pushed her into it and she went along. Regardless, she was “jumped in” — a rite of passage in which gang members beat a prospect. It is a crucible — people start as recruits and emerge as members. Since the number “27” has special meaning in Bloods lore, the gang members surrounded Arrington and beat her continuously for 20 minutes and seven seconds. They said to fight back.

“They told me to just keep swinging.”

Arrington, by her own account, was not a good gang member. Over the next couple days, her new comrades tried to teach her secret handshakes, Bloods lore and traditions. But Arrington messed up, and each time she did, she got “a DP” or “disciplinary/detrimental punishment,” which meant a beating. Usually it was just the women hitting her, but sometimes the men joined in, too.

Arrington estimated she got five or six DPs in the first three or four days she was a gang member. She kept telling them she didn’t know anything about all this gang stuff. They didn’t care.

The night of

What ended in a bloody maiming and near death was supposed to be a pizza-and-movie night. As the new Outlaw Bloods rookie, Arrington went to Little Caesars to pick up dinner. Her 2-year-old son was with her, and the plan was to go to Glen Myrtle where everyone would watch the new remake of The Lion King, starring Danny Glover, Seth Rogan and Beyoncé.

When she arrived around 7 p.m., everyone else was already there and the festivities had started. The other Outlaw Bloods members were shooting videos of each other flashing guns, which according to Arrington, wasn’t strange. “They always have their weapons out,” she said.

At some point, they gave her a pill and told her to take it. She did. Everyone did.

More senior gang members immediately “G-checked” Arrington — quizzed her on Bloods lore. When she failed, they beat her. The attack intensified when others joined in, with all 10 participating at some point. Still, this was a relatively routine beating, the kind she had endured several times in previous days for not being a fast enough learner.

Things got worse when Arrington was supposedly rude to a higher-ranking gang member. So they took her into one of the apartment’s two bedrooms. Winnegan beat her, Arrington said. When he left, all the women in the gang took over the attack.

“It was a lot,” she said.

After that, Arrington came back into the living room and asked Winnegan if she could talk to him out on the balcony. When they were alone, she told him she was scared, that she wasn’t “built for this stuff.” She asked for her “walking papers,” his permission for her to leave the gang.

“I said, ‘I’m not that type of person. I don’t know how to do all this. It wasn’t me, and I’m not OK with it,’” she said at the December court hearing, recounting what she told Winnegan. “I wasn’t built for this.”

Winnegan’s reply: “Don’t say that.”

The two went back inside. Arrington thought Winnegan was about to give her the green light to leave the gang. Instead, he relayed the news to everyone else: Arrington wanted out.

“That’s when everything started.”

Winnegan punched her in the face, she said. Toporshia Hodges and Asja Smith-Moore told Winnegan they needed to kill her. They made their case: Arrington was shaking in fear; she might tell people about the gang. Plus, she was making Webb look stupid, since she’s the one who had recruited and vouched for Arrington. Rumors swirled around the group about her being a spy for another Bloods set.

Eventually, a decision was made: Arrington knew too much and had been beaten too badly. The gang would have to kill her.

“If I wanted out, I had to die,” she said.



The defendants in the Brianna Arrington case. Pictured top row, from left to right, is Asja Smith-Moore, Brandon Winnegan, Deondre Watkins, Ginger Mcafee and Javonee Hodges. Second row, from left to right, is Sadia Brown, Skylar Webb, Tavarius Mitchell, Toporshia Hodges and Xavier Walker. (Photos Courtesy of Norfolk Sheriff's Office)

Xavier Walker, who goes by the nicknames “Flash” and “Turnup,” took Arrington’s socks off her feet and shoved one in her mouth, according to her testimony. Then, while her son watched, he beat her. She testified that she doesn’t remember which part of her body Walker was hitting.

“But I do remember my son watching me, crying,” she said.

During the attack, Winnegan punched and pistol-whipped Arrington in the face and choked her. Pinned to the kitchen floor, she kicked her legs and banged them on the floor to alert people in the downstairs apartment. To stop her, two gang members held them down.

Then, while Winnegan was choking Arrington with one hand, he poured bleach down her throat with the other. She swallowed some.

“He tried to drown me with bleach,” she said. “It was a big bottle.”

Meanwhile, other gang members were covering their tracks. Toporshia Hodges and Smith-Moore took Arrington’s phone and deleted the gang’s Facebook Messenger group chats. Javonee “Shamurda” Hodges, Toporshia’s husband, told them to transfer all the money Arrington had in her Cash App account.

Eventually, Winnegan and another male gang member whose nickname was “Flash” carried her out of the apartment, down some stairs and out to her car. At some point during the trip, Winnegan let go but Flash held on as Arrington begged for freedom. Instead, he hit her. Deondre “Killa” Watkins and Arrington’s son were right behind.

Once they got to the car, Flash let go, she testified in court. Arrington got in the driver’s seat with her son on her lap. She locked the car, but without the keys, couldn’t drive off. She had no escape plan or scheme about what to do next. Holing up was an act of desperation. “I was just waiting in the car because I wasn’t getting beat...and that was the safest place at the moment.

“I just wanted to get away from all of that,” she said. “I was hoping that they would just leave me alone.”

They didn’t. Several of them surrounded the car. At least six of them had guns. Toporshia Hodges told her she was “not being a good mother because I was holding (my son) to protect me” as a human shield.

Arrington apparently agreed and put her son in the back seat.

“I didn’t want them to shoot him,” she said.

Watkins broke through the Saran wrap covering her rear windshield. Her son started screaming. Again, Arrington tried to get the attention of anyone who might help, this time by honking the car horn. That didn’t work, either

Her execution seemed imminent.

“I can’t remember anything else after that,” Arrington said. “It just went black.”

Left to die



The spot along Norfolk's Glendale Ave. where Brianna Arrington was found sitting in her car after being shot and beaten. As seen Friday, June 18, 2021. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

Arrington said she doesn't remember being moved from the Glen Myrtle apartment complex, being stabbed multiple times, getting shot, being found the next afternoon or being treated by paramedics. The last time she remembers seeing her son, he was in the backseat as gang members with guns surrounded them.

But this is what happened after Arrington sought refuge in her car, according to a prosecutor:

Some of the gang members dragged her from the car and beat her some more while firing off their guns. Then two of the men stuffed her in a trunk and drove her six blocks away. One of them shot her in the face and put her in the front seat of the Mercedes.

“And left her essentially to die,” Beye said.

But what to do about her son? They decided not to kill the boy, not because it would be cruel, but because doing so would trigger a massive police response, Beye said. So three of the gang members drove him 5½ miles south on Hampton Boulevard and dumped him in “a nice neighborhood near CHKD.”

Hours later, a garbage collector found the 2-year-old wandering by himself near Redgate and Claremont avenues, a block away from the West Ghent Greek restaurant Orapax. It was pouring rain. The garbage collector called for help. A police officer who'd been in his patrol car under the interstate got the call and responded.

When he got there, he found a mystery: a toddler soaked from the rain and discovered alone in the early morning. The officer noted the boy was well-dressed in his “little button-up.”

“The child ... appeared to be almost in his Sunday best,” he said, “like he was going somewhere.”

The officer asked the little boy some questions: What was his name? Who were his parents? How did he end up on the street alone in the early morning in the middle of a storm? The boy didn't answer any of them. Nearly everything he said was unintelligible to the officer, except one thing.

The 2-year-old was given to Child Protective Services, and he was in foster care three months later in July 2020. It's unclear if he's still there or if he's been reunited with his mother — through the Norfolk Commonwealth's Office, Arrington declined to be interviewed for this story.

More than seven hours after the boy was found, police got another call. Dispatchers said someone saw a woman inside a silver Mercedes: “life status questionable.”

An officer went to the 500 block of Glendale Avenue, a 420-foot strip of road that dead ends in a solid wall of vegetation. Bullet holes pocked the car's rear driver's side door. There were blood stains and, in

the back seat, a child's car seat. One of the rear windows was shattered. A forensics team later found a 9mm shell casing inside the Mercedes, on the floor of the front passenger seat. Two more were scattered on the ground just outside the passenger side — one next to the front tire and another near the front door.

As the officer drew closer, he could see the woman more clearly. She had “two extremely swollen black eyes ... and blood all over her face. Her eyes were swollen shut.”

Blood poured out of a bullet hole in her right ear. Bruises covered her body. Paramedics later found stab wounds behind her head and down her back.

“I assumed that she was dead. I didn't expect her to respond.”

He tried anyway. “Excuse me. Hello?”

To his surprise, she stirred.

“It was mostly a grunt. She definitely tried to answer me, but she was so — her body was so bruised and beaten that she could just make noise.”

Gangs of Norfolk

Arrington's shooting exposed the brutality of local gangs, although the full scope of Norfolk's gang-related violence is hard to measure. Police don't release stats on gang violence like they do with homicides and shootings, and top officials have been reluctant to talk about it publicly for years.

In 2009, then-Police Chief Bruce Marquis was more open about the existence of gangs in the city. In fact, he teamed up with other city leaders to put out a video about it. At the time, Marquis said police believed there were 67 gangs and 1,500 to 2,000 gang members operating in Norfolk. About 25 of those gangs were routinely involved in crime.

The 16-minute video, “Facing Gangs,” aired in the city's middle schools ahead of the summer as an effort to convince students not to join gangs during the break.

The video included a warning from Marquis' gang unit boss, then-Lt. Larry Boone: “You guys are the target. You guys are the people the gang people want.”

Since then, Boone has become chief, and he has spoken little about gangs. In 2017, he told *The Pilot* there were only two or three “active” gangs in the city, although the department never answered a follow-up question about how many “inactive” ones existed. Boone at the time declined to make anyone available from the department's gang unit to talk about gangs in the city. Mentioning them in the media, he said, gives them the attention they crave.

For this article, the police department didn't make anyone available to talk about the Arrington shooting or Norfolk gang violence in general. They also didn't answer questions about how many gangs and gang members police believe are operating in the city.

Boone's denial in 2017 and the department's silence now are part of a years-long pattern of police denying the existence of gang violence or not talking about it publicly.

Five years ago, Boone's immediate predecessor, former chief Michael Goldsmith, and other higher-ups said gang violence wasn't happening in Norfolk. In April 2016, Goldsmith told City Council members that none of the homicides they'd seen in 2016 were gang-related.

But a longtime officer contradicted his former boss. During a June 2016 interview, the veteran officer said the police department's head of investigative services had been hitting officers with a message over and over: Gangs aren't a problem in Norfolk.

“Those of us on the street know different,” he said at the time. “There's no doubt that what's happening now is absolutely, 100% gang-related.”

The officer spoke on the condition of anonymity because the department strictly controls when the rank-and-file can talk to media.

Since October 2019, the department has sent out nearly 1,400 tweets, informing the public about everything from murders to fatal car crashes to myriad scams. They've used Twitter to wish dads a happy Father's Day, recruit new officers and highlight Boone's appearance on CNN to talk about joining Black Lives Matter protesters after George Floyd was killed.

The police department has mentioned the word “gang” once in the 1,396 tweets posted during that time: to announce arrests in Arrington’s case.

Not talking about gang violence hasn’t made it go away. In 2016, a gang war caused several murders, which, in part, [made it the deadliest in a decade](#). Also that year, a North Carolina-based drug trafficker ordered a hit on the aunt of a Norfolk gang member who owed him \$72,000 for two kilos of cocaine, according to federal prosecutors. The result was a 59-year-old grandmother [gunned down in her driveway](#) while taking out the trash in front of her Norfolk home.

One month later, a man was shot “execution style” outside a Norview-area pizza place in what police described as a gang-related murder.

Aftermath

The reasons Arrington joined the Outlaw Bloods are common, said gang expert and licensed mental health counselor Lisa Taylor-Austin. People who are alone need help, protection, and the safety net that comes from being a part of a tight-knit group. Those who are outcasts or vulnerable see gangs as a way of getting the family they often don’t have.

So a single mother living out of her car with her 2-year-old to care for might turn to gang life, not because of the violence and crime that comes with it, but in spite of it, Taylor-Austin said. The risk of living alone on the street is too great.

“She could be raped or attacked,” said Taylor-Austin, who didn’t consult or provide therapeutic services in Arrington’s case for police or prosecutors. “She’d be trying to protect her little boy.”

Fourteen months after she was shot in the head, Arrington is out of the hospital and, to a degree, has healed. But not completely. That will never happen. She’ll grapple with significant physical challenges for the rest of her life, said Beye, the prosecutor. In December, Arrington testified that she still had to have at least six surgeries and was taking 28 pills a day.

A psychiatrist helped her battle the emotional trauma she endured from the attack.

“I used to wake up screaming and hollering and crying a lot,” she said. “And fighting in my sleep.”

The horrors Arrington endured will be hard to forget. The cases against the people accused of trying to murder her are still working their way through the Norfolk court system, and they could stretch on for years, which means she will remain in limbo for the foreseeable future, never quite able to close the door on what happened.

That means she may need to testify at their trials and relive the day her supposed family allegedly punched, kicked and pistol-whipped her, the day they poured bleach down her throat, the day they shot her in the head and left her to die.

She didn’t die. She survived. But living on means living with the physical and emotional wounds of what happened, according to prosecutors:

That those she turned to for help and safety and camaraderie in her time of need provided none of those things.

That those she saw as family tried to kill her.

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Jonathan Edwards is a former reporter for The Virginian-Pilot.

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