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Picnickers recall gun violence victims

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Falana Whitehead unfolded the white program that she carries in the glove box of her car. Raindrops fell onto the mimeographed photo of her friend, Richard Parks. He was the 17th of the city's 20 homicides in 2010. He was found shot to death March 28 in parked car in Over-the-Rhine.

In spite of the painful memory of Parks' death, and the two non-fatal gunshot wounds suffered by her own 18-year-old son, Whitehead, 36, of Northside drove Sunday afternoon to the West End to attend a stop-the-violence cookout.

"I came to support the young lady who put this on and to add another voice who says this has to end," Whitehead said.

Tiara Shaw, 32, and her sister, Crystal Shaw, 36, both of the West End, organized the cookout on the sixth anniversary of the shooting death of their cousin, Jaamal Shaw, gunned down April 25, 2004, in Over-the-Rhine.

The steady rain could not stop the picnic or the more than 100 people who came out to Wade Park off John Street.

"Rain doesn't stop the killing, so it's not going to stop us today," Crystal Shaw said.

The goals were modest.

"You don't want to read the paper or watch the news because it's depressing," Tiara Shaw said. "If we can stop shootings for one day, it's worth it."

Within an hour of its scheduled 3 p.m. start, hot dogs, hamburgers and chicken were cooking on grills in the park. A disc jockey set up his table beneath a tent and powered his equipment with a portable generator. And the people came, those from the neighborhood, and those wearing rest-in-peace T-shirts, with a story to tell of a lost loved one.

Cincinnati had 60 homicide victims in 2009, including Candice Tate, 27, an innocent bystander shot while walking on Ridgeway Avenue in Avondale on Nov. 11.

Erica Smith wore a T-shirt with a faded image of Tate on it to the cookout Sunday.

"She was like my little sister; everybody loved her," said Smith, of Over-the-Rhine, and mother of a 15-year-old son, Marquez Coleman. "I'm going to fight to the end to protect him."

Music with a heavy bass rang through the park. People wearing ponchos and holding umbrellas stood in line for cans of Big K soda and a plate of food. The rain didn't let up. Adults pushed young children on swings.

Cortez Johnson, 17, a West High junior, walked from his nearby home and ate a hot dog with a can of

root beer.

"We're an endangered species," said Johnson, who is African-American. "You can't trust anyone any more."

Norman "Big Tank" Smith, 54, Over-the-Rhine, a friend of the Shaw sisters, worked one of the grills. Fifteen people have died since March 4.

"I've lived in Cincinnati my whole life, and I've never seen it this bad," Smith said.

Bruce Winstead, 49, a part-time carpenter, made his way on crutches from his home a few blocks away.

"Something like this shows we can care about and love each other," he said.

The list of the city's 20 homicide victims so far this year doesn't include Brian Jones, 29, who was found dead with a single gunshot wound to the head near the Petersburg, Ky., exit of Interstate 275 in early January. He lived in Hyde Park with his sister, Shauna Trimble, 37, who has since moved with her three daughters to North College Hill. Wearing a white T-shirt that featured her brother's image and the words R.I.P. Fat Boy, Trimble came to support "something positive. It really touched my heart that these ladies put this together. I broke down, it meant so much to me."

Daughter Porsh'a Trimble, 13, cried when trying to describe the uncle she lost - never mind his record of arrests for drug possession and trafficking.

"He was so nice to everybody," the girl said. "He took me clothes shopping."

Several members of the group Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV), a city-funded program that employs ex-cons as outreach workers, showed up to show support for the cookout.

"Events like this," said street advocate Arthur Phelps of the West End, "show the neighborhood wants to do something. Mothers are tired of losing sons. Everyone's tired."
