

A CONVICTED
KILLER TURNED
YOUTH ADVOCATE

'NO
CHILD
IS
BORN
BAD'



LIFE LESSONS

“As kids, we couldn’t stop the violence,” says Xavier (left, in Chicago in August; right, around age 4).



INCARCERATED FOR MURDER AT 14, XAVIER McELRATH-BEY WAS INSPIRED BY HIS YOUNG VICTIM’S FAMILY TO CHANGE HIS OWN LIFE—AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS *By* **JEFF TRUESDELL**
Photographs by **NOLIS ANDERSON**

Acting as lookout to protect the house of a fellow Latin Kings gang member, 13-year-old Xavier McElrath-Bey felt his heart begin to race. In Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood—near the former meatpacking district and known for its violent crime—Pedro Martinez, a 14-year-old suspected gang rival, stepped onto the street. Xavier sounded the alarm, and his gang members lured Pedro into an abandoned building nearby. With Xavier still acting as lookout, the other boys beat Pedro to death. “I remember seeing a shadow of him laying on the ground. I remember hearing him breathe,” says Xavier of that moment on Oct. 28, 1989. “I remember feeling horrible.” Xavier was living mostly on the streets after running away from the welfare home in which he had been placed. But on this night, he raced to his mother’s house in tears. “I never thought I’d be involved in taking someone’s life,” he says. “I was broken. I just thought that there’s no way God will forgive me.”

Within days Xavier—who by then had 19 arrests and seven convictions as a juvenile, on charges ranging from robbery to assault—was charged with murder, as an adult. The presiding judge sentenced Xavier to 25 years in prison, giving the teenager a damning pronouncement: “You are never going to change.” The words served as a wake-up call to Xavier, then 14. “There was something deeply damaged inside of me,” he says. “And if I didn’t face that, I would never be able to heal.” In prison he earned a bachelor’s degree in social sciences and learned how social isolation and peer pressure fed his self-destructive behavior. It became clear to



SPEAKING OUT

“I want to be part of the solution,” says Xavier (in 2016), lobbying Utah lawmakers on juvenile-sentencing reform.



him that teens, whose brains and bodies are still developing, need tools for rehabilitation. Released at 26 after serving 13 years as a model prisoner, Xavier became a passionate advocate for sentencing reform. Now 46, he codirects the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, an organization that lobbies states to end laws that lock up teens for life without parole. It’s an effort supported by the loved ones of Pedro Martinez, the teen whose life ended at the hands of Xavier’s gang. Moved by his remorse and purpose, they now consider Xavier a friend. “It just proves that we can all be much, much better,” says Cinthya Alonso, Pedro’s youngest sister. “He is a beautiful inspiration to many, including myself.”



A “happy soul” who loved basketball, Bruce Lee and house music, Pedro “was my best friend,” says Cinthya. When his body was found two days after his murder, it was a then 12-year-old Cinthya, the youngest of 13 kids, who had to interpret the news for her Spanish-speaking mother. “I stopped going to school and would hide in the house



FINDING HOPE

“He’s admitted he was not blameless,” says attorney Conyers (with Xavier). “He was a child looking for validation on the streets.”



because it was horrible to walk the streets without him holding my hand,” she says. The trauma contributed to two older sisters, both in early pregnancy, losing their babies, she says; a brother who had shared a bed with Pedro “couldn’t take the pain.” At 19, he jumped from a moving pickup in a suicide attempt that left him paralyzed and in a nursing home, unable to speak or breathe on his own. Says Cinthya: “We were all suffering.”

But in 2016 the Martinez family found a YouTube video of Xavier—who had worked his way through graduate school to expand his efforts

CHILDHOOD INTERRUPTED



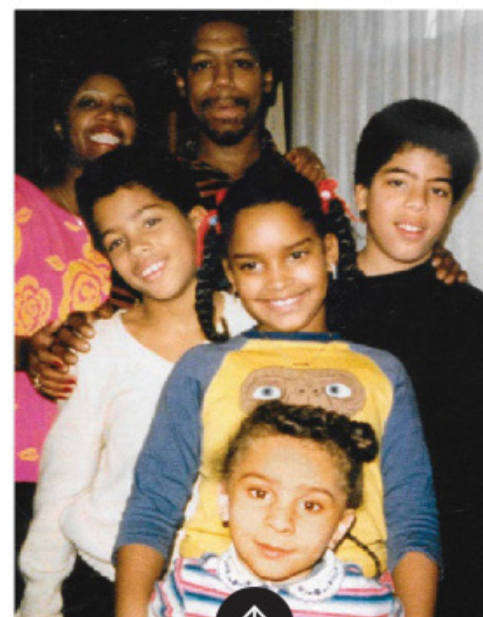
A BIRTHDAY WISH

Turning 5, says Xavier (right), was “the best birthday” before entering foster care.



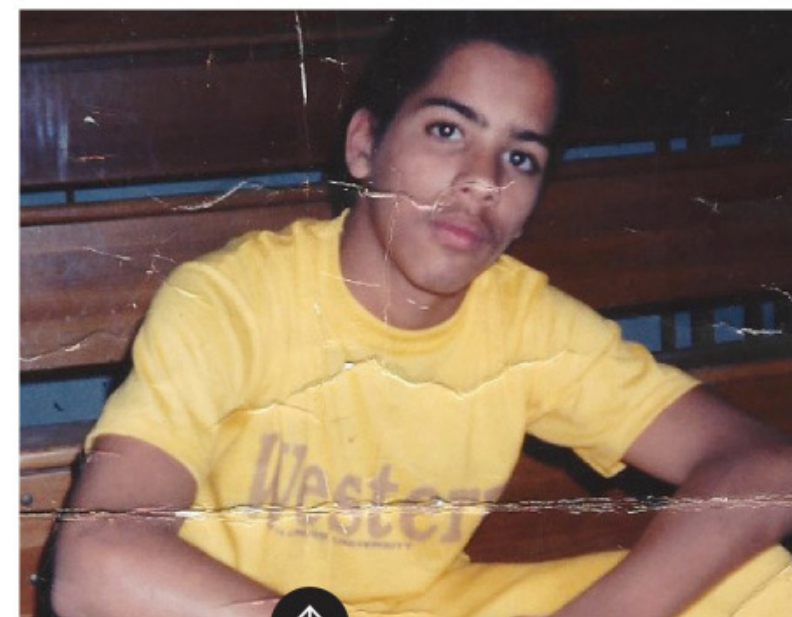
SIBLING BOND

Before being removed from home at age 6, “we were close, we would play together,” says Xavier (right, with brother Nathan).



FAMILY PORTRAIT

Xavier (in black, with father Charles and an aunt, back) is one of four siblings split up.



STRUGGLING TO CONNECT

By 12, Xavier was in a group home (at Maryville Academy). A staffer bought him this college shirt.



FINDING FORGIVENESS

After her brother Pedro Martinez, 14, was killed, “I was suffering out of loss,” says Cinthya Alonso (seated with Xavier near a portrait of Pedro). “[Xavier] was suffering out of guilt.” In a letter to Xavier, convicted for Pedro’s murder, she wrote: “I am glad he became the inspiration you needed to be the person you are today—a caring, humble and exceptional human being. You honor his memory through your hard work and dedication in bringing love, hope and compassion to all those lost like you once were. Pedro will always live through you.”

advocating for juvenile prison reform—talking about Pedro. “He said, ‘I often think of him and his family. What his life was like, what his family was like,’” Cinthya says. “At one point he breaks down, and I knew he had remorse. None of us are exempt from God’s mercy. I really felt the need to reach out.” Her subsequent email stunned Xavier. “All that I had accomplished, none of it mattered,” he says. “I became a 13-year-old [again], crying on the couch. It all came back.” He asked Father David Kelly, who works with Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation and had known Xavier since meeting him in jail at 13, to set up a meeting. Cinthya showed up with her husband, several siblings and food, including some of Pedro’s favorite dishes. “We all wanted to know what happened, and we understood that if he really had a change of heart, we were there for him,” Cinthya says. “I am just amazed what he has done with his life and what he has been doing for people like him that need support to find their way back.”



Raised with an abusive father, and then a stepfather who was also abusive, Xavier was first placed into foster care at age 6, but he “felt safer on the streets,” says his sister Melinda, 45. There he sought security and companionship. “I was a scared kid who experienced violence from every adult in my life,” Xavier says. “My gang partners gave me a sense of belonging. I would have done anything to retain their respect. They were people I looked up to and also feared.” In and out of jail before being charged with murder, Xavier had the rap sheet of someone

known in the criminal justice system as a “super-predator,” thought to be deserving of sentencing in adult court despite being a minor. But Herschella Conyers, Xavier’s public defender for his murder trial, saw “a small child, inquisitive and engaging, and he told me about his life,” she says. “Then and there I changed my mind. I remember thinking, ‘We can’t put kids away for longer than they’ve been on the planet.’” Conyers is now chair of the Juvenile Justice Initiative, a statewide criminal-justice reform nonprofit. “He taught me to look more closely at people,” she says. It’s an effort Xavier continues to pay forward. “No child should ever live without hope,” he says. “No child is born bad.”

Today, a father to 10-year-old daughter Sophia, Xavier has found strength, hope and power in forgiveness. “I’m no longer the one standing on the other side of this, the one involved in Pedro’s loss, having to live with the deep sadness and guilt,” he says. “I’m now standing alongside his family, remembering him, lifting him up... and being part of the healing.” ●

‘I TRY TO BE A LIVING EXAMPLE OF POSITIVE CHANGE. I LIKE TO THINK PEDRO’S MEMORY IS BEING HONORED.’

—XAVIER McELRATH-BEY



NEW CHANCES
“Sadly, there is less compassion and care for the most vulnerable,” says Xavier (with images of kids lost to jail or violence).