



**The Brookings Institution  
*The Current* podcast**

**“Off the court: How one basketball star’s death is saving lives”**

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*Participants:*

Ron Cottrell  
President and Executive Director, Play Smart Save Lives  
Head Men’s Basketball Coach, Houston Christian University (1990 – 2024)

Rashawn Ray  
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

Taren Weaver-Smith  
Founder/CEO, DLEE23 Foundation

*Episode Summary:*

Research shows that investing in programs and places for youth to participate in sports can reduce gun violence. But what can the people most directly affected do in the wake of tragedy? In this episode, part two of a conversation, Brookings Senior Fellow Rashawn Ray speaks with Taren Weaver-Smith, mother of Darius Lee, a rising basketball star whose life ended by gun violence, and Ron Cottrell, Darius’ coach at Houston Christian University.

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**RAY:** You're listening to *The Current*. I'm Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. We are right in the heart of March Madness, a time when the energy on the hardwood is at its peak. But while the nation's attention is on the tournament brackets, we are continuing our conversation about how these same courts serve as essential public safety infrastructures in our neighborhoods.

Welcome to part two of our series on basketball and gun violence prevention. In our last episode, we looked at the data and the power of place. We highlighted a sobering statistic that all of us can help change: millions of children live in homes with unsecured guns. These same guns are used in about 75% of school shootings and 75% of unintentional youth gun deaths.

Today we move from the research to a deeply personal legacy as we sit down with Taren Weaver-Smith and Coach Ron Cottrell to discuss the life of Darius Lee and the movement born from his story. Welcome to the show you all, welcome to *The Current*.

**WEAVER-SMITH:** Thank you for having us.

[1:39]

**RAY:** So I work with many families who have lost children and loved ones to gun violence, police violence, or other forms of violence. As a parent myself, it is unthinkable, and yet as a Black man in America with Black boys, I unfortunately think about this potential outcome all too often. Taren, I'm deeply sorry for your loss, and as much as we could talk about that tragic night, I always like to center people like Darius, who I'm sure you still feel with you on a regular basis.

We know he was an amazing basketball player. But can you tell us about Darius as a person, his character, his dreams, and his impact on your family?

[2:19]

**WEAVER-SMITH:** That makes me smile a little bit. Oh wow. Darius, even, he was such a laid back, chill type of kid. If you, you know, if you knew him, you loved him. He was very goofy, once you got to know him. He made you feel like family. He always joked around. Of course his favorite thing was basketball, practicing, going to games. He liked his video games. He loved family. He liked to hang out with his, you know, his close immediate friends.

But you know, since probably the age of nine, he picked up a ball and he came home one day and he said, ma, I have a coach that wants to train me in basketball. And he went to our local community center, which is Mill Bank, is where he grew up,

and he started playing basketball. And from that day on he was there, you know, until the end.

[3:10]

**RAY:** That is simply amazing. I mean, I love it. It is, you talk about his humor, playing video games. I mean, obviously playing ball, that is one of his loves.

And Coach Cottrell, Darius was in his senior year of college playing for you. We know that having a player and leader of Darius's caliber is special. What was Darius like as a basketball player? Talk to us about his play on the court, his leadership and his reputation.

[3:36]

**COTTRELL:** Well, the first thing is, like Taren said, he was an unbelievably quiet young man, very unassuming. Just one of those guys who you never would've thought he was the great player that he was, just by the simple fact that he was he was always kind of observing and and over in the corner paying attention to what's going on, and never the guy who was out there in front and talking smack and and doing things on the court crazy. He was just figuring out how he was gonna beat you basically.

He was a terrific basketball player and even better teammate in person. His teammates loved him, and that's what what made this whole thing so unfortunate is that this is a young man who had the brightest future you could ever have imagined on and off the court, and had it taken away from him. And I I I could have never coached a young man that was more polite, and and honorable, and wanted to be a part of a team, and and part of our program. And it was just a shame that that things turned the way it did.

[4:36]

**RAY:** Yeah, I mean, it's it's nothing like having an amazing player like that who's quiet, listens, and then just leads and is able to just get things done. And coach, what you just described, you said, quote, after this happened that you felt all alone when trying to help your team navigate the death of Darius, who was, as you mentioned, a friend, the best player, a mentor, a leader all rolled into one. What was your thought process? Who did you call and what did you do next?

[5:04]

**COTTRELL:** When I got the call early morning from from Taren, I had returned back from a recruiting trip late that night before. I knew when she called, it was like six in the morning, that that that was unusual. Something was wasn't right. And the first thing she said to me was, "they took my baby, they took my baby." And at that moment things turned dramatically.

And I didn't know where to go at that point. That is not something that we as coaches are trained to to deal with. We're trained to deal with a lot of things and issues, but to

have someone so young and and such a bright future, and have his mom calling me telling me that he was gone, it shook us, it shook our whole program.

And as I said, several times, the next few months were a fog for us trying to manage that and and kind of how we're gonna honor him and support his family, and and support my players individually that that were best friends with him, but also keep our team moving forward and and getting ready for a season without their best player and their leader. And and I had to talk to a lot of friends, and we we went through and had and had counselors from the university come in and talk with our guys, and met with them.

But you you aren't prepared for that, believe me. Until you go through it, you have no idea what you're going through. Taran lost her her baby, and we lost our leader on and off the court. And we had guys on our team that were literally devastated. I just leaned on a lot of people around our campus, a lot of friends in the coaching profession, and certainly my family. And we just all got through it together.

So that's that's kind of how how we started. And then it, we reached out and and and as you know, Play Smart kind of evolved out of this. And we we created a structure of how to deal with these kind of things.

[7:06]

**RAY:** Yeah, I mean, as you just mentioned, both of you have created lasting legacies in Darius's name. Coach, I'm gonna come right back to you. But Taren, I want you to tell us about the DLEE23 Foundation and what you all are doing to to highlight his legacy and raise awareness about gun violence.

[7:26]

**WEAVER-SMITH:** So I wanted to do something where we give back to the youth, like mentorships, basketball clinics, just places for our kids can go, kids can talk to people if they need to. We also created some scholarships, gave out a few scholarships about a year ago. We gave out some stipends.

So just a place where, you know, youth can go, you can talk to, youth can have someone some peers other than, you know, just family members. They have their coaches, they have their friends, they have their family members.

As a single parent, when I was raising Darius, when there would be a lot of different tournaments and stuff, it was, it was costly, and you needed like, you know, some help and assistance in those type of ways. So that's kind of one of the reason, main reasons why I started the Foundation to just help our kids, you know, to get them off the streets, to give them something to do.

Because, you know, Darius, he was a good kid. He didn't bother nobody. He just wanted to play basketball, be with his family, and go to school. You know, his number one goal was to get to that D1 college, which he he accomplished, and he went through a lot to get there. So I just wanted, you know, wanna let kids know, don't give up. Like, he he struggled, like, when he got out of high school, he didn't

get that offer, but he didn't give up. He went to JuCo. He made a name for himself there, and then he finally got that offer.

So, I just wanna let kids know, you know, when times get hard, things are a struggle, when family struggle, you have somewhere to go, you know, just don't give up on yourself.

[8:59]

**RAY:** Hmm. I mean, you just said of several words, Taren, for sure. And as as the son of a single mother, I know what you went through, and we appreciate everything that you've done. And mentioning the cost associated with youth sports now, I mean, focusing on that is so, so important. There are tons of kids that people might see in the middle of a street or on a street corner raising money out of buckets. People need to think about that. These kids are trying to pursue their dreams. They're trying to do something that that they, that they love to do. And if they had the money, they wouldn't be there.

And so there's several ways that we can lean in and through your Foundation in Darius's name, that's a way that people can do it in a way where they know their resources are going to a particular place.

And similarly, coach, you and others like Howard Levy have created the Play Smart Toolkit, highlighting practical resources that empower coaches to navigate both immediate, as you highlighted, as well as systemic trauma with athletes. The Play Smart Toolkit also educates players on safety measures to secure guns properly, and how to use basketball to develop deescalation skills to prevent minor disputes from escalating to fatal violence. Talk to us more about the Play Smart Toolkit, the programming, all the backstage work and conversations that people oftentimes don't see that goes into Play Smart

[10:15]

**COTTRELL:** Well, in the aftermath of of Darius's death, I I got contacted by Howard and Ryan Marks and Joe Kennedy, all all college coaches, and said, Hey, we want to get together and figure out we've got this happening to too many of our youth. And we need to figure out how to help college coaches in particular. Because I don't know that people understand that ages 19 to 35 African American young men are 19 times more likely to be affected as a victim of gun violence. And so that's our demographic. That's college basketball players.

And so we wanted to do what we could. And we formed this organization. The very basic of the organization was we want to talk about gun safety. And and let's start with that, first of all, is is how to store guns safely. Whether that's in their apartments on, you know, when they're away at college or when they're at home with their with their families, and making sure that the guns are not left out and loaded and accessible to people that maybe are having mental issues, maybe having a a bad

day, maybe having something go on and all of a sudden that that gun is there and something unfortunate happens that that affects them.

And so we started with gun safety. That was the very basics of what we started Play Smart Save Lives with. And then we started talking about how to resolve conflict and deescalate conflict and what do we do? And we do that as coaches anyway, that's that's part of our everyday life in basketball is how to how to mediate conflict during a game and things like that.

[11:54]

And so, but we started talking to coaches about how to help their players deal with things away from basketball and getting away from conflict situations. One little drill that we talked about is you give two players looking at each other face to face, and you give one of them a tennis ball and you tell the other one, you've got 30 seconds to get the tennis ball from your teammate. And you wouldn't believe what happens. It becomes chaos. There's all kinds of wrestling and arguing. And so when 30 seconds are up, you you you kind of go, what happened when we when we started this? Well, we started fighting over the tennis ball and stuff.

Well, you go back to him and you go, did you just ask him if you mind, if giving you the tennis ball? Can you have a conversation, a civil conversation over, Hey, I I need the tennis ball and maybe you don't and and would you mind giving it to me? And and so how do you have conversations that maybe bring down the tone deescalate situations.

And so we started talking about those kinds of things and how to walk away. It doesn't mean you're less of a man to walk away from a situation that may be a conflict situation if it saves your life.

And then we start talking with coaches about when something does happen. I go and talk to a lot of teams. I I spend a lot of my time now that I'm out of coaching going around talking to teams about Play Smart Save Lives, and what we're all about. And invariably, I ask the question, how many of you have had a family member, a teammate, a friend, a classmate, somebody affected, a victim of gun violence? And invariably, 75% of the room raises their hand. To me that breaks my heart; that that is so unfortunate to think that many young men in our world, and young women as well, have had gun violence affect their families, their classmates, their teammates.

And and so how do we deal with that trauma afterwards? Because we didn't know where to go when it happened with us with Darius. And so we had to kind of find our way through it with counselors and different sorts of things. And so we're trying to educate and support these coaches that are going through this on almost a daily basis now.

I don't know that people understand, 120 people die from gunshots every day in America; 120 people die from gunshots every single day in America. That to me is an astounding number. That doesn't happen anywhere else in the world. And so, we are doing everything we can to understand that we have a group of young men in

particular and young women that we're reaching out to, to try to help them deal with this situation.

[14:38]

**RAY:** I mean, Ron, just simply powerful. I mean as as a person who has had a gun pulled on him, whose had friends impacted directly by gun violence, I mean, those statistics always stand out to me as being deeply personal. And I think about how we're elevating, particularly at Brookings, how we think about the connection and the lens between data and policy and that intersection.

But Darius Lee's life reminds us of the immense human potential that is at stake. And as we get ready to close this conversation, I want to ask both of you, and Taren, I'll start with you, what is the most critical lesson our country's leaders and policymakers can learn from Darius's legacy, and the work of you all's organizations?

[15:22]

**WEAVER-SMITH:** Gun violence education. You have to educate people on how to use them, how to keep them safe, when to use them, when not to use them. People that do have them need to keep them locked up. You have to you have to educate your children. Know what's coming in and out of your house. Like, it's no need for your child to have a gun in your house and you not know about it. Know what's going on. We have to start raising our kids. People are not raising their kids anymore. And that and that's a huge problem.

[15:54]

**RAY:** Yeah, most definitely. Ron?

[15:56]

**COTTRELL:** Yeah, I think it starts with communication. We have to start talking to each other and listening to each other. I think too much is going over people's heads, no one wants to really get down and listen and communicate and build the bridges. I know Hanna talked about in y'all's previous episode, building bridges between the communities. And to me that's so important.

And our leaders, our politicians, our community leaders have to understand that the people in America want to see gun violence brought down. There's no reason we should be having this happen in America. And we have to communicate with each other and realize that the guns, unfortunately, there's 400 million guns in America right now. They're not going anywhere. Okay? We've gotta make sure that we do everything we can, just like Taren said, to own them safely and understand life is precious. And we need to understand how to communicate with each other and and get past being being the type of a a society we are right now.

**RAY:** Yeah. Amen. Look, I mean, on that note, I want to thank Taren for sharing her son's story with us. Coach Ron Cottrell, to you and all your colleagues for developing

such an important resource for coaches, players, families, and communities to lift up Darius's legacy.

And when we start talking about coaches in America, we're not just talking about elite coaches like Coach Ron. There are over 100,000 youth basketball coaches in the United States. This probably doesn't even capture all the dads, moms, siblings, and mentors who join in to help as assistants. And as a person who's coached my boys and dealt with situations that needed to be deescalated, Play Smart is a resource for all of us, as I've seen tons of kids who didn't have the resources to go on an important trip that could potentially change their life, not just from playing ball, but from being exposed. We definitely have to focus on the DLEE23 Foundation.

And so to learn more about this, you can visit [Play Smart Save Lives dot org](http://PlaySmartSaveLives.org). You can also visit the [DLEE23 Foundation dot com](http://DLEE23Foundation.com).

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And of course, as always, you can be sure to visit [Brookings dot edu](http://Brookings.edu) to learn more about the intersection of research and action.

Thank you all for listening to *The Current*.