

mother's arms.



Rashad Smith, b. 2004

New Orleans

By Nathaniel Rich

In a class for children with behavioral problems at New Orleans's ARISE Academy, Rashad Smith was the most popular kid: the loudest, the oldest, the largest. The smallest and youngest and most introverted was a boy named Kendrick. Forty pounds, five inches and two years separated them; sometimes Rashad lifted Kendrick like a teddy bear and walked around the class with him. "He's not a toy," scolded their teacher, Sidney St. Martin, though Kendrick didn't mind. Nobody minded Rashad. He teased and fought as much as anyone in the class, but always with an impish smile. He had a wild,

infectious laugh — the kind of laugh that cracked up his teachers, even when they didn't know why he was laughing. St. Martin referred to him as “my little butterball.” His siblings called him Sha. At home he was the baby, the youngest of seven, but in school, he was everyone's big brother.

When other kids bullied Kendrick, Rashad wouldn't tolerate it; he'd barrel over and accost the bully. “We don't do that here,” he said. “We're family. We protect each other.” During a class trip to Waffle House, Rashad made sure to sit next to Kendrick and helped him read the menu. When the waitress approached, Kendrick was too shy to talk, wanting Rashad to place the order for him. Rashad insisted he speak for himself. “He made sure that Kendrick had a voice,” St. Martin says. Crossing the street on the way back to school, Kendrick held Rashad's hand.

“He always had a smile,” St. Martin says. “But then his smile left.”



Rashad in class at ARISE Academy in 2016. Sidney St. Martin/ARISE Academy

It disappeared, he says, on Thanksgiving night in 2019, when Mark (Mario) Robinson, Rashad's older brother — his mentor, his father figure, his best friend — was shot and killed on the front stoop of their home in the Upper Ninth Ward. As Mario died in his mother's arms, Rashad watched from the doorway. Later, on his bad days, Rashad would tell his mother that he wanted to join Mario. On worse days, he would say that he was already with Mario, that he, too, died that Thanksgiving night. "Nothing has really mattered since Mario died," he'd say.

Mario had always told Rashad that, in order to survive childhood, he would have to grow up as quickly as possible. Everybody's not your friend, Mario warned him. You can't trust anyone. Be careful about

where you go, what you say. It's best to be alone. After Mario's death, Rashad began heeding his brother's advice. He tunneled himself inside his bedroom, coming out occasionally to play video games in the living room, where the curtains were perpetually drawn — curtains screen-printed with blown-up images of Mario and the date of his death. Rashad stopped going to school and was arrested on a series of charges (which were going to be expunged from his record). Once he came back to ARISE to fight a student. St. Martin intercepted him. "That's not who you are," he said, but St. Martin was no longer sure if that was true.

Cheri Deatsch, the attorney who represented Rashad at the Orleans Public Defenders' Office, visited him the year after Mario's death. Deatsch had been visiting with another client a few blocks away who had just witnessed a shooting, and she decided to check on Rashad. For privacy, they held their conversation outside, on the front stoop. "I remember looking at him," Deatsch says, "16 years old at the time, and realizing how heavy the world was on his shoulders." Deatsch delivered her typical pep talk, about staying in school and keeping out of trouble, but the words felt hollow as she spoke. Rashad couldn't pay attention: he was too anxious scanning the block, looking over his shoulder, wondering who might come around the corner. He didn't feel safe, outside. On that stoop. "When he was able to be a kid, he was so gentle," Deatsch says. "That was his true demeanor. But he couldn't be that person. He was forced to become tough, because you have to be tough to survive. His life was a struggle from the time he was born."



Rashad on a field trip in 2017. Sidney St. Martin/ARISE Academy

Or at least from eight months after he was born. When Hurricane Katrina hit, Rashad had just begun to crawl. Water filled the house, destroying everything. His mother, Lori Smith, waded to a shelter through knee-high water, the baby tied to a neighbor's back in a bedsheet. Conditions at the shelter swiftly deteriorated: two people died before their eyes, a woman was raped, guns were ubiquitous. Lori's sister died that week in the Superdome, leaving behind six children, all of whom would move in with Lori and her seven.

But a miracle also occurred at the shelter. As soon as they arrived, as if refusing to be a burden any longer, Rashad suddenly began to walk. Lori laughs, recalling her disbelief. "I was like, wait, hold up — you're walking? Rashad, you're walking! Rashad, you're *walking!*"

On March 4, Rashad Smith was called out of his house by a group of people he knew and shot and killed.

Juan Carlos mastered every viral TikTok dance. He performed them for his mom at Auntie Anne's, where they both worked.