

# Ezell Ford was victim of gang gunfire years before LAPD shooting

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Years before Ezell Ford was killed by LAPD officers, he was the victim of another shooting, one that marked a turning point dividing his promising youth from the difficulties he encountered as an adult.

In that earlier shooting, in 2008, he was struck by a bullet fired at the onset of a gang war. It was a feud that killed at least four men and wounded a dozen others around his South Los Angeles neighborhood, court documents say.

Ford, 25, is usually described in news reports as an unarmed African-American man with mental health problems who was shot three times by LAPD officers last August. Police and Ford's lawyers and supporters give conflicting accounts of the shooting. It will take investigations by law enforcement agencies and a civil rights lawsuit to resolve what really happened.

But family, neighbors and public documents flesh out details of Ezell Ford's life before that fatal meeting, going back to the days when he dreamed of being a pro athlete and a doctor.

## "Just a precious bundle"

Mahalia Clark, his great aunt on the mother's side of the family, told Ezell Ford's story from the beginning.

"When they brought him home from the hospital, he was just a precious bundle," she said. His parents were teen sweethearts. His mother, Tritobia, was 16; his father, Edsell, 17. Ezell was the first of the seven children they would have together: six boys, one girl.

"We pretty much spoiled him, as anybody would do with kids," Clark said.

In this family photo, Ezell Ford, right, is with his mother, Tritobia Ford and three younger brothers.

Ezell had early health problems and difficulty breathing. He had asthma at around age 5.

He attended local elementary schools — 66th Street Elementary, Marcus Garvey Elementary and Bethune Middle School, she said. As he grew and played basketball every day with his brothers and friends, private schools like Pacific Hills Prep and athletic powerhouse Verbum Dei sought out the athletic teen, she said.

"He wanted to play basketball. He was a basketball jockey," Clark said.

He was a freshman on the football team at Verbum Dei during the 2003-04 academic year, but left before completing the full term, said Fr. Michael Mandala, school president. Ford received the standard scholarship offered all students who attend, Mandala said.

## **Life on 66th Street**

The Ford family home on 66th Street is a small stucco bungalow, more than 100 years old. It's so close to the 110 Freeway, the sound wall is the first thing to cast a shadow on the house each day as the sun sets.

Its spare, concrete front yard is bordered by a metal fence, and a tiny back yard is enclosed by concrete block walls, where the Ford family and friends would gather for parties and holidays. The family of boys often played basketball on a fold-out portable backboard set up on the street in front of their house.

Interviewed several miles away in her own home, Clark recalled one Christmas when she sat with Ezell and asked him to write about his dreams for the future. She took a picture frame down from her living room wall and removed a sheet of notebook paper folded into a square.

"To his aunt December 25, 2004. My goals in life. What do I want to be when I am 20 years old? I would like to be a pro basketball player. I would like to be in college studying to be a doctor."

At age 16, Ezell Ford wrote his goals in life on a sheet of notebook paper. His great-aunt has kept it as part of a memorial photo collage.

Ford, at 16, filled the page with his careful, neat printing. He imagined each decade of his future life: practicing medicine during his pro-basketball off-season, retiring from the game, owning a nice home.

At age 50, Ford wrote, "I would be relaxing with my wife. I would still like to be a doctor."

## **Guns and pot: Troubled late teen years**

Clark wouldn't go into some details of his later teen years, citing a lawsuit the family has filed against the LAPD.

But court records give a glimpse of Ford's troubles.

In September 2007 Ford was arrested on felony charges of possession of marijuana with intent to sell and carrying a loaded firearm. He was 19.

Sheriff's deputies said he threw a paper bag containing 18 small baggies of pot out the passenger window of a car as Sheriff's deputies chased him. He jumped out of the car and ran, but was caught and cuffed.

At trial, Ford testified the pot was just for personal use — a less serious crime. He

testified he had smoked pot since age 9 and that he smoked it "all day, every day," consuming about 3.5 grams a day, the equivalent of about 16 to 18 joints. He testified he went to a studio to make music each day and he was taking the marijuana to share with his friends as a reward for their hard work making music.

"Receiving His Scholarship to the University of Heaven" is the caption on this card distributed at Ezell Ford's memorial service. His great aunt Mahalia Jackson said a few private schools had provided him athletic scholarships in high school to play basketball. The arresting deputies said there was no smell of pot smoke in the car or any smoking paraphernalia. But the strategy to show the drug was for personal use appears to have worked. In January 2008, the charges against Ford were reduced to a misdemeanor, and he paid a small fine.

The firearms case did not go as well. He pleaded guilty to carrying a loaded firearm in a public place and was sentenced to 90 days in jail.

## Wounded in a gang war

Two days after that conviction he was shot in his own neighborhood.

66th Street is home to a subset of a street gang known as the East Coast Crips. It got the name because it's just east of the 110 freeway. Walls in the vicinity are prominently tagged with the gang initials, ECC.


Ezell Ford was one of the early casualties in a gang war that took at least four lives and wounded at least 13 people.

According to court files, the East Coast Crips and their allies, the Grape Street Crips, were at the same party on Florence Avenue. About 1 a.m., Jan. 27, 2008, someone fired on partygoers. Two Grape Street members were killed, several others were wounded.

That ended the two groups' alliance. Shortly before noon the same day, someone drove down 66th Street between Grand and Broadway firing from a car. Ford was shot in the leg.

Within hours, two more people in the Grape Street area were dead in what police said was a retaliation shooting by East Coast Crips. Two ECC members were convicted in those deaths. At their trial and in their appeal, police identified Ezell "Easy" Ford as a member of the East Coast Crips.

The LAPD and the California state Attorney General keep a list of the people they identify as gang members, but it's secret and available only to law enforcement. It's not something journalists or the public may access. And critics question the list's accuracy and the methodology of how it is compiled.

Others in the Ford family declined on their lawyer's advice, to be interviewed. They have sued LAPD for \$75 million in a federal wrongful death civil rights case. 

## Mental illness becomes more apparent

Neighbor Vanessa Santory lives on the Ford's block. As she watches her granddaughter play on a skateboard in an apartment house driveway, she recalled that shooting.

"Oh, yes, I remember a little bit vaguely about it when they shot Little E in the foot, I think, or the leg? He got shot."

But she said Ford was an innocent bystander.

"I would say so, because I never seen him gang bang or anything like that, none of [Tritobia Ford's] boys, really, none of them," she said.

She said that after he was shot, his mental illness became more noticeable.

Clark said his mother took him to doctors. "They diagnosed him as being bipolar, and they put him on medication."

Ford walked for hours at a time to clear his mind, she said.

Clark says that's what he was most likely doing on the day of his fatal encounter with two gang police officers last Aug. 11. It was about 8:10 p.m., about a half hour after sunset, and the officers got out of their patrol car to question Ford, who was walking on the sidewalk on 65th Street west of Broadway.

LAPD Chief Charlie Beck said Ford saw the officers, and turned to conceal his hands, then he crouched between a car and some bushes. One of the officers reached for Ford, but Ford grabbed the officer, forcing him to the ground, Beck said. Ford grabbed for the officer's holstered gun. The officer's partner shot at Ford, hitting him twice, in the side and arm. The officer on the ground reached his own backup weapon and shot Ford at close range in the back, Beck said.

Ford family lawyer Federico Sayre said Ford raised his hands when confronted by the police, but one officer tackled him, and both shot him while an officer was on top of Ford.

Ezell Ford was fatally wounded a few doors west of the corner market at 65th Street and Broadway, just one block from his boyhood home on 66th Street.

"I want the world to know that he was a human being, with a soul," Clark said. "That was loved, and he loved."

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**AUDIO:** Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck and an attorney for the Ford family recount conflicting versions of the shooting death of Ezell Ford.