

## After a Violent Childhood, How Did Will Make It?

On 'Oprah,' UDC Student Describes Seeing Mother and Brother Slain



University of the District of Columbia students, faculty and staff watch Bill Cosby embrace student William Kellibrew IV on the "Oprah Winfrey Show." (By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)

*By Susan Kinzie*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, October 18, 2007; Page B01

Every life has its turning points. William Kellibrew's first came when he was 10 years old, watching the man who had just shot his mother and brother walk toward him with a gun.

Yesterday, a crowd of his friends and professors at the University of the District of Columbia watched him tell his story on the "Oprah Winfrey Show." Many, as they wiped their tears away, had the same question: How did Will survive?

In a world in which violence often cycles into more violence and troubled childhoods can become troubled adulthoods, William C. Kellibrew IV made it. Not only made it: At 33, he's the UDC senior class president, he's studying business in the United Kingdom on a scholarship this semester. He's on the tennis team, an accomplished singer, a volunteer, a natural leader -- the kind of person who does well at almost everything he puts his mind to and laughs it off.

Why did he survive? his grandmother, Delores Short, asked. "I often wonder about that. You know? You just wonder. He led a suicidal life."

### **An Early Turning Point**

Will Kellibrew woke up that morning, July 2, 1984, because he heard shouting outside.

No one else was home.

He was an outgoing kid and a mama's boy, the one of the five children who always wanted to go with his mother wherever she went. He remembers pushing the cart while she shopped for groceries, going ice-skating, watching her dance the Hustle in their living room before going out at night.

Will Kellibrew was the one the other children in the neighborhood looked up to, the one with lots of plans: Play in the abandoned car near their rental home in Capitol Heights, build roads by the creek and play follow-the-leader.

He looked out the window that morning and saw his mother yelling for help. Her boyfriend, who had recently moved out, was pulling her down the street toward the home. His 13-year-old brother, Anthony Cephas, held her around the waist, trying to pull her the other way.

Will didn't like the boyfriend, Marshall Williams. One night, he woke up because Williams was beating him with a rubber hose from the washing machine. He had seen his mother show relatives the bruises Williams had caused.

He didn't know, then, that his mom had been hiding from Williams, only that she hadn't been around and that the kids, from 6 to 15 years old, had mostly been taking care of themselves.

He didn't know that Williams had served time in jail for murder.

At the time, it seemed like just another fight.

The adults burst into the living room. His mother was hysterical, screaming out the window, begging neighbors to call the police.

Will sat quietly on the steps by the front door. His brother Tony was silent, standing against a wall with his head down. Williams was blocking the door, the only way out. He didn't say a word as he took out a small black gun and began loading bullets into the clip. Jacqueline Kellibrew kept screaming. Will rolled a small toy car along a step.

Even then, he didn't know enough to be scared, he said. He had seen people brandish guns and make threats but had never seen one fired.

Everything happened quickly. Williams walked over to his mother, Kellibrew said, put the gun to her face and shot her twice. She dropped to the floor. He and his brother didn't move. It was the quietest thing, Kellibrew said.

Then Williams went over to Tony, whose head was still down. He shot him twice. "I watched him pull the trigger," Kellibrew said. His brother buckled and fell to the ground, his knees together. A fountain of blood was shooting from the back of his neck.

Will was thinking: Get ready. "I knew I was next." Williams went back to Jacqueline Kellibrew and shot her. When he walked over to Will, squatted and held the gun a finger's length away, Will suddenly knew how much he wanted to live.

He looked at Williams and said: "Please don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me. I'll do anything!"

Williams didn't respond.

Will threw his head back and prayed, yelling, "Please, God, don't let him kill me!"

For a minute, maybe -- an eternity -- he begged for his life. Then he heard a click. Williams turned away, took a few steps and said something that he couldn't quite understand. It sounded like, "You can go call the police."

Will was too scared to move at first. Then he crept to the door. Put his hand on the knob. Unlocked the door. Opened it a crack. The blood was still gushing from his brother's neck. He stepped out carefully, thinking about the gun inside. When he got to the road, he started to run as fast as he could. He didn't know where he was going: Home, his mom and his brother were behind him. He ran. Then he banged on the door of his friend Pumpkin's house and yelled: "Call the police. Call the police," just like his mother had.

Why did Marshall Williams walk away?

Will's sister, Manyka Gaither, thinks it was God's saving Will for a greater purpose.

That and Williams ran out of bullets. "He was a coward," and he needed the last bullet for himself, she said. Police found three bodies in the home.

His grandmother thinks it was Will's determination.

"I don't know," Kellibrew said. "Maybe I presented such a good case. I like to think that because that's just the kind of person I am." And he had made his choice: He wanted to live.

### **'What Doesn't He Do?'**

It wasn't the first violence in their life, and it wasn't the last. Two other family members died suddenly that summer. The day after the slayings, on the way to make funeral arrangements, Will was with his grandfather when he got into a fight and exchanged gunshots. The next day was July 4, and it was years before Will could hear fireworks without thinking they was gunfire.

The children moved in with Short, in a relative's basement. No one talked much about what had happened. Will was chosen to be in a performing arts group out of Howard University and for a while he was okay. "I think God just gave me a few talents," he said and laughed. "He knew I was gonna need them."

He drifted between resolve and despair for years. He traveled with the performance group, singing, dancing and acting. He had breakdowns sometimes, thought about suicide and was hospitalized. He dropped out of high school, then decided to get his GED. He worked at restaurants, getting promoted to manager. He tried drugs and got into some trouble. "He wasn't

no angel," Short said. None of the kids were; his brothers have served jail sentences, Kellibrew said.

The next turning point came when his grandmother had heart bypass surgery. He moved in with her for several months to nurse her to health. He decided that he had to return to school, to make sure that she didn't have to worry about him and to be able to give something back. It wasn't an instant transformation. He was only deciding to move forward, day by day. Now he gets good grades studying business administration at UDC, where he's known for his infectious laugh, his friendliness and his talents.

"What doesn't he do?" said Rina Daniels, president of the undergraduate student government association. (Kellibrew served the two previous years, the maximum term.) He has organized rallies to support the students at Virginia Tech and teams to help victims of Hurricane Katrina who have been sheltered in Washington. People bubble over with stories about students he's helped, encouraging them to stick with their classes or take on a challenge. "He's changed a lot of peoples' lives here," Daniels said, "one by one."

Many students covered their mouths when they saw him, on "Oprah," drive to his old house and break down crying. And they cheered when Bill Cosby, who met Kellibrew when he visited UDC last summer, hugged his grandmother, who was bursting with pride.

So how did he make it?

Family and friends keeping him close, junior Maaku Adi said.

By realizing he had choices, said Rondolph Codlin, a 34-year-old math major. "And determination."

"Faith," freshman Lekea Hutchins said.

Sophomore Mwansa Changwe thinks he survived by believing he could make a change and stop the cycle. "His story might help close the hole in someone else's life," she said.

*Staff researcher Aruna Jain contributed to this report. Excerpts of Kellibrew's appearance on the "Oprah Winfrey Show" can be seen at <http://oprah.com>.*