

## Trayvon Martin, a typical teen with dreams of flying or fixing planes



This photo provided by the Martin family shows Trayvon Martin on a snowboarding trip, an experience beyond South Florida.

By **Miami Herald**

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Trayvon Martin spent his 17th birthday, which would be his last, with his family. He ate a home-cooked meal followed by cake, opened presents that included Levis jeans, Adidas sneakers and a bottle of Issey Miyake cologne.

He would be 17 for 21 days. He died Feb. 26, a bullet in his chest, shot by a neighborhood crime watch captain patrolling a suburban gated townhouse community in Sanford, 250 miles from his home, where he had gone with his father.

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"He had been so looking forward to going to his junior prom, and he had already started talking about all the senior activities in high school," his mother, Sybrina Fulton, 46, said in a voice hollowed and somber. "He will never do any of those things."

As the nation grapples with the killing of an unarmed black teenager wearing a hoodie, his parents patiently offer the simple details of Martin's life, painting the portrait of a typical teenager who would end up in a casket, buried in a white suit with a powder blue vest.

Trayvon Martin was 6-foot-3, 140 pounds, a former Optimist League football player with a narrow frame and a voracious appetite. He wanted to fly or fix planes, struggled in chemistry, loved sports video games and went to New York for the first time two summers ago, seeing the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and a Broadway musical, *The Addams Family*. He hoped to attend the University of Miami or Florida A&M University, enamored by both schools' bright orange and green hues.

Also known as "Slimm," he had a girlfriend and spent endless hours talking or texting on his cell phone. Other times he was quiet, listening to the soundtrack of R&B, reggae, rap and gospel music flowing through his ear buds or watching half-hour re-runs of *Martin*, his favorite show.

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Martin's parents — his mother is a Miami-Dade government employee and his dad is a truck driver — divorced in 1999 but lived near each other in Miami Gardens, working hard to raise Martin with family values and lift him above the statistics.

riding for her birthday, 13 days after his.

"Tray was a beautiful child. He was raised to have manners and be respectful. He was a teenager who still had a lot of kid in him," his father, Tracy Martin, 45, said.

"He still loved to go to Chuck E. Cheese with his cousins and would bake them chocolate chip cookies when he was babysitting them."



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Still, Martin had non-violent behavioral issues in school, and on the day he was killed, he had been suspended for 10 days from Dr. Michael M. Krop Senior High School in North Miami-Dade.

"He was not suspended for something dealing with violence or anything like that. It wasn't a crime he committed, but he was in an unauthorized area (on school property)," Tracy Martin said, declining to offer more details.

Before that, Martin attended Miami Carol City High School near his mother's home in Miami Gardens.

"He was doing average in school, a little bit better when he was at Carol City and then I had him transferred," she said this week. "I thought Krop was a better school and I wanted a different environment for him. My oldest son has graduated from there."

Martin's older brother, Jhavaris Fulton, 21, is a junior at Florida International University.

When he was a child, Martin saved his father's life.

"That was my main man. That was my hero. He saved my life, actually pulled me out of a house fire. He was 9 years old at the time. A 9-year-old kid saved his dad's life. And I wasn't there to save his life," Tracy Martin said in an MSNBC interview broadcast Thursday. "As a dad, that makes me feel bad because I know my son was depending on me to be his savior. And I couldn't save his life at that time."

Martin spent his freshman year and much of his sophomore year at Carol City, where on Thursday, more than 1,000 students walked out to honor him and fight for justice in the case.

His first year there, Martin would spend mornings at the high school — a roomy campus of cream buildings in Miami Gardens — and then go to George T. Baker Aviation School for the rest of the school day. Inspired by his uncle, Ronald Fulton, who had a brief career in aviation, Martin saw his future in planes.

"He loved flying and working with his hands. Barrington Irving took him on his plane at the Opa-Locka Airport. He got a chance to sit in the cockpit and that did it for him," said Fulton, referring to the youngest person and first black person to pilot a plane around the world solo in 2007. "He wanted to be a pilot or work as a mechanic in aviation. He was mechanically inclined and could fix just about anything."

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Math was his favorite subject, according to one of his Carol City teachers, Ashley Gantt. She taught his sophomore year English honors class where the curriculum included works such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Sometimes he would come to the second-period class looking exhausted. Gantt would call out his name.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Gantt. I'm not asleep. I'm listening," he would reply, she said.

"Once he came in wearing a UM hoodie. I'm a Florida Gator," Gantt said. "I'm like, 'You can't come into my class with that.' "

Gantt said she never saw Martin behave aggressively or show disrespect.

"He was just a sweet kid, she said. "He got A's and B's. If he received a C on an assignment, it was because he was just being a kid that day. He was very smart."

Students at Carol City, some who now wear Trayvon Martin memorial buttons, have compared his death to that of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago, who went to visit family in Mississippi and never returned. Emmett Till was pulled from his bed, beaten to death and dumped in a river for allegedly whistling at a white woman, one of the nation's most infamous civil rights cases.

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"The injustice (is the same) in both situations — Zimmerman is still free and the killers of Emmett Till, they went free eventually," Gantt said.

For Gantt, Martin's death has become a teachable moment, telling her students: "You have to know what your rights are. You can wear a hoodie and walk into a gated community ... you have the right to do that and not be profiled."

At Krop, a sprawling campus near the county line, home to some 2,700 students, a few of the students recalled the days they shared with Martin in middle school. He attended both Norland Middle and Highland Oaks Middle schools, both also in North Miami-Dade.

Dominique Clarke, 17 who knew him from Highland Oaks, said he was very quiet and kept to himself. The friends took Spanish together.

"He wasn't perfect. But he was someone who was very respectful," she said. "He did have a bright future and everyone who knew him liked him."

One day at Krop last year, Brian Paz, 16, opened the door by the vending machine and he saw Martin. They had been good friends at Highland Oaks, but went to separate high schools.

"I was like, 'What's up man?' I was happy to see him again," Paz recalled.

They became close friends. When Paz's mother, who is from Colombia, called her son, "he would say my name in a funny way. I'll never forget the way he said it. 'Brrrian,'" Paz remembered, rolling his 'r' and laughing at the memory before becoming more serious.

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He wants people to know something about his childhood friend: "He wasn't threatening. There was no reason for George Zimmerman to pull out a gun and kill him. He was too peaceful for that."

Martin left the Sanford townhouse on a rainy Sunday night nearly a month ago to walk to a nearby convenience store. As Martin walked back, Skittles and canned ice tea in hand, Zimmerman decided he looked suspicious. He called police who advised him not to follow the boy.

Questions remain about what happened next, but Martin was shot, his body found face down on the ground, 70 yards from the back door of the townhouse.

Zimmerman has not been charged. He told police he felt threatened and that Martin jumped him. He responded, he said, by taking out a 9mm handgun and shooting in self-defense.

Trayvon Martin was buried six days later.

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