

## **Bound by Love and Tragedy, Graduates Lean on Each Other**

Not a day has gone by that Tekisha Blue and Keisha Acres, two St. Louis Community College students, haven't struggled to keep from falling apart. Both lives were irreparably changed last fall, leaving the women with constant reminders of unthinkable tragedies.

Blue lost her daughter Sept. 9, following a long battle with cancer. Acres' daughter, Alexzandria Bell, was shot and killed in the Oct. 24 school shooting at Central Visual and Performing Arts High School (CVPA) in south St. Louis.

It's been a challenge – and that's not nearly a strong enough word to describe their lives – to get to where they will find themselves on May 21. Acres and Blue will be walking across the stage at Chaifetz Arena as members of the Class of '23.

"It's been several days that I want to take my own life just to be able to see (my daughter)," Acres said. "So, graduation, I know my baby would be beyond proud of me because I kept going. That's what I use to teach her: When you're having a hard time, you find a way to find the good in it. As long as you see something good out of it, you keep going."

Both women will earn an associate degree in culinary arts and hope to serve the communities in which they live. Acres wants to get a food truck to bring healthy options to underserved areas in St. Louis. She also wants to become a family and consumer sciences teacher so she can teach students how to prepare healthy meals.

Blue, who has run three community gardens for years, wants to help north St. Louis City by educating the community on ways to prepare meals beyond junk food and fast food.

They were brought together two years ago by Mysha Clincy, STLCC's coordinator for student retention programs. Clincy saw a lot of similarities between the two women, which is why she connected them. Both were non-traditional students – Acres is 43 years old and a mother of two; Blue has four children and 16 grandchildren, six of whom now live with her following her daughter's death. They were both involved in the Black Male Achievement program that's designed to increase the retention and matriculation of underrepresented students – both male and female.

Both students are also Black women determined to break into the white male-dominated world of food service. They are mothers, grandmothers, active in their communities and, thanks to the introduction, indispensable for each other.

Commonality brought the women together; tragedy and triumph have bonded them.

"She's like my sidepiece," Blue said of Acres. "I'm her sidepiece. We can relate. When she's having a bad day, she'll text me and say those encouraging words and I pray with her. We have this bond. We're inseparable."

### **'She was so petrified'**

It was a perfect day, maybe more than perfect, Acres recalls about the day her daughter died. Alexzandria, who Acres calls Alex, was already up and well on her way to getting

ready when her mom video called her, as she did every school day, to wake Alex for school.

Alex, three weeks shy of her 16th birthday, came down the stairs in a good mood, looking forward to going to CVPA, seeing her friends and attending the classes she liked. The two got in the car so Acres could drive her daughter to the bus stop. As she was getting out of the car, Alex – unbeknownst to her – dropped her glasses on the car floor and then got on the bus.

“When she was stepping on the bus,” Acres said, “she turned around and said, ‘I love you.’ She looked me dead in my face and said, ‘I love you Mama.’”

After the bus pulled away, Acres noticed Alex’s glasses and drove to the school to drop them off. She handed them to Dr. Kacy Seals, the principal of the school, and went home.

She had barely walked into her house when the calls started. First, it was a family friend whose daughter confirmed there were reports of an active shooter at CVPA. Acres immediately called her mother and got her shoes on to drive to the high school to find her daughter. The calls kept coming and Acres kept ignoring them.

“I’m flying. I don’t care about no tickets,” she said. “I don’t care about nothing. I just need to get to my baby.”

Acres was forced to park five blocks from the school and asked police officers and others if they knew where her daughter was. She showed them pictures of Alex. She approached anyone who might know and asked if they had seen her daughter.

Her son, Terrell Acres, went to Gateway STEM Academy, where some of the reunions were happening with students and family members. He didn’t see Alex there.

Acres, starting to fear the worst but attempting to have faith, called her pastor for counsel and prayer.

She called her daughter. Again. And again. And again.

She remembered the Life365 app on her phone that indicated where Alex’s phone was. The app said she was in the school, so maybe she was still hiding. That was Acres’ hope.

She checked again. And again. And again.

Alex’s icon never moved. Acres prayed that meant she dropped the phone in the chaos. By this time, Acres was just outside the school and had gone past several police barriers. She continued to study her phone, hoping for a clue to her daughter’s wellbeing. When she looked up, she was surrounded by people.

One of those people was Seals. The principal approached Acres but didn’t have to say a word.

“I looked at Dr. Seals, and the look in her eye told me everything I needed to know,” Acres said.

Her daughter was dead.

The police retrieved Acres’ family from around the city and brought them to her. They were there when Acres was asked to look in a body bag and make a positive identification – but wasn’t allowed to touch Alex, in order to preserve evidence of the crime.

Within moments, her daughter was whisked away.

“The look on her face,” Acres recalled. “She was so petrified; she was so scared.”

Acres decided to quit college more times than she can remember since her daughter’s murder, but Clincy and Blue haven’t let her. They encouraged her, supported her and did whatever they could to keep Acres moving forward. The College worked with her to make up the class she dropped in the fall so she could still graduate in May.

But her final semester was supposed to be much different: more special, more personal. Alex was set to enroll in STLCC’s Early College program and enter the same culinary program her mom was in. She wanted to help Acres achieve her dream to run a food truck.

### **‘I’m going to live in the moment’**

Blue is a private person. Very few at the College knew she lost her daughter. She didn’t share it widely with her fellow culinary arts students or with the members of Phi Beta Kappa, the campus honor society in which she’s a member.

It’s just not Blue’s style to share personal matters with anyone who is not family or like family. She only recently told Acres that her two oldest grandchildren attend CVPA but stayed home the day of the shooting because Blue wanted a family day. So, when her daughter died, Blue found a way to forge through the first semester of her second year.

“I kept pushing and praying,” she said. “I didn’t have time to breathe because I was there for my grandkids and my husband.”

Blue and her husband, Jerry Blue, will become the first two members from either side of their families to graduate from college this month. Jerry Blue is earning a degree from Ranken Technical College.

Tekisha Blue promised her daughter before she died that her daughter’s six children would not be separated. That meant taking them into the Blue home and helping them navigate the loss of their mother. It also meant a constant reminder of the loss of her daughter, who Blue was supposed to see the day she died, only to receive a call in the middle of the night with the news that her daughter had already passed.

Blue said her daughter was a driving force for continuing through the pain and earning a degree. Like Acres, there were numerous times that Blue considered leaving the College to focus on her other responsibilities – she cooks a meal for her church every Sunday, she’s studying to be ordained this fall, she tends to her gardens, and she has her

six grandchildren, ages 6 to 18, living at her home. However, when she walks across the stage at commencement, Blue is going to try and focus on what she has achieved despite all the obstacles.

"I'm going to live in the moment," she said. "I was going to quit, but my granddaughter said, 'Mama wouldn't want you to quit.'"

And she couldn't quit on Acres, who Blue told about her daughter's passing in January. It's one thing to have all the similarities the two shared before last fall, but only so many people understand the pain of having to bury your own child. They needed each other.

On a mid-April day, just about five weeks before commencement, neither woman wanted to come to school. They were scheduled to help a fellow culinary arts majors prepare for his capstone meal, something all the culinary students do during the last semester of their program.

Their emotions were raw, as they have been since the fall, and dealing with anything more than getting out of bed seemed daunting. But they both arrived to do their part, Acres in the back of the house making a cheesecake, and Blue in the front of the house getting the tables set properly.

They were present, but not for anybody but each other and their daughters. The two students have been close since they met nearly two years ago, but their friendship took on a greater urgency this year.

"I can't let her see me break because I've got to be here for her," Blue said. 'I probably would have quit'

Acres and Blue sat together at a table in Café East in the student center at STLCC-Forest Park. It was Blue's birthday and she was in the moment. They laughed and joked and were enjoying each other's company. But about 10 minutes into the conversation, when the talk turned to Alex, the two women instinctively grabbed each other's hand.

They didn't let go for nearly an hour as each mother talked about what it has been like since their daughter's death. They supported each other as they both struggled at times, often through tears, to recount their child's final days.

They weren't going to let the other one be alone.

"If I didn't have her, outside of Mysha, I probably would have quit," Acres said of Blue. "When I tell her something's bothering me, we explore whatever it is. We pray. She'll give me encouraging words and throughout the day she'll check on me."

Acres then turned to Blue and said: "I appreciate you for that because there were a whole lot of times I wanted to walk out the building and not come back. But it's because of your support that I'm still here."