

Aurora shooting victim finds hope in community's caring nature



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Of all the powerful moments at the Fox Valley United Way breakfast last Thursday — and there were many — it was the testimonial of Theresa Harden that received a standing ovation.

She was a 34-year-old mom of two young kids, including a baby celebrating his first birthday, when a punk in a ski mask approached her car that night in November of 1996 and put a gun to her head.

She begged for her life, but it did no good. Thirteen bullets were fired into her car at close range. Nine slammed into her body.

There were lots of shootings going on in Aurora in '96. Harden, who was working as a nursing assistant at the time, probably should have been another murder statistic for that year. But 21 pints of blood and a wonderful staff at Rush-Copley Medical Center saved her life, if not her colon.

Months of recovery, much of it in a coma, were followed by years of fear.

A suspect was identified but never arrested, so Harden turned into a recluse, venturing out into



Gunshot victim Theresa Harden, with oldest son Cameron, gave a moving testimonial at last week's United Way breakfast.

the world only when absolutely necessary. In a wheelchair and with little support, she felt like "I had no one but God to help me."

Her young boys changed, too, becoming bitter and angry, especially her youngest, who she couldn't seem to reach.

Harden's testimonial at the United Way event was the first time she's spoken publicly about her ordeal. It was, in fact, one of the few times she's even left her home since

the shooting, except to get groceries, said her eldest son Cameron, now 27.

"She was scared. She always felt like someone was going to come back and finish her off," he said of the shooting police believe was a gang initiation. "It changed our family."

Harden was also "terrified" as she stood in front of those 400-plus people who packed the Piper's Banquets room last week.

But it was the United Way-funded program, Triple Threat Mentoring, that helped him get rid of all those destructive emotions.

"When he got to West High," she said, "he felt like he was somebody."

It was also when Harden's youngest began opening up that she began to do the same.

Harden was shot around the same time 6-year-old Nico Contreras was murdered; and finding the child's killer, she knew, was a top priority with police. With her case, a car had been identified, she added, but with the shooter masked and his victim in a coma, no positive I.D. could be made.

And Harden didn't push it because, "we were just trying to get by," said Cameron, who was forced at age 10 to become caregiver to his mom and parent to his little brother.

Her eldest son admits he had his own issues after the shooting. But when you look around a community and see how much it embraces those in need, Cameron admitted, it "becomes easier to let that anger go."

Theresa Harden and her family may have become victims to the ugliness that can threaten our neighborhoods. But she also realizes their recovery is a testament to what is so beautiful about this community.

"The generous, caring people" who live and work here, she said, reopened the doors to her heart.

"Oh my God, it was such a struggle for me," she told the crowd just before receiving that standing ovation. "Smile ... smile ... because things could be a lot rougher. May God bless you all."

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CAMERON HARDEN, son of Theresa Harden, who was shot in 1996