

Before he was a gangster, Garrett was my son

Colleen McComb's 23-year-old son was murdered last year in a gang dispute. She wants parents to know how even good kids can become drawn into a lifestyle of drugs and violence.

Frank Peebles
Citizen staff

Garrett McComb's mom is proud of him. She knows with more certainty than anyone else that he was a young gangster, an active player in Prince George's violent drug world. McComb, 23, and girlfriend Brittany Giese, 19, were both well known to police for their own activities before they were murdered in the quiet suburban neighbourhood where they rented a home.

The murder was, according to those close to the investigation, brutal and a symbolic gesture from one desperado group to another in the tit-for-tat battle over the northern B.C. drug industry. It cast McComb as a victim but also exposed his dark side, a side that baffled and angered his family.

"Something told him that (the gangland money and lifestyle) was important and I wish I knew what it was," said Colleen McComb, his mother. "I want parents and teachers and society to know that it can happen to anybody. For Garrett and Brittany to get drawn into something like this, and have it kill them... They were relatively normal people who had the support of good family, good friends. We kept them busy with sports and travel and activities growing up, but it can happen to anyone."

One of Garrett's teachers attended his funeral specifically to tell McComb that she was a good mother, and Garrett was not one of those children for whom street life was the natural progression.

Garrett's two siblings are living lives nowhere near the gang world.

"I'm not really sure how to explain it," said McComb. "He got into a bit of trouble in high school, and back then we didn't know anything about gang influence in Prince George. He liked the edge a bit, he had some edgy friends and I think he got caught up in the money. And some people have no fear. No matter what we'd say, he would be stubborn. He went back to school, he was going to UNBC, and I thought he was turning it all around, but in January (2008) I started to see different signs and I realized he was into something deep. He's your son you don't want to push him away, but you know you can't stop it."

When a gunfight erupted on the streets of downtown Prince George in August, two rival gang factions brought their war into the public. Garrett was one of those involved in that spray of bullets.

It was all, according to some close to the issue, part of the chain of drive-by shootings, public fights, crack house attacks and the murder of Mitch Henry in the first two months of 2008.

McComb did not know Garrett's position in all of the violence, but she knew he was in danger. When Garrett's regular phone calls home stopped, in October, McComb got a sinking feeling. Then, when she heard news reports of two unidentified people murdered in a gangland execution, she didn't have to wait for the police to knock on the door to know what was coming.

"It was an agonizing three days," between finding the two bodies in the house on Webber Crescent and that fateful meeting with the RCMP that confirmed what her heart already knew.

After the devastation, the waves

of heaving sobs, the hugs of family and close friends who try to comfort you, the ever-present and permanent weight of loss and sadness, there comes the ripping rhetorical questions, McComb said. The grieving process is a punch in the face from the outside world you couldn't control, she said, but it is also an endless bout of self beating.

"I miss him every single day. Some people say 'the world's a better place without that gangster' but I beg to differ. There was too much good in him, too much of the other side of his life for that to be true. He made some bad choices, he did some bad things, but he was not just this bad person. I'm not denying the bad parts of him that we didn't see, but I also can't deny the good parts of him. He was thoughtful, he never missed a family function, he really cared for Brittany, he paid attention to his friends and he always showed his love for his family. He liked people, he was outgoing and fun-loving. I thought he would eventually move out of that life, others say no, but he had so many things in his life he enjoyed outside of that."

McComb said she is realistic about the murder investigations now underway. She isn't expecting police to announce a suspect anytime soon. She just hopes they are investigating the way they say they are.

She wishes she had some nugget of information that would help police, but she said Garrett kept them all blocked off from that side of his life. She wonders if she could have ever turned him in to police herself, had she had the opportunity, but she was never aware of anything that would form the basis of such a call.

"I have regrets. I wish I had been more forceful as a mom, but I certainly didn't want to lose contact with him. You want to know where he is, that he is OK. It actually puts the whole family in a bad situation. Your hands are tied in so many ways; you can't stop them once they start making those choices. He's an adult and you can tell him what you wish he'd do, but you can't control what he does. I wish he had gone with all the great qualities he had, instead of the other ones. I am proud of him and the good things he did accomplish in life. I say that about Brittany too, and Mitch Henry. People deserve to be remembered for their good qualities."

McComb doesn't want anybody's pity. She wants people to be scared by her son's story.

"He was complex like all people are, but he was ordinary in so many ways, and that is what is scary," she said.

Almost a year later, her pain is still raw. When people are in that state, especially when events are fresh, she encouraged friends and loved ones to not hold back from approaching the ones closest to the grief. She wasn't able to properly acknowledge the outreach from many who offered their condolences in those first few days, but she said she appreciated every one of them and never wished someone hadn't stepped forward to say something, even if it seemed hollow or awkward.

"No it doesn't make the pain go away, but it does comfort you," she said. "Don't worry that you're going to say the wrong thing, or what you have to say isn't good



Colleen McComb created this collage of photographs depicting her son Garrett at various stages in his life.

enough, just do it," she suggested.

She sees the Garrett McComb Memorial Golf Tournament as another part of the healing, and a way to keep alive the bright qualities of someone remembered by the public for his darkest ones.

The first Garrett McComb Memorial Golf Tournament

June 27 - 10 a.m. check-in
Aspen Grove Golf Course
Registration: \$50 per person
Registration/information: 250-614-8353 or colleenmccomb@hotmail.com

Financially established by family and friends, the Garrett McComb Post-Secondary Memorial Fund is to give street-involved or otherwise disadvantaged youth access to higher education they would otherwise have a harder time getting.

"It is money for youth to participate in post-secondary education, and for youth who have accessed the programs of Youth Around Prince (YAP) Resource Centre previously," said YAP co-ordinator Diandra Oliver. "The youth that come through YAP often don't have access to these sorts of funds. It is providing learning opportunity for youth who don't usually have financial backing."

"I don't want Garrett's legacy to be that he was killed by a gang and involved in gangs," said his mother Colleen McComb. "He was a very thoughtful person who did a lot of good things to help other people. Even though he made some poor choices, that's who we knew him as, so that's what we want to do in his name so other

people are helped - people who need it."

Although Garrett was involved in many activities as a child - minor hockey to the mid-level, little league baseball, card games, fishing - he started playing golf at about age 12 and it was his first love, hence the golf tournament to raise funds for the scholarship.

Garrett McComb once wrote... "Teeing off...you realize there is no place you'd rather be. Gleaming down the hill to where a creek runs through the fairway, you notice the edges of the rough cutting close to the tree line, knowing you want to be hitting your ball onto the freshly cut fairway...The golf course's scenery alone was worth the Saturday afternoon you gave up playing, but playing the round of your life was a bonus...Golf remains the greatest game man has ever made."

Remembering Brittany

Brittany Giese's family was approached for comment but declined. One family member did state that it was known that she was getting deeper into the gang world, and was shrouding herself in secrecy toward the end.

The family member was not pleased with her association with Garrett McComb, but supported the idea of the scholarship.

"It won't bring Brittany back, but I certainly don't want anyone else to go down that path," said the relative.

"They did not deserve that (murder). Nor did that young man at the restaurant (Mitch Henry), and all those people killed in Vancouver. People don't deserve to be killed, no matter what."

Investigation ongoing

In early October, police taped a perimeter around a home on Webber Crescent, a quiet residential street near CN Centre.

It was not the first time police had visited the home. They raided the place only four weeks earlier, arresting four and seizing a number of guns.

They also knew it to be the destination of people who fled in a bullet-riddled vehicle from a downtown shootout in August.

This time, the investigators were clad in sterile suits and carting in boxes of forensic tools.

It was soon revealed that on Oct. 6, two people - later identified as Garrett McComb, 23, and Brittany Giese, 19 - had been slain in a gang hit.


Police have not disclosed if they have a suspect in the case.

"It is an ongoing, intensive investigation," said RCMP spokesman Const. Gary Godwin. "When you get two young people like this that were murdered, that were previously targeted for death or grievous bodily harm (the August shootout), then the investigation is intensive."

Godwin said the need to put a hard focus on the case is not just to bring the killers of McComb and Giese to justice, it is also to interrupt and disrupt a culture of violence that exists in gangs.


There is always the possibility of more attacks back and forth between organized crime groups if the main players are not charged and convicted and each of those attacks, said Godwin, brings more danger to the public at large.


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