

Funeral fashion

T-shirts featuring the dead are becoming a staple of mourning

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Black T-shirts bearing an "R.I.P. Jordan Manners" slogan punctuated a march against gun violence at Jane and Sheppard this weekend, the latest instance of Torontonians using memorial T-shirts to lionize young victims of crime in the city.

In some ways an extension of hip hop fashion, oversized Ts adorned with photos of the dead are increasingly making their way into funerals and courtrooms on the backs of family, friends and classmates.

Like the ribbon before it and the button before that, the T-shirt, already a popular vehicle for indicating one's politics, is gaining status as a modern way to express grief publicly. A token of remembrance, the memorial shirt is also being used to draw attention to one's campaign of choice and even elicit remorse from suspects in court.

"Year by year, we seem to be getting more memorial orders. It's usually young people. They've died young, whether it's from disease or crime," says Travis Johnston, who handled an order for 500 T-shirts emblazoned with young Jordan's face before his funeral service last month.

Mr. Johnston, who works at King Street West's Artik T's & Promotions, had the shirts made up white, with the boy's photo on the front and "R.I.P Jordan Manners" on the back -- it was mother Loreen Small's idea. About 100 people donned the shirts at the 15-year-old's funeral; a handful of his classmates wore them on their first day back at C.W. Jefferys after Jordan was shot in a hallway inside the school.

Ms. Small has taken to wearing a T-shirt that shows her and her son together; Jordan's uncle, Greg Stokes, wears a version inscribed with the boy's name and a logo for Soldiers of Change, a movement of Torontonians campaigning for action after the school shooting.

Last summer, the memorial shirt helped raise money for the widow and five children of rapper Proof, whose given name was Deshaun Dupree Holton, gunned down on Detroit's notorious 8 Mile Road.

Mr. Holton's management and record label, Eminem's Shady Records, launched a benefit site that allowed fans to buy a commemorative T. The concept surfaced at Mr. Holton's funeral where mourners wore homemade tribute shirts.

What started as a hip hop mourning convention quickly translated to the streets.



CREDIT: Brent Foster, National Post

The father of murder victim Drew Stewart leaves court in February, 2006, wearing a T-shirt featuring his son.



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

Loreen Small, mother of 15-year-old shooting victim Jordan Manners, wears a T-shirt featuring her son outside a press conference last week.

"It's an economical way to express yourself," says Paul Nguyen, founder of Jane-Finch.com, a Web site devoted to the community. He's seen a surge of commemorative T-shirts in recent years.

"Especially in a neighbourhood like this, I would venture to say not everyone has a computer here so they can't all make a Facebook or a MySpace page," says Mr. Nguyen, referring to online memorials popping up on social networking sites.

"These days, it's fashionable to have an extra-long T-shirt that goes down to your knees. There's a lot of printing space."

In late 2005, teenaged friends of Amon Beckles -- shot and killed in Etobicoke at a funeral for Jamal Hemmings, a friend whose murder he had witnessed -- wore T-shirts depicting the deceased above an epitaph that read, "A Friend Till The End."

A year earlier, Drew Stewart's family and friends took the memorial T to another level. The 16-year-old had been swarmed, beaten and stabbed while he tried to defend a pregnant friend being assaulted in a Coxwell Avenue restaurant.

The murder galvanized his East York Collegiate schoolmates, who wore T-shirts bearing his photo to court to ensure the killer, Kimo George, would be forced to look at Drew's face.

The shirts, which read, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good," became a type of victim impact statement. It was Drew's mother's idea; his father wore one emblazoned with the words "Violence Kills."

"It's a focus for memory. Through ritual, we try to understand why would this kind of senseless thing happen," says Ivan Emke, an anthropology professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland. Prof. Emke examines society by looking at changes in funeral rituals.

Since the death of Princess Diana, academics specializing in death have watched the advent of the mass grieving phenomenon, otherwise known as conspicuous compassion: "You start to have large groups of people mourning together in a very conspicuous way ... It's almost become expected that people do this."

Prof. Emke says that for today's young mourners, "It fits with what they do when they idolize music or they idolize celebrities. The human need is the same, but this just looks different."

As for Mr. Johnston, the customized T-shirt peddler, memorial Ts are becoming his most meaningful projects.

"I enjoy doing it. It's not a disposable item. Promotional products, sometimes they are disposable, sometimes they're not. But a memorial shirt? That's probably going to be around for a while," even if, he admits, the sombre artifacts only get worn once.

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