

Columbus, Ohio Funeral Home Billboard Targeting Black Homicides Stirs Community

by: **Theodore Decker** | Columbus Dispatch



COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — The billboard is blunt by design.

“Black Lives SHOULD Matter, Especially to BLACK PEOPLE. STOP THE VIOLENCE. We don’t want your business That bad.”

The bearer of this message is Marlan J. Gary, and his business is funerals.

Columbus is coming off a year of horrendous homicidal violence. There were 143 killings in 2017, a total unlike anything the city had seen in decades. The old record of 139 homicides occurred in 1991.

That was the year Gary came to Columbus. He was in his early 20s, and the surging homicide rate was not something a young man in a new town thought much about.

“I just wasn’t community-minded, even to have an opinion,” he said.

Now he is a 48-year-old father of two, a community-minded businessman and, as the billboard makes clear, a holder of opinions.

This latest advertisement for Marlan J. Gary Funeral Home went up about two weeks ago on two billboards: one at East Main Street and Nelson Road on the Near East Side and another at East 5th and Woodland avenues.

Gary has advertised on billboards for years, and occasionally he alters the messages to reflect holidays or celebrate Black History Month.

The start of a new year, coming hard on the heels of such a violent one,

seemed to him a good time to make a point.

In 2017, 111 of the city’s homicide victims were Black, and all but of 10 of them were males. The median age was 29. Fewer than half of the killings have been solved, but Gary intuits that most of these young Black male victims were killed by other young Black men. He’s handled the arrangements for more homicide victims than he can count, and he knows this as surely as the police do.

So far, the response to his message has been positive. He said he doesn’t know if he’ll receive any push-back for co-opting the language of the Black Lives Matter movement that began in 2013 in response to police killings of Black people.

These issues matter to Gary, who is Black and has a son about to turn 18 years old. In 2015, Gary irked the Columbus Division of Police with billboards that directly addressed the BLM movement by offering advice to young Black men (cooperate, don’t commit crimes, don’t run) and to officers (“You can stop me without killing me” and “I deserve a day in court, not in a casnet”).

The Police Division released a statement in response that it was “disappointed” by the message, given officers’ community-policing efforts.

“I’m all in support of the Black Lives Matter movement,” Gary said on Jan. 26. “At the same time,

I realize that it has to matter to us before it matters to anybody else.

“The bottom line is that I don’t bury a whole lot of people who were killed by police,” he said. “Right now, I’m burying a lot of Black people who are killed at the hands of Black people.”

Pictured beside Gary on the latest billboards is Fralisia Jefferson, one of his funeral directors. Jefferson, 25, lost her 27-year-old godbrother, DeShawn L. Marable, to gun violence last year. He was shot to death on the South Side in August, and his killing remains unsolved.

Jefferson said young people “feel invincible, untouchable, until it touches you and gets closer ... and then it touches your immediate family, and then it’s too late.”

Retaliation perpetuates the violence, she said.

“When you fight fire with fire, all you get is a bigger fire,” she said. “We’re getting to a dangerous point.”

Nine people have been killed in Columbus this year; eight were black. Gary hopes the billboards add to a community conversation that makes 2018 a record low year for homicides and the heartbreak that follows.

“I just thought it would be great if we could try to beat that record,” he said. “It would be nice if we could just move back toward the record low.”

The Austin Villager Covers the 60th Grammy Awards in New York City

By **Naomi Richard**
Villager Contributor

The 60th Grammy Awards® encompassed much more than the televised experience that most fans witnessed. There were a plethora of activities including parties, concerts, non-televised awards, meet-ups and private events. *The Austin Villager* made its way to several pre-show activities — and this is our story.

Our journey launched with Bishop Hezekiah Walker’s Gospel Grammy® Celebration featuring Grammy® nominees Anita Wilson, J.J. Hairston, Tina Campbell, Marvin Sapp, Travis Greene, CeCe Winans, Le’Andria Johnson and The Walls Group from Houston, Texas. Gospel music rang out from the rafters and the house was packed to capacity.

Each year students from around the country are given the opportunity to apply for GRAMMY Camp™. The selected students performed at the renowned New School in New York and were accompanied by jazz artist Jon Batiste. During the same event, Melissa Salguero, teacher at P.S. 48



Villager Reporter Naomi Richard and Neil Portnow President of The Recording Academy.
Photo by Dallas Davis.

Joseph R. Drake School in the Bronx, New York, was announced as the recipient of the 2018 Music Educator Award™ presented by the Recording Academy™ and GRAMMY Museum®. Nominations and applications for the 2019 Music Educator Award are now open via www.grammy.com.

Essence Magazine held its annual Black Women in Music event and honored Missy Elliott’s career. As a rapper, singer, songwriter, producer and dancer, Missy Elliott has inspired popular culture for over two decades. The exclusive event took place on January 25 at New York City’s Highline Ballroom. Established in 2010, Black Women in Music recognizes the accomplishments of both emerging and established artists and influencers during GRAMMY Week.

Roc Nation, LLC, an American entertainment company founded by Shawn “JAY-Z” Carter in 2008, held its 2018 Roc

Nation Pre-Grammy Brunch at One World Trade Center on January 27, 2018 in New York City, hosted by JAY-Z and wife Beyoncé.

Finally, *The Villager* Newspaper was proud to be a part of the 2018 MusiCares® Person of the Year (POTY) honoring Fleetwood Mac, the first band to be chosen. They were celebrated for their extraordinary creative accomplishments and significant charitable work. Entertainment for the evening included Miley Cyrus, Little Big Town, HAIM, Lorde, OneRepublic and Keith Urban to name a few.

The MusiCares® POTY tribute is one of the most prestigious events held during GRAMMY Week. The MusiCares Foundation® offers health and human services and programs to members of the music community, including emergency financial assistance for basic living expenses.

Come Join The TEAM!

A Better Me is a program of the Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas. It was created to assist individuals who want to make lifestyle changes that will help reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases or better manage those conditions if they already exist. The changes sought will primarily be associated with physical activity and nutrition.

For more information or to join the team, please contact us at:

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