

NEWS

In Des Moines' Oakridge neighborhood, Yore Jieng's memory lives on at his favorite place — the basketball court

Andrea May Sahouri Des Moines Register

Published 6:05 a.m. CT Aug. 4, 2021

The Oakridge neighborhood's basketball court is where it all started.

It's where 14-year-old Yore Jieng and the other boys in the nonprofit housing community would play basketball every day after school, forming a brotherhood.

Yore would goof around and poke fun at the others' hairlines, making everyone around him smile and laugh. But make no mistake, his friends said, Yore was slick and competitive on the court.

And it was on that court where Yore declared he didn't just *want* to become a professional NBA player — he was *going* to become one.

"Yore, he wanted the world; nothing was going to stop him from achieving what he wanted to achieve," said his sister, Nyabiay Jieng, 23.

"I knew he was going to be something in life — and he knew it, too."

Yore never had the chance to realize his dreams: He was just a freshman at Roosevelt High School when, on Oct. 24, 2016, a stray bullet struck him in the head while he was sitting in the passenger seat of a car driven by Nyabiay Jieng at the intersection of Keosauqua Way and 12th Street, just north of downtown Des Moines.

The pair were on their way to a McDonald's. He died five days later.

And nearly five years later, his case remains cold. No suspects have been arrested.

His Oakridge community, however, won't let anyone forget him.

In a new effort to honor the young basketball player, a large mural of Yore can now be seen at his favorite place in the world:

His home court.

Oakridge mural shows Yore's spirit 'is still with us'

The mural is on the basketball court that sits between Oakridge's Community Center and Variety Center.

Yore is in a Los Angeles Lakers jersey — for LeBron James, of course — against a swimming pool-blue backdrop. His chin is up high, and a golden yellow crown rests proudly on his head.

He's surrounded by yellow, white and red flowers native to the South Sudanese region where his family is from. He looks elegant like his mother, Lory Kuon.

"I have pictures (of Yore) at home, but not everyone sees them. Everyone seeing his picture is one of the best ways to honor him," Kuon, 49, said through an interpreter in her native language, Nuer.

Yore carried love with him everywhere he went, Jieng said. Everyone knew Yore — he brought the Oakridge community together like family and was heavily involved in the neighborhood's youth programming.

Jieng said their family is hoping that, as more time passes, someone will have the courage to speak up about the bullet that killed Yore. They want to bring him justice, but they aren't holding their breath.

Des Moines police previously cited uncooperative witnesses as barriers to their investigation. Today, the investigation remains ongoing, but police have no additional information they are willing to share publicly.

Without justice or answers, Yore's family is grateful for the mural because it helps to keep his name and memory alive.

Previously: A stray shot killed their 14-year-old brother. A year later, 'it's still fresh.'

"We will never stop fighting behind his name. We're still living on for his name," Jieng said. When she saw the mural for the first time, she thought about her brother's love.

"It was just beautiful. I can't describe it in words," Jieng said.

After about a week of painting, Yore's mural, which was commissioned by the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, is almost complete. Jordan Weber, the lead artist on the project, has only some finishing touches to add, he said.

'Yore was the community:' Coming together to paint the mural

Weber, 36, is a Des Moines-based artist who, in previous years, had done youth art programming at Oakridge. He said he felt the impact that Yore's death has had on the community.

"He deserved more," Weber said. So, when the foundation expressed plans to incorporate public art at basketball courts in Des Moines, Weber had the perfect idea.

He pitched Yore's mural, and the foundation was game.

It was important for Weber to involve Yore's family, friends and the Oakridge community in all aspects of the project, he said.

Before designing the mural, Weber got a photograph of Yore from his mother and bounced ideas around with his family and friends. Weber learned about who Yore was, what he loved, and more about South Sudanese culture, he said.

And when it came time to paint, Yore's family and friends, as well as other youth in the neighborhood, stepped up to help Weber get the job done.

His death "broke everyone's heart," said Abdalla Guma, one of Yore's friends, as he sat on the basketball court painting Yore's crown. "Everybody loved him."

"We were all brothers," Macky Doctor chimed in, paintbrush in hand.

Doctor and Guma, both 18, played basketball with Yore almost every day after school, they said.

"It's important to honor him," Doctor said.

And it's important to show that Yore's "spirit is still with us — that he's gone but never forgotten," said Kong Neyail, 20, another of Yore's friends.

"The mural means a lot — not just for me, but for the whole community."

Just how much the mural means to the community would be hard to put into words, said Balev Johnson, who runs high school and middle school programming at Oakridge.

"He was kind of like the mayor of Oakridge," Johnson said. "Yore was the community."

He had a larger-than-life personality, Johnson explained, and he was wise beyond his years.

Previously : Yore Jieng 'full of positive energy and light,' friends say at vigil

Plus, Johnson added, Yore wanted the best for himself and for others. Community members of all ages looked up to him. He loved to help and make others happy, Johnson said. You couldn't get mad at him for more than 10 seconds because of his smile, he said.

When Yore was killed, the whole community was heartbroken and numb, he said, and hasn't fully healed.

"He was one of one. You'll never have another Yore Jieng," Johnson said.

"It's so good to see his face again."

Yore Jieng's family strives to remain strong as pain lingers

Jieng said she and her family still feel the trauma of her brother's death.

She still remembers the way the world felt, as if it paused after Yore was shot, and the way her body froze. She remembers the shattered back window of her car and the rush to the hospital.

"I still have PTSD from that moment," she said. "I never knew in a million years my family would experience a loss and a tragedy like this."

"We hurt, every day ... It's an ongoing hurt you can never get rid of, but we are a strong family; we keep moving forward."

What Jieng and her mother miss most about Yore are the little things.

Kuon misses the smile her son's face every time she came home from work, or his knock on her door to let her know he was on his way to school.

He had a big heart and was always respectful, Kuon said.

"I miss being his mother," she said. "The pain, memories of him ... They didn't go anywhere," she said.

Jieng misses the way they laughed together while watching their favorite shows: "Chicago Fire" and "9-1-1."

She remembers how her little brother always treated people the way he would want to be treated, and she misses telling him not to let anyone bring him down.

"My family, now, we just want peace. We want some sort of justice, but like my mom says, it's in God's hands," Jieng said.

"Every year, we're going to keep his name alive. And God's going to shine his light."

Andrea Sahouri covers social justice for the Des Moines Register. She can be contacted by email, at asahouri@registermedia.com, on Twitter, at [@andreamsahouri](https://twitter.com/andreamsahouri), or by phone, at 515-284-8247.