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# A grieving mother is sharing the story of her son's life and death on the big screen in effort to raise awareness of teen depression, suicide

By **BILL JONES**

DAILY SOUTHTOWN | JUL 20, 2021



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Jamal Clay, a graduate of Marian Catholic High School, died by suicide on May 27, 2020. His family is to premiere a documentary film about his life and death on Saturday, July 24, in Chicago Heights with the hope of making a difference in the lives of others in the community. (Rafiah Maxie)

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their children's mental health.

A documentary about the life and death of Jamal Clay, a graduate of Marian Catholic High School who died by suicide in May, 2020, at age 19, will debut at 3 p.m. Saturday at Marcus Theatres Chicago Heights Cinema, 1301 Hilltop Ave.

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"I never wanted my son to be just a Black boy in the grave," said Rafiah Maxie, Clay's mother. "I don't want my kids or anyone else's kids to be that. It's important to put meaning, not just the acceptance part of grief but to actually add a meaning, to that person's life because they brought meaning."

Clay was a dedicated student, Maxie said. He was the South Suburban Chicago president of the Top Teens of America in 2019, an organization he joined in seventh grade and stuck with through high school. He loved Legos and reading, particularly comic books. He regularly took part in the MLK Day of Service. He followed directions, stayed on task and got things done, Maxie said.

"Jamal was, in no understatement, just a really outstanding kid," Maxie said. "He was mild-mannered and very much a good friend that folks felt they could come to

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social worker for the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, Maxie said no one would have recognized severe depression in her son — at least until he started coming home dirty, not wanting to talk about his days.

“Sixth grade was the first notice of some things that were maybe going on,” Maxie said. “He was bullied very badly by students in the class. He never talked much about it or let us know what was going on. We would just notice there was this quietness.”

It all came to a head at a three-day, sixth grade camping trip, Maxie said. He was “elated” about making the trip but uncomfortable with his physical appearance, Maxie said. He was not allowed to wear a T-shirt while waiting for the showers, as he had requested, and was “taunted and teased” for days, his mother said. Clay wound up isolated during the trip. Maxie could tell something was wrong the second she picked him up. She asked him what happened.

“He just burst into tears about how he hated himself,” she recalled.

Maxie said she dropped off her son at home and went back to his school to talk to



From left, Jamal Clay, his mother Rafiah Maxie and sister Jada Clay pose for a photo at their Olympia Fields Home. Jamal died by suicide in May, 2020 and is the subject of a documentary film that will be presented Saturday at Marcus Theatres in Chicago Heights. (Rafiah Maxie photo)

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“I got a call from my daughter saying he told her goodbye,” Maxie said.

The family called police, got Clay medical attention and then mental health help. After he was discharged, Maxie worked with Matteson School District 162 on an anti-bullying campaign. And the family kept a close eye on Clay.

“We took it upon ourselves to really invest more in him — make sure we talked about things,” Maxie said. “After that, we thought this chapter was over. ... As time moved on, nothing major occurred. He continued to soar.”

But the night before his death, Clay had a dispute with a girlfriend that Maxie said she “couldn’t make sense of.” She let her son know that things would be OK and prayed. Maxie got a call from her daughter in the morning screaming because she found Clay.

“That’s when my world turned around,” Maxie said. “You don’t want to imagine. I tell people all the time, if you imagined, it would be worse than your imagination. This is part of the world many parents don’t want to know about, don’t want to be associated with and never asked to be a member of. It’s a lifelong commitment to grieve.”

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The first six months after Clay’s death were the worst, Maxie said.

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She knew she needed help but struggled to find it. While advertisements offering help to prevent suicide are common, groups for those who have lost loved ones to suicide are comparatively sparse.

“By the grace of God, I found the LOSS program through Catholic Charities,” Maxie said.

But she was the only person of color in many of the groups. While they all shared the commonality of grief, there were things specific to her family’s situation that made it tough to relate. In that moment, she saw a need to raise awareness and dialogue about suicide in her own community.

So Maxie turned to a production company to create a documentary about her son.

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“We Cry Your Tears: The Jamal Clay Story” was produced and directed by Yoshie Lewis of Pretzel Pictures, in association with Roc Star Studio and Urban Matrix Magazine. The idea, Maxie said, was to try to make meaning of her son’s life by telling his story, from birth to death.

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“The ones that we think have it together ... It’s important to check on all children and just not assume they’re doing OK.”

The COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on everyone, including Clay. He had just finished his first semester in college but could not go back. He got a job at Amazon while he was waiting, but Maxie said he experienced racial profiling at the hands of police who would stop him “more than often” for small things such as an air freshener hanging from the mirror. And his death came two days after the murder of George Floyd, which Maxie said weighed on the whole family.

Maxie also founded Soul Survivors of Chicago in her son’s honor. The idea came to her last June, when she was sitting in Jamal’s room and wondering what to do with all of his things. Some of his shoes caught her eye. She thought she could donate them to people in need with the understanding that they would be walking in his shoes — whether going out for their first job interview, meeting the love of their life or taking their first jump shot.

“The shoe carries a message to the person who gets it,” Maxie said.

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She started getting more shoes from families who lost someone to trauma or violence. And she hopes the effort will continue to grow. Soul Survivors is looking to offer monetary support to families, scholarships and mental health resources, as well as create educational advocates, keenly aware of the truth in the adage that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

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know that wellness is a key factor. You're yourself. Your health is your wealth. Nothing else makes you richer — not a job, not a stock market, not a lottery ticket.”

Maxie said making a difference in the world with her son's name and story attached to those efforts would go a long way toward finding meaning in the unimaginable — a legacy for Clay.

“It means that he still lives; he just lives in a different way,” she said.

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Information on tickets for the documentary premiere and Soul Survivors of Chicago is at [soulsurvivorsofchicago.com](https://soulsurvivorsofchicago.com). A trailer for the film can be viewed on YouTube on the “Soul Survivors of Chicago” account. Maxie said there will also be an online opportunity to view the documentary, which runs roughly 40 minutes.

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*Bill Jones is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.*

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