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By Giulia Nesi, CSB

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'Stay Gold, Yakez': Evanston Lays to Rest Young ETHS Graduate

By Kelley Elwood

A Celebration of Life Ceremony was held on Feb. 17 for Yakez "Heaven" Lee Semark, a 20- year-old graduate of Evanston Township High School whose life ended tragically when he was shot on Feb. 8 near the corner of Hovland Court and Emerson Street in Evanston.

Friends, family, and community leaders packed Christ Temple Missionary Baptist Church to pay last respects and were greeted by music, photos, and a video montage that chronicled Yakez's short life. Spots of gold could be found among the many mourners dressed in traditional black, making a symbolic connection to Robert Frost's poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay," which had a special connection to Yakez.

Friends offered remarks, memories, and song. Rev. Dr. Marcus Campbell, ETHS Principal, and Rev. Kenneth Eugene Cherry conducted the service. Several of Yakez's close friends told stories of their times together. Yakez was "the smart one in the group" and "the first to do everything," said one friend. His smile would light up a room, recalled another. He was generous and brought people together, said another friend, who told a story of how Yakez once bought Pop Tarts for the whole cafeteria at ETHS "because they were on sale." A fellow ETHS graduate sang "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Many staff members and several Board members from ETHS and from Evanston/Skokie School District 65 were in attendance to show support for Yakez's mother, Evangeline Semark, the Director of Communications and Engagement at the school. ETHS School Board member Monique Parsons told the crowd to "be bold, brave, keep talking, show up, be unafraid and do what you can do to make a change" in the world. "Look out, Evanston" said Dr. Campbell, referencing the strength and ambition of Ms. Semark. He also implored guests to, "continue to lift [the family] up" and work to heal the community.

A preschool friend of Yakez read the Robert Frost poem she said was a favorite of theirs. She spoke of how, as middle school students at Chute, they read "The Outsiders" by S.E. Hinton and "fell in love with it." "It related to so many things in our lives," said Yamila Blake-Lazu at the celebration. "It taught us about natural order, love, and to always appreciate what we have, because nothing is forever." She said their entire class "fixated" on the book and the Frost poem contained in it, particularly Yakez, because "he saw the gold in everything."

The "Stay Gold" mantra connected Yakez and his mother as well. They discussed the poem and the book at great length and how the messages of staying true to oneself, holding on to all that is good, solidarity, and staying gold in the face of adversity resonated with them. Since Yakez was very young, Ms. Semark said, she frequently told him to "stay gold," and she became more intentional in using the phrase with him when she discovered their mutual connection to the poem.

"I would use the 'Stay Gold' phrase as a reminder to him that he alone was enough – that he was valued, he was loved, and he was the most beautiful gift to this world," wrote Ms. Semark. "But every young person is enough. Every young person has value and should be celebrated. Every young person is gold."

Ms. Semark plans to organize The Stay Gold movement in Yakez's name to carry this philosophy forward. Donations can be made at gofundme.com/yakez-semarks-funeral-support.



Yakez Lee Semark
Submitted photo

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At the end of the celebration, Rev. Cherry told the crowd to continue expressing the goodness and love he saw in that room. "If goodness exists like this every day, we'll find ourselves in a better situation."

Two Young Men Charged in the Murder of Yakez Semark

By Larry Gavin

On Feb. 8, Yakez Semark, a 20-year old resident of Chicago, was shot in the chest at approximately 11:30 p.m. in the 1800 block of Hovland Court. He was transported to Evanston Hospital where he was pronounced dead. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office ruled Semark's death a homicide. Evanston Police Detectives along with members of the North Regional Major Crimes Task Force (NORTAF) investigated the homicide, said Commander Ryan Glew, Media Relations of the Evanston Police Department.

On Feb. 18, Evanston police charged two young men in Mr. Semark's homicide, said the Commander. One is an 18-year old resident of Evanston and the other an 18-year old resident of Chicago. Both men have both been charged with First Degree Murder in connection with Mr. Semark's death, said the Commander.

The investigation revealed that the two young men allegedly arranged to meet with Mr. Semark to buy a quantity of cannabis, said the Commander. The transaction allegedly escalated into a physical altercation between one of the young men and Mr. Semark, said the Commander. During the altercation one of the young men allegedly shot Mr. Semark once in the chest, causing his death, said the Commander. Both men fled on foot.

Mr. Semark is a graduate of Evanston Township High School. His mother is an Evanston resident. Funeral services were held in Evanston on Feb. 17. The public is reminded that the filing of charges is not evidence that the persons charged committed a crime. They are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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