

## Remembering the short life of a kindergarten teacher



Nathan Noel, who worked at a Toronto daycare and kindergarten, didn't just watch his kids play – he joined in. And he treated their problems with gravitas. 'My children,' he called his students. A memorial was held for him this week.

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last fall, I've been part of an eclectic group in my community helping to organize a memorial for a young man who, in a cynical age, stood out because he wasn't.

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Nathan Anthony Noel was hopeful, decent, driven. He said things like, "Every rock they throw, you gotta use as a stepping stone," and he meant it.

It's been eight months since we lost him – to a brain aneurysm, at the age of 24.

I say "we" because Nathan belonged to many families. He was a kindergarten teacher at Garden Avenue Public School in west Toronto, where he taught my son. For four years before that, he worked at the school in Sunnyside Garden Daycare, where he looked after my daughter. "My children," he called them.

To see Nathan you'd never guess his vocation. For starters, he was that rare species in early childhood education – a male. He was also brawny and black, he sported diamante studs in both ears, a chin-strap beard and, even on cloudy days, designer shades.

But what truly set him apart was the crackling enthusiasm he brought to a day. When he rallied the students for soccer games before school, he didn't just supervise, he played. He laughed loudly and often and hugged as easily as he said hello. He taught his kids how to rap about social justice, and huddled with them in hallways, treating their pint-sized problems with gravitas. After school, he hosted a mock TV show he called "Real Talk with Mr. Nathan," fielding pressing questions from "the audience" – *What's your favourite mystical creature? What's the weirdest thing about you?*



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How had someone so young touched the lives of so many? Was there something to learn from his short life?

### **A study in inspiration**

On a cold Sunday last fall, I visited Nathan's parents and his older brother Isaiah. They live in a big, stylish house in Ajax, Ont. – Nathan had described it with relish around school when they moved in 2012. His parents saw it as a family home for the generations, as they describe it, large enough for their children and, one day, grandchildren, and light years from where they started.



raising two young black males you look for a place that's safe," Mrs. Noel says.

"There's an island tradition for parents to step back and away and let teachers and students play their roles. But we didn't. We tried to teach them to work hard. We told them it builds character, that you have to be respectful and take responsibility for all that you do."

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I could hear Nathan in her words as she spoke. I wondered if she knew that he'd carried them across the city, to a school full of children, and his peers, too.

Mrs. Noel is her own study in inspiration. She had the boys composing their resumes at 14. (They found jobs clearing shopping carts at IKEA.) If they wanted to hang out at the mall in the summers, she made them visit the library first and write reports for her on the books they read there. "You need to be very articulate and present your story and what you think. Words not fists," she'd tell them.

"I knew an education makes for a better life," she says. And Nathan understood this. "He was very aware of the unfortunate stereotypes of young black men and he looked at the world differently – like it really could be changed."

He was also, they believe, born with his own brand of determination. "You don't ever tell Nathan he can't do something," Mr. Noel says.

Most of his energy he poured into sports, football, volleyball, basketball. And he loved to run. Once he did it until his feet bled. A high-school track star had challenged him to a race and Nathan, though he was wearing dress shoes, refused to back down. He ran in his socks and



followed Isaiah's path, graduating with his diploma in early childhood education.

### **'Be good to everyone'**

Two months later, he arrived in our lives – first in daycare, then in the school's new full-day kindergarten program.

When Judith Malcolm-Barnes, the daycare supervisor, first hired Nathan, she assumed she was giving him the opportunity of a lifetime. Now she believes the opportunity was hers. To see him with the children was extraordinary, she says. "I think Nathan drew energy from the kids, and the more love they gave him, the more he had to give back."

Nathan had his shortcomings. Getting anywhere on time was a daily battle. For a while, he took to leaving his house hours earlier than necessary and Martha Peterson, the school principal, would find him parked outside, asleep in his car. "I'd knock on the window, and say, 'Hey, Nathan it's time to wake up!'"

But he also had vision. "He was very grounded and knew what he wanted out of life," says Mrs. Peterson. "He was a wise old soul, like he'd been around before. I really feel that. He didn't know his life was short, but he treated so many days as though they were precious."

Many parents have told her since that Nathan still features in their lives. "They say to their kids, 'What would Mr. Nathan say about that?' 'What would Mr. Nathan do?'" One mother, Angela Carter, told me her family has instituted a gratitude experiment since losing Nathan: At the end of each day each one of them mentions something they're thankful for.

In the last year of his life, Nathan had landed his dream job, bought his first car and fallen in love. He felt thankful for a great deal. But success only made him more determined to push others forward, says Satish Singh, a co-worker and close friend at the daycare.



mornings, and say, 'You gotta keep going to school, don't stall' ... when I'd see him at lunch, 'Are you going to apply? ... Go get that school done!'

In one of the memorial books Ms. Carter produced for Mr. Nathan, Mr. Sahathevan wrote: "When I get that diploma, I'm going to walk out of that college building and look to the skies and show you..."

It was the idea that Nathan's legacy might go unexplored, or worse, be forgotten, that had compelled me – and so many others – to get involved in his memorial. Yet the more I spoke to people about him, the more I realized that what Nathan had given was ours to keep. Which, even in a cynical world, is worth celebrating.

On the patch of asphalt where Nathan used to run his morning soccer games, we held his memorial this past week. Staff from the school and daycare, parents and children all made it happen. A Yellowwood tree was planted in his honour, and a striking mural installed. (A bench wouldn't do. Nathan rarely sat down.)

The rain held and a stage went up. Flowers, too, photos, posters and pictures the children drew. The school choir sang to an African drum and a back-track laid down by one of the fathers. Between songs came the tributes, from friends, coworkers, and the kids Nathan had called his own.

The Noel family sat in the front row and heard how their son had left us better than he found us. Behind them, fastened to the chain-link fence, was a cut-out of Nathan's silhouette, larger than life, in mid-stride between two words – his words.

It reads simply: Play On.

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