

Boy, 14, killed by train is mourned

By Angie Green
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A day after **14-year-old Lavert Baker Jr.** lost his life after being struck by a Metro Blue Line commuter train, his family members grappled with whether his loss could have been avoided. "He was my heart," his father, Lavert Baker Sr., said Friday. "I lost a big part of my heart yesterday." The teenager was hit Thursday afternoon in Watts as he walked home from school. Witnesses said he was in the middle of the train tracks when warning lights started blinking and the guard gates lowered. A spokesperson for the L.A. County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which operates the train, said an investigation is underway. By chance, Lavert's 15-year-old sister, Moneisha, was a passenger on the train but did not learn that it was her brother who had been struck until she arrived at a relative's home in East Los Angeles. Of 13 siblings, Lavert and Moneisha shared a special bond because of their closeness in age, the elder Baker said. "The two were like this," he said, holding his index and middle fingers together.

Lavert, an eighth-grader at Charles R. Drew Middle School, was crossing the four-lane tracks at the intersection of East 92nd Street and Graham Avenue when, his father said, he was "blindsided." Baker said witnesses told him the guard gates were up before his son entered the train right-of-way about 3:45 p.m. Earlier reports said he was riding a scooter, but an eyewitness said the scooter was brought to the scene by another neighbor boy after the accident.

Blanca Mendoza, 37, was heading east on 92nd Street and saw Baker standing in the middle of the four-lane tracks that run south and north. Mendoza said Friday in an interview that there was no scooter near him. "He was in the middle when the lights started blinking and the arms went down," she said. She heard the train's horn three times and saw the train slow as it approached the boy, who turned to look just before the train hit him.

The teenager took the same route every day, his father said. The elder Baker was at his home less than a mile from the crossing when Mendoza and another resident rushed to tell him about the accident. Baker, 51, found his son on the ground as a crowd began to gather. He rushed to his side and held him despite officials' asking him to step aside. Lavert was taken to St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood and was pronounced dead at 4:11 p.m., said Lt. David Smith of the L.A. County coroner's office. The younger Baker, who was nicknamed "Vert Vert," was described as "comical" by his mother, Marvella Graves, and "full of joy" by his father.

At the accident scene, Lavert's father set up memorial candles in the shape of a "V" Thursday night. Friends and family on Friday described Lavert as a well-liked and ambitious teen who was a video game fanatic and liked to play football and basketball. He wanted to be an electrician and go to college.

"He always showed me he wanted to go to college," Baker said. "He would say, 'You just watch, Dad, I'm going to be the first one.'" A constant stream of friends and family members stopped by the Grape Street residence Friday to offer their condolences.

To help raise funds for memorial services, the 92nd Street Elementary School is holding a car wash today from 9 a.m. to noon. On Friday afternoon, students held posters they made with colored markers advertising the event. Lavert was the second fatality this month involving a Metro Blue Line commuter train. On Jan. 5, a male was struck by a train in the Long Beach area, said Helen Gilstrap, an MTA spokeswoman. The Metro Blue Line, L.A.'s first light-rail transit system, runs from 7th Street in downtown L.A. through Vernon, Huntington Park, South Gate, Watts, Compton and Carson to downtown Long Beach. It carries about 63,000 passengers daily and has a 55 mph maximum allowable speed.

From June 2005 to June 2006, 27 people were injured and five were killed in Blue Line accidents, Gilstrap said. The commuter trains run every five minutes from 3 to 7 p.m. at the intersection where Lavert was struck. Gilstrap said the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the MTA are investigating Lavert's death. She could not answer specific questions about the circumstances surrounding the accident. "Everything is under investigation at this time," Gilstrap said. "The results will take two weeks to give you a definitive answer."

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