

NOLA

'A hole in our hearts': Family, friends mourn murder victim Chyna Gibson

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It was a struggle to reach New Orleans from Baton Rouge after the tire started leaking last Friday night. But by stopping periodically to pump the tire with air, Chyna Gibson finally made it back home in time to put the finishing touches on the makeup for her close friend and mentor, Dayshawn Brown, and Brown's sister in preparation for the Zulu ball that night.

Once the revelry ended hours later, Brown dropped Gibson off at a relative's home in the 7th Ward. He had no idea that would be the last time he saw her.

"To have this happen is devastating," Brown said. "I'm not sure what could have transpired."

Gibson, 31, was gunned down the next night, Saturday (Feb. 25), around 8:30 p.m. outside the Bella Plaza shopping center in the 4300 block of Downman Road in New Orleans East. New Orleans police found her body, with several bullet wounds, lying between two cars parked in front of a clothing store. Neighbors said they heard eight to 10 gunshots.

According to her family and close friends like Brown, Gibson was a transgender woman and New Orleans native who performed in drag shows across the country. She was also known by the name Chyna Doll Dupree.

A friend, who asked not to be named, said at the scene Saturday that Gibson had recently arrived from her current home in California to celebrate Mardi Gras with friends and family.

Speaking with NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune on Wednesday, Brown said that Gibson had ventured to Downman Road to pick up a dress from a boutique store in the shopping center and was planning to wear it at a Mardi Gras party later that night.

He has no idea why Gibson was on the receiving end of gunfire.

"Chyna didn't affiliate herself with any kind of drama," Brown said. "It's a shocker to everyone because she didn't have any drama with anyone, and I've never heard her say she was into something."

When he first met Gibson through his cousin back in 2003, Brown said Gibson asked him to be her "parent," a role in the close-knit LGBT community that serves as both mentor and a loving source of support akin to a family member.

"She came to me for anything personal, any advice," Brown said. "She said she admired me because not only do I party, but I'm about business also. She said she would just love for me to be a parent."

Often, Brown said he would push Gibson to secure a day job and keep a close watch over her finances. But Gibson, a talented dancer, had other plans: Her heart was set firmly on show business, Brown said.

"That was her life," Brown said. "That's what she wanted to do, and she was very good at entertaining."

Gibson's foray into the entertainment world started as a high-schooler growing up in the former St. Bernard public housing development, where she fell in love with bounce music and joined a local dance group called the Body Rockers, Brown said.

Hurricane Katrina scattered Brown's family to Houston and Gibson's family to Atlanta in 2005. While in Atlanta, Gibson landed her first major show at the Jungle club, Brown said, and was hooked on the thrill of the stage. But it was in Houston where her star began rising, all because of one night at a house pageant.

A house pageant, Brown said, is a beauty pageant held in someone's home. All the garments used by the participants have to derive from household items found inside that home. On the night of the house pageant in Houston, Brown said Gibson performed the same lip-sync and dance routine she did in Atlanta -- and brought the house down.

"Everyone went haywire in the house," Brown said. "That was her breaking point right there."

The performance put Gibson on the map in Houston. She started to get regular gigs at local venues, and became known as the "The Dancing Doll," Brown said. National bookings followed as far away as California, where she eventually moved.

Fox 40 in Sacramento reported Tuesday that Gibson's biological family lives in Sacramento, Calif. A vigil was scheduled to be held in Sacramento Tuesday night, according to the station.

"It's heartbreaking to know that she's not coming home on her scheduled flight, or we won't be seeing her again and hearing her voice," Gibson's sister, Iona Maxie, told Fox 40. "She had fun everywhere she goes. She was a person who would walk in the room and complimented everybody and just wanted you to feel good and have fun."

Despite her family in Sacramento and her roots in New Orleans, it was Houston -- the town that put her on the map -- where Gibson always seemed to return, often for months at a time, Brown said.

"She could just not leave Houston alone," he said. "She loved Houston, and she loved New Orleans."

Fox 26 in Houston reported Monday that Gibson was a well-known performer at clubs located in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. Dozens of people attended a vigil held in Houston over the weekend, according to the station.

"She was just fun to be around and her personality was really funny," Adam Hicks, a Houston resident and close friend of Gibson, told Fox 26. "This is just really upsetting."

Gibson's murder is all the more tragic, Brown said, in light of plans she had made to undergo gender confirmation surgery in April.

"She will be missed dearly," he said. "She's left a hole in our hearts, not only in New Orleans but outside here, too. I'll never forget her."

Gibson's murder preceded by two days the fatal stabbing Monday (Feb. 27) of another transgender woman, 25-year-old Ciara McElveen, who was dragged out of a vehicle in the 7th Ward by the driver after she had apparently been stabbed several times, according to police and witnesses. Police said the driver got something out of the trunk, walked to the passenger side of the vehicle, stabbed McElveen, then removed her from the car. The suspect got back into the vehicle and drove away.

At a press conference Wednesday afternoon, NOPD Cmdr. Doug Eckert said authorities do not believe the two murders were connected, and don't believe the two people were targeted because they were transgender women. He said investigators are still seeking motives for the slayings.

"Right now, we're not looking at these as robberies," Eckert said.