

How Did Steven York Die?

Bryant W. York January 2007

Steven Everett York
March 29, 1948 – December 15, 1960



On December 14, 1960 there was a huge snowstorm in Boston. My family lived in the Orchard Park Housing Project at 26 Ambrose St., Roxbury, MA. We awoke on the morning of December 15, 1960 to those radio words all schoolchildren love, “No school, all schools, all day in Boston”. About 15 inches of snow had fallen overnight. I was 15 and my mom asked me to take my 13 year old sister, Gail, to what is now Downtown Crossing to buy her some snow boots. My two younger brothers, Steven 12 and Gregory 10, went out to play in the snow with the rest of the kids from the Project.

A white truck driver from Iowa had decided he could save some time by cutting through Yeoman St. to Hampden St to make his delivery. Yeoman St. was a tiny, one-way street, with no trucks allowed, that ran directly behind the Project. Several kids from the Project including my two younger brothers were having a snowball fight as the 18-wheeler turned into Yeoman St. My brothers and some others were running on the snow-covered sidewalk using the truck as a shield. Gregory fell under the truck but before the wheels got to him, Steven pulled him out of the way and Steven fell under the truck. The four rear wheels on the left side of the truck rolled over Steven and he was caught between the two forward and the two aft wheels.

Some of the kids ran to get my mother. When she arrived at the scene, she saw Gregory sitting in shock on the snow bank covered in Steven’s blood. Steven was caught under the wheels of the truck, also covered in blood. She ran toward Steven. The white truck driver grabbed her and threw her against the building, shouting “It is just a nigger, stay away from it!” My mother had very light skin and the truck driver had mistaken her for white. My mother lunged at him in rage and he threw her to the ground. The truck driver threw a blanket over the wheels to cover Steven, although several people said they could hear him breathing.

After some time the police arrived and assessed the situation. They decided they would need a fire truck to lift the 18-wheeler off my brother. Although both the local fire station and police station were located at the corner of Dudley St and Blue Hill Avenue next to St. Patrick’s Catholic Church about 800 yards from the scene of the accident, the fire truck arrived about one

and a half hours later. After some time the firemen were able to lift the truck off my brother and transport him to the hospital. Stevie was pronounced dead on arrival. His cranium and pelvis had been crushed. This was a time when almost all policeman and firemen in Boston were of Irish or Italian ancestry.

While the 18-wheeler was being lifted off of my brother, onlookers pointed to the “No Trucks Allowed” sign on the corner and commented that trucks were not allowed on that street. As the firemen removed some of the snow beneath my brother in order to free him, several people noticed that the four wheels that crushed my brother were actually on the sidewalk. Later several kids from the snowball fight told my mother that the truck driver had been angrily shouting “nigger” out of the window at them just before the truck swerved up onto the sidewalk.

When my sister, Gail, and I arrived home from getting the boots, we found about 100 people standing outside our home at 26 Ambrose St., from the steps of the building the line reached halfway up the street. These were mostly our friends and their parents. As we walked towards the door, they just stared at us and did not say anything. It was a truly surreal moment. As we walked up the front steps someone shouted, “Stevie is dead!” Gail and I looked at each other in disbelief and continued up the steps to our apartment. Inside we found our older sister Yvonne who was married and lived in Dorchester. She said that Stevie had been taken to the hospital and we were waiting to hear about his condition. Boston City Hospital was a 15-minute walk from the Project and I left for the hospital immediately. As I was going out the front steps, my mother and father arrived in my father’s car (my mother and father had been separated for 5 years). I looked at my mom but she would not look at me. My father looked at me and calmly said “Stevie is dead!” but I did not believe him. As my mom walked up the steps, one of our neighbors asked, “How is Stevie?” My mom cried and said, “Stevie is dead!” Only then did I believe that Stevie had died.

Before the end of the day the trucking company had contacted my mother and offered to settle out of court for \$500.00. They claimed it would be ruled an accident and the driver would be fined \$25.00 for driving on a “No Trucks Allowed” street, but they were willing to generously offer my mother \$500.00 for the loss of her son. They also explained that the truck driver might file assault charges against her because she had lunged at him. My mother was distraught but she had enough presence of mind to refuse to settle. For years prior to her separation from my father, my mother had worked as maid for several rich, Jewish families in Newton and Brookline. Although she had not worked for any of these families for over five years, one of them helped her find a lawyer. The lawyer believed he could at least prove negligence on the part of the driver, if not malicious intent. He hired a photographer to take photos of the scene and he instructed me to go out to the scene immediately and scoop up some of Stevie’s blood from the snow. He insisted that I do this immediately as the forecast was for rain and he claimed the rain would wash away the evidence. I told my mother that I thought that saving the blood seemed crazy because the snow would melt long before a trial, but I was a 15 year old. She overruled me and instructed me to get the blood.

I took two large empty mayonnaise jars and washed them out thoroughly. I went out to the scene and scooped up as much bloody snow as I could, filling the two jars and replacing the lids. I brought the jars back to our apartment and put them in the freezer compartment of our

refrigerator as instructed. It was difficult to look in the freezer, but I did look several times every day so that I could report to the lawyer the progress of the melting. After several days all of the snow had melted and we just had two mayonnaise jars of Stevie's blood floating in dirty water. After a few weeks the lawyer said it was no longer necessary to keep the blood as it could not be used as evidence. I removed the jars from the freezer and poured the bloody water down the drain in the kitchen sink. It was more painful pouring the blood down the drain than it was for me to think about my brother lying underneath the wheels of that truck for nearly two hours. It was years before I could finally say goodbye to Stevie.

Christmas 1960 was a sad time for the York family. Every year for the previous 5 years it had been my job to write the letter to Globe Santa requesting toys for my younger brothers and sister. Globe Santa was the Boston Globe Newspaper's way of distributing Christmas toys to indigent children. In 1960 I didn't sit with Gregory, Stevie, and Gail and ask them what toys they wanted so that I could write a good letter. I never celebrated Christmas again until I had children.

In the weeks that followed I sometimes accompanied my mother when she met with the lawyer. He instructed us that it would be an uphill battle because (1) we were Black, (2) we were poor, and (3) the legal system was complicated. Leading up to the trial the trucking company kept telling my mother that she would not have a chance in court. No one would believe a black woman, whose witnesses were black children. As she was told, "Blacks have low credibility." The lawyer was able to find a white witness who lived on Yeoman St. very close to the site and who was willing to testify. It was the father of Walter Boudreau, a friend of mine. Walter's father had said that he saw the driver yelling names at the kids and he saw the truck swerve up onto the sidewalk. At trial none of the Project kids were allowed to testify and Walter Boudreau's father was painted as an alcoholic by the trucking company's lawyer. Consequently, there was no proof that the driver had used racial slurs; there was no proof that the driver had purposely swerved up onto the sidewalk to hit my brother; and there was no proof that the driver had told my mother "It is just a nigger, stay away from it! It was the word of a poor Black woman who lived in subsidized housing versus that of a middle-classed, white truck driver from Iowa. Things looked pretty bleak. My mother was staring at losing the case and possibly being charged with assault, when one of the white firemen came forward and said he would testify that the truck was definitely on the sidewalk when they lifted it off my brother. Here it is not clear whether the case went to trial or was settled out of court. I believe my mother won a settlement of \$5,000.00 from which she owed the lawyer a \$1,600.00 fee and costs for the photographer, etc. After splitting the remaining \$3,200.00 with my father 50/50, my mother ended up with \$1,600.00. At the time my father was paying \$20.00 per week in support payments and our rent was \$20.00 per month (the Project was federally subsidized housing). It is difficult when the court assigns a monetary value to the life of someone you love and have lived with every day for twelve years. It is particularly difficult when the people who run the legal system are all white and they tell you that your brother's life was worth less than their used automobile. I have often wanted to publish a Kelly Blue Book of Used Lives. I am sure that we could find any number of economists who could prove that the white truck driver's contribution to American society was greater than the potential contribution of a twelve year old Black boy living in the ghetto.

This experience took a tremendous toll on the York family and the entire Orchard Park Housing Project. It destroyed my younger brother, Gregory's life. At age 10 he witnessed his closest

brother crushed to death. He understood that a white man could call him a nigger, drive a truck onto a sidewalk and kill his brother, slap his mother and throw her to the ground, and have the court say there was no proof because his Black friends were deemed non-credible witnesses. The experience shattered my mother. She became very bitter, began to drink heavily, smoke heavily, and deteriorate. She eventually died in 1979 of lung cancer. Gail, Yvonne, and I were less dramatically affected because none of us had actually observed the scene. My older brother Billy had gone to the morgue to view Stevie's body and he suffered a deep depression.

In 2001 as I was driving across country from Massachusetts to Oregon, I stopped in Boulder Colorado to visit with an old friend from the Orchard Park Housing Project, Bruce Van Allen. That night at dinner he told me how profoundly Stevie's death had affected him. Over the years I had forgotten that many of my friends were out on Yeoman St. that day and that their lives had been transformed as well.

During the period following Stevie's death, the Orchard Park Housing Project became a progressively worse environment in which to raise children and at one time qualified as the murder capital of the USA. Eventually it was torn down and replaced with Garden Homes that were dedicated by President Clinton in 1997.

Although Steven York was killed by a single white racist who may have gotten away with manslaughter or murder, the rest of the York family was destroyed by a system of white racism that pervades American culture to this day. A system in which every white person is born with that "invisible knapsack of privilege"¹ that allows them to break the so-called laws of the land in the interest of "justice".

¹Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," an essay excerpted from the winter 1990 issue of *Independent School*.

*** All of the events reported above were either experienced directly by me, learned from my mother, learned from my brothers and sisters, or learned from my friends who witnessed Steven's death.

Where was the Orchard Park Housing Project?



The York Kids in 1951

