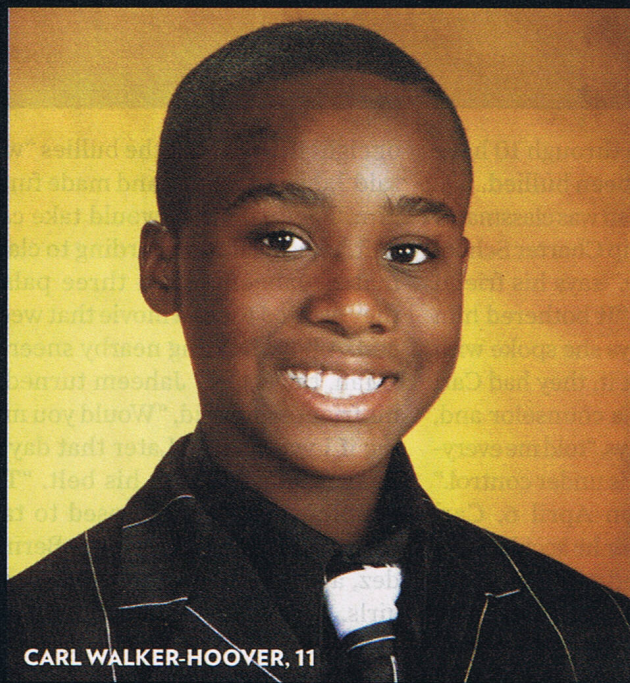
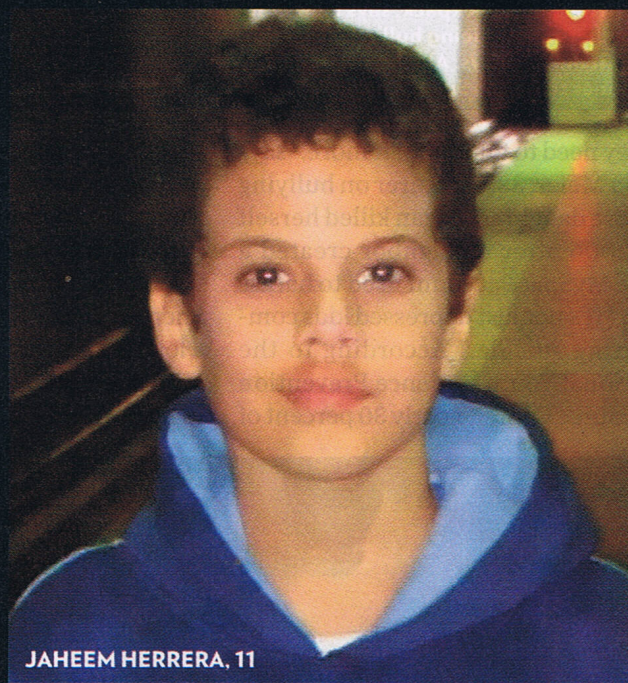


TWO BOYS, TWO TOWNS, TWO TRAGEDIES

BULLIED TO DEATH?



CARL WALKER-HOOVER, 11



JAHEEM HERRERA, 11

IN 10 DAYS, TWO BOYS HANGED THEMSELVES AFTER BEING TEASED AT SCHOOL. COULD THEY HAVE BEEN SAVED?

The first child, Carl Walker-Hoover, came home from school on April 6, sat with his mother for a while, then waited in his room while she made him a cheeseburger. “I called up to him while it was cooking,” says Sird-eaner Walker, 44. “He didn’t answer. So I went upstairs.” There, she found Carl, 11, hanging from an electric cord slung over a banister. “I couldn’t hold him up,” she says. “His weight was so heavy. All I could do was scream.”

Ten days later, the second boy, Jaheem Herrera, came home from

school with his report card. “He had all A’s and B’s,” says his mother, Masi-ka Bermudez, 29. “I gave him a high five.” Jaheem, 11, went to his room, and when dinner was ready, “I kept calling him but he didn’t answer,” says Bermudez. “My daughter and I went upstairs. We unlocked the door. We walked in, and I saw him hanging in the closet. I tried to hold him up. When I touched him, he was cold.”

An unthinkable scene played out twice just 10 days apart—how could it be? Why did Carl, a bright, creative kid from Springfield, Mass., who

wrote plays and once made his own currency, and Jaheem, of Decatur, Ga., who loved drawing flowers and doing funny dances, decide to end their lives? Their mothers say the tragedies have something in common: Both Carl and Jaheem were taunted and called gay by bullies. “How could his school have let it reach the point where a child kills himself?” says Bermudez. “Parents are at work thinking their kids are safe, but they’re not.”

Bullying is hardly a new problem, and in recent years schools have been addressing it, experts say. Still,



REMEMBERING CARL Sirdeaner Walker (right), with her son's backpack, says he was afraid to tell teachers about being bullied. "He said he'd be labeled a snitch," she says. Above, friends sign a memorial banner to Carl in Springfield, Mass.



"they need to talk about it more," says Tina Meier, 38, a lecturer on bullying whose daughter Megan killed herself in 2006 after a neighbor created a fake MySpace account used to harass her. "It's not just depressed kids committing suicide." According to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, nearly 30 percent of

students in grades 6 through 10 have bullied someone or been bullied.

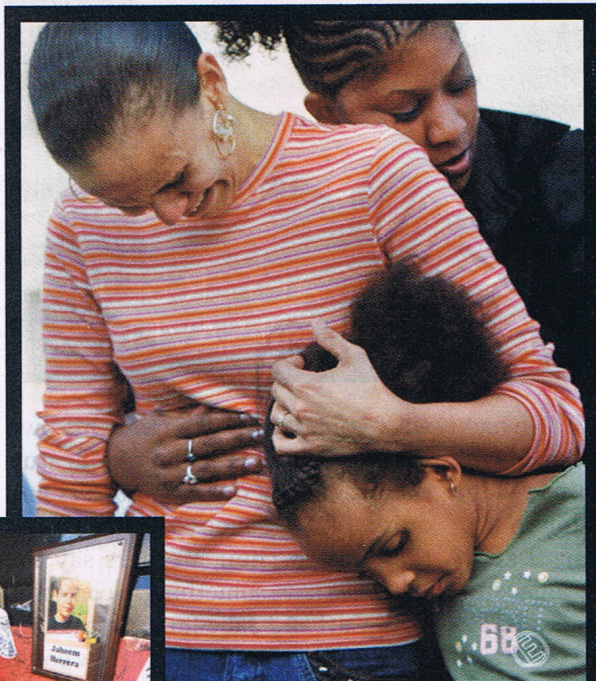
For Carl, the problem was classmates at the New Leadership Charter School "who called him gay," says his friend Sherine Cockett, 11. "It bothered him a lot." His mother says she spoke with school officials about it; they had Carl meet regularly with a counselor and, she says, "told me everything is under control." But on April 6, Carl told her he accidentally pushed a rolling TV set into a classmate, who allegedly threatened him. Later that day he wrote a suicide note before hanging himself. "He said, 'Tell everyone I'm sorry and that I love them,'" says Walker, a social worker and single mother to three other children. Peter Daboul, chairman of the school's board of trustees, says a taskforce is looking into the matter. "As best we know, we did what we were supposed to do," he says. "Maybe it isn't enough."

Masika Bermudez says she met with officials at Dunaire Elementary School seven

or eight times about the bullies "who said Jaheem was gay and made fun of him. They said they would take care of it." On April 16, according to classmates, Jaheem asked three pals if they wanted to see a movie that weekend. A boy standing nearby sneered, "Man, that's gay." Jaheem turned to his friends and said, "Would you miss me if I was gone?" Later that day he hanged himself with his belt. "The people who were supposed to take care of him didn't do it," says Bermudez, a single mother to three young girls. "They failed him." School officials pledged to review the case; the DeKalb County District Attorney is also looking into it. Bullying expert Dr. Eli Newberger says school programs aimed at combatting bullies will fall short if they don't also confront "homophobia among children. It's become widespread and acceptable for playground insults, and it's deeply hurtful."

Those who knew Carl and Jaheem can only hope their deaths will somehow help make schools safer. "I was really mad when I found out Carl killed himself," says his friend Kevin Cao, 11. "Now he won't get to grow up and find out who he was going to be."

By Alex Tresniowski. Anne Driscoll in Springfield, **Chandra Thomas** in Decatur, **Steve Helling** in Orlando and **Howard Breuer** in Los Angeles



HE LOVED CARTOONS "Every time I close my eyes I see him," says Masika Bermudez (in stripes, with daughter Ny'irah, 7, and family friend Angelic Mitchell at an April 21 prayer vigil for Jaheem). At left, friends leave messages at Jaheem's Decatur, Ga., home.



LEFT: FROM TOP: CHRISTOPHER EVANS/SPRINGFIELD UNION NEWS; CURTIS COMPTON/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/AR; BITA HONARVAR/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/AR