

Blessed Sacrament says farewell to young parishioner

Long before “Stop Snitching” became part of the urban parlance, drug dealers fired 52 machine-gun shots into the Baltimore home where Robert J. Nowlin Jr. lived – to send a message to his community activist father.

Many of the son’s classmates sold drugs, and more than a few of them died on the city’s streets. Bobby, as people in the neighborhood called the younger Mr. Nowlin, vowed he would do more with his life by enlisting in the military. He fulfilled his dream, serving in the U.S. Army five years, including 14 months in Iraq.

Mr. Nowlin had re-enlisted before he died in an Aug. 19 auto accident in Savannah, Ga.

On the evening of Aug. 25, nearly 200 mourners at a memorial Mass at Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Baltimore recalled the courage, faith and determination of the 22-year-old parishioner who, according to his father, was struck down on a highway while outside his vehicle.

“Bobby was an inspiration, a strength, a support,” said Father P. Edward Kenny Jr., the Blessed Sacrament pastor. “He was so strong and so fearless and he set such a fantastic example for the other kids in the neighborhood.”

His father, longtime Pen Lucy activist Robert J. Nowlin Sr., said his son saw so many wasted lives and decided on a better path.

“He joined the service,” Mr. Nowlin said, “because there was nothing out here but trouble. He wanted to go to the service and make something of himself, and that’s what he did.”

At the front of Blessed Sacrament sat a folded American flag, medals of commendation and a posthumous certificate of promotion to sergeant. Mr. Nowlin had passed the sergeant’s test, but had yet to receive the promotion.

Mourners said that even after drug dealers fired shots into the family's home in 1996 – the bullets did not hit anyone – neither Bobby nor his father would give up on their North Baltimore neighborhood.

The younger Mr. Nowlin, who had been an altar server at Blessed Sacrament and attended Sunday school there, served as the “eyes” for his father, who has been blind since birth.

Sometimes joined by some of the other five Nowlin children, they took part in anti-crime walks through the streets. They rallied in demonstrations and told elected officials of drug dealing and violence. They prayed at corners as Sister Marie Mack, S.S.N.D., the parish's pastoral administrator, spread holy water.

Sister Mack said Bobby personified Christian charity. When she needed someone to clean the church yard or shovel mountains of snow, she said, “no matter when he was called, he was always willing, even though it might put off doing something else.”

Bobby had been an Army logistical specialist in the 26th Brigade Support Battalion, attached to the 130th Infantry of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team. Stationed at Fort Stewart, Ga., at the time of his death, he was buried at the base's Lincoln Cemetery after an Aug. 23 military funeral.