

Alisha Neeley's death leads to girl gang truce

The Ladiis and the Baddest squash their beef

By Emily Kaiser
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Kris Drake



Briana Hunter, LeLe's best friend, battled other girls on the street to defend her family in a longstanding beef

Kris Drake



The Ladiis and the Baddest release balloons following the truce banquet in honor of LeLe

Kris Drake

Alisha Neeley spent the last night of her life surrounded by her closest friends.

The 17-year-old was pre-partying at her cousin's house, taking shot after shot of vodka. Wearing a brown Hollister polo, jeans, and Coach boots, she was a natural beauty with a hypnotic smile. Known as LeLe to her friends, she was the life of the party, playfully pulling girls off the couch to dance.

They called themselves the Ladiis and were known as one of the toughest female cliques on Minneapolis's north side.

"Fuck the Baddest," Lele yelled, calling out their rival clique and throwing up the "L" sign. "Woo woo, it's the Ladiis."

The girls left for the house party just before 11 p.m. They arrived to find at least 75 people packed into several basement rooms. LeLe announced her entrance with a voice so loud it drowned out the room's conversation. "It's the Ladiis!" Other girls at the party gave sideways looks as the Ladiis pushed their way in and started dancing together.

The party ended and the Ladiis were some of the first people outside. A man started yelling. "Get down! He's gonna shoot!"

LeLe kept dancing.

Shots rang out. The crowd scattered. LeLe dropped.

"I'm hit," she said.

Her cousin, Kayla, ran to her side. "LeLe, stop playing," she said.

"I can't breathe," Lele said, her breaths coming short and fast.

Kayla searched LeLe's body for the bullet wound, but couldn't find it. LeLe



Alisha Neeley, known as LeLe, was a vivacious 17-year-old with an infectious smile

Details:

[Photos: The Ladiis and The Baddest call a truce](#)

[Photos: Alisha 'Lele' Neeley](#)

was gasping the cold February air, holding her hands tight to her chest.

"LeLe, this is your cousin Kayla. I am not leaving your side. Ain't nobody out here but us. I need you to hold on, be strong, hold my hand, and listen to my voice. Do not leave my voice. Just fight, just be strong."

LeLe's eyes rolled back in her head, then snapped back to refocus on Kayla's face.

"LeLe, you have to relax," Kayla said. "They coming, they coming, I hear the sirens. Just fight."

By the time LeLe arrived at North Memorial Medical Center, paramedics had discovered the small gunshot wound to her neck. LeLe was suffering from internal bleeding from a bullet lodged in her lower back.

Doctors were unable to save her. She died in the early morning hours of February 26, just two weeks before her 18th birthday. Her death marked the 10th homicide this year in Minneapolis.

LeLe is emblematic of a growing problem: girl gangs. Police estimate there are 150 to 200 girls in Minneapolis who claim to be in a clique or gang.

Much of the time, girl gangs stay under the radar of law enforcement because their crimes are considered minor compared to the mayhem and gunplay favored by male gangs. But that doesn't mean the girls aren't putting themselves at risk.

Fourth Precinct Inspector Mike Martin says girls in the past were more likely to be auxiliary members of gangs through their boyfriends or brothers. Now they are increasingly independent, and their violence is escalating as they fight other girls with mace, padlocks, and knives.

"We've been fortunate that not a lot of serious violence has been associated with girls in gangs or cliques, but that's a natural evolution we might be seeing in the future," Martin says.

Sarah Klouda, the teen coordinator at Oak Park Center, works with girls in cliques every day. She's known the Neeley family since she started her job four years ago.

"Someone just ripped her away from us," she says. "She was right there in our grasp. She was on the right track and she was speaking up against this clique stuff. If that can happen to somebody like Alisha who was really on a mission, where did we all go wrong?"

LELE FOUGHT FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FIFTH GRADE. While walking to her boyfriend's house with a friend, she crossed paths with two other girls. Trying to act tough, the older of the two forced the younger girl to fight LeLe.

LeLe came home and told her older sister, Helena, about the altercation. Helena was only a year older than LeLe, but had grown up protecting her little sister. When she heard about the fight, she couldn't control her anger. She stormed over to the girl's house.

"That's real bullshit you tried to fight my sister," she yelled. "You don't even know why you're fighting

her."

The girls came out to settle the score. The adversaries walked seven blocks to the nearest park so they wouldn't get in trouble.

Helena attacked the girl who fought her sister, punching her in the face until she fell to the ground. When the older girl jumped in, Helena picked up a metal pole and started swinging it at her.

"I never knew how angry I would be if someone hit my sister until then," Helena says.

From that point on, Helena fought for LeLe. They were raised by their father, who spent long hours working to support his kids, and Helena became a mother figure to LeLe.

Their older brother, Terrence, had been running the streets for years with the Tre Tre Crips. Helena and LeLe started hanging around with their brother, known as T-Streets, and other Tre Tre Crips members in middle school.

By 2004, T-Streets was locked up on felony assault charges, so the sisters had to represent his name on the streets while he was behind bars. LeLe started dating one of the Tre Tre Crips members, Kenneth Dillard. The group of girls became known as the Lady Trez, following the boys to parties and fighting girls from rival gangs.

The violence turned deadly in 2007. Dillard and another Tre Tre member were charged in the death of 14-year-old Charez Jones. She was caught in gang crossfire while walking home from a birthday party.

When fellow gang members snitched on each other to police, the Lady Trez lost faith in the boys and decided to branch off on their own. They decided to represent as the hottest girls on the North Side, wearing the coolest clothes and mesmerizing the cutest boys in town. They became the Ladiis.

LeLe took charge of the Ladiis, recruiting new members and making a name for the group on the streets. She was beautiful and flirtatious, which brought boys around.

In 2007, LeLe, Helena, and fellow Ladii Latisha Williams were in a car on their way to get some food. As they passed a park, LeLe saw the girl her ex-boyfriend was dating. LeLe rolled down the car window and started yelling at her.

Tish joined in. "LeLe wants to fight you!" she taunted.

LeLe jumped out of the driver's seat. Before Helena could park the car, LeLe was already punching a girl to the ground and stomping on her.

A single gunshot echoed through the park. The girls scattered. The next time Helena saw LeLe, she had blood gushing from her mouth and tears streaming down her face.

"Oh my God, they shot you," Helena said.

LeLe rolled her eyes. "No, them hoes pistol-whipped me."

ERIKA "CHA" KILLINGSWORTH KNEW EARLY ON she had to fight for herself.

While attending Willard Elementary, Cha started her first fight with another girl during track and field day. The girl had been taunting her for days and Cha was sick of it.

Before the teacher pulled her away, Cha had been socked in the head and had a nasty bump to show for it.

When she got home, her mom yelled at her.

"You let her put a lump on your head?" her mother scolded. "You let her do that to you? You need to defend yourself."

By high school, Cha had been in multiple fights with Briana Hunter, a member of the Ladiis. As the fighting became more intense between Cha and Bri, friends started joining the fray.

When the Ladiis posted a "punching list" on MySpace, Cha and a number of her friends were included. Banding together, they decided to make their clique official. They were the Baddest.

Before long, the girls were proclaiming their clique on MySpace, scrawling their symbol on school notebooks, and throwing up their "B" sign.

Cha called a meeting at her house to talk about what it meant to be a part of the Baddest.

"We're the Baddest," Cha told her friends. "If we're going to be in this together, we need to follow some rules."

The Baddest came up with bylaws: "If you don't fight when we fight, you're kicked out. We have to keep good grades, get all the boys, and wear the hottest clothes. We don't mess with each other's boyfriends. The number-one target is The Ladiis."

The first full-on fight happened at a Henry vs. Edison basketball game in January 2009. A member of the Ladiis had made up a rumor that a girl in the Baddest had jumped her, so after the game the rival gangs met up to scrap.

The girls circled, screaming and amping each other up. One of the Ladiis made the first move, and suddenly every girl jumped in. Police moved in with mace to separate the combatants.

The next day, the Baddest posted a photo on MySpace of Monique Sanders's weave, which they had ripped out during the brawl.

As the rivalry grew more intense, the Ladiis and the Baddest started looking for confrontations every weekend.

Cha would call Monique on a Friday night. "Ya'll there? What's up?"

"Oh, we're there," Monique would say.

"Okay, we're on the way," Cha would say before hanging up.

There were times when the Baddest would show up to find the Ladiis fighting another girl gang. The Baddest would patiently wait their turn.

By summer, the girls were carrying weapons: mace, padlocks, knives. The two cliques carved their own

paths around the neighborhood to avoid running into each other. Anybody caught slippin' was sure to get jumped.

That winter, the Baddest were hanging out smoking weed and drinking when they got a call from Cha's boyfriend. The Ladiis were at a party nearby.

That's all the Baddest needed to hear. They were too drunk to think straight, and their hatred had spiraled out of control.

Cha was furious. "I don't care who I see," she screamed as they walked to the party. "I'm gonna fight anybody."

At the party, LeLe and Veronica Perkins were inside dancing when they got a text from Tish that the Baddest were outside. "You better come back out," Tish said. "Looks like we're gonna fight."

Cha spotted Veronica first. She had just given birth to a premature baby the day before and Cha couldn't believe she was out partying and looking for a fight.

Tish came after Cha, swinging a padlock on a shoestring. Cha was able to duck a couple of times before the lock smashed her lip, splitting it open.

By the time the fight ended, LeLe was clutching her hand in pain. She'd been stabbed with a box cutter. It was sure to leave a scar.

LeLe had spent the past two years of her life living fast, ditching school, and recovering from fights that had become an almost daily routine. She was going on 18 and would have been graduating from high school in June if she hadn't dropped out.

"I feel we're runnin' in circles doing the same stuff," LeLe said, exhausted. "Fighting back and forth ain't getting us nowhere except with Mace in our eyes and headaches when we get home. I am so tired of this and been doing it for too long. I don't know why you all ain't tired, too."

MOURNERS WERE GATHERED AT THE SCENE OF the crime the day after LeLe's death, leaving flowers and cards, when shots rang out nearby.

At LeLe's funeral the next weekend, police arrested two men after one was spotted passing a gun to the other before attempting to enter New Salem Baptist Church for the service. As the family prepared to bring LeLe's casket out to the waiting hearse, a scuffle between two rival gangs led to guns being pulled in the crowd and scared mourners pushing their way out of the church.

One of the men arrested was Alonzo McCoy, a Tre Tre Crips member. In April, police filed search warrant applications in Hennepin County District Court to search his phone records along with Dillard's. Witnesses told police McCoy was seen shooting in Neeley's direction at the party that night. Both men were charged, but never tried, in the murder of Charez Jones in 2007.

But prosecutors dropped Dillard's case just hours before his trial after they were surprised by new witness testimony. The case remains open.

WHEN CHA HEARD ABOUT LELE'S DEATH, HER eyes welled up with tears, but she couldn't explain why. LeLe was one of her worst enemies, and here she was crying like she had lost a best friend.

She thought back to the last time she saw LeLe. They had been fighting just three weeks before, after a Henry basketball game. LeLe was attacking her with a belt.

Cha made a three-way call to Danielle and Jasmine, two of the Baddest. She spoke through sniffles.

"This is really serious," she said. "This is one of us. This is one of our girls. Somebody our age. Somebody who knew the same boys we knew. Somebody who did the same things we did."

The girls came to the only conclusion that made sense: It was time to squash the beef with the Ladiis.

"What the fuck was we thinking?" Cha said. "We're going to end up killing each other one by one. I am so mad because we coulda stopped this on our own. We was almost there. I know we was."

Toya called Monique from the Ladiis.

"Is LeLe really dead?" Toya said.

Monique was already in tears. "Yeah, she's dead."

"We don't want to beef no more," Toya said.

The idea caught Monique off guard. She had been mourning the death of one of her best friends and wasn't thinking about the Baddest.

"All right," Monique said. "I'll call you back later."

When Sarah Klouda heard about the truce, she jumped at the opportunity to help the girls make it official. Some of them came to her office to talk about it.

"This is huge, and it's on you guys to see it through and make it happen," Klouda said. "Alisha is gone, and in the back of all of our minds, you can't help but think who is next. The change isn't going to happen from me; change is going to come from you and your abilities to school the next generation and teach them otherwise. You need to stand as role models to start changing this cycle."

But emotions were running high. Rumors accused some of LeLe's closest friends and enemies of the murder. Girls on both sides had been close with the gang members involved in the gun battle that night.

Some members of the cliques weren't ready to drop the rivalry so fast. Bri was furious and went to talk with Helena about the truce.

"Now she's dead and they want to be our friends?" Bri said. "We can stop the beef, but they can't never be my friends. I can't just walk up to them like, 'How you doing today? You want to go smoke some weed?' I can't do that. We're not friends."

Girls from both sides struggled to maintain the truce when they saw each other on the street. Klouda kept receiving phone calls as the girls tried to cope with situations where they would usually fight each other.

"I don't know if this is going to happen," Helena told Klouda.

The rumors became too much for Helena. When she heard of one girl spreading lies about her sister's murder, she decided to go fight her. But when she got into her car, it wouldn't start.

"LeLe is telling me not to do it," she told herself.

Klouda suggested a banquet where all of the girls could come together to show their support for the truce. Then they would know who was serious about stopping the beef.

"This is a really big deal for them to call a truce on their own terms," Klouda says. "That never happens. I wanted to make sure Alisha's death wasn't in vain."

In April, members of the Ladiis and the Baddest, along with some of their best friends, met at Oak Park to talk about the banquet. The two groups had to create a list of invited members who they believed were taking the truce seriously. They were envisioning a semi-formal night with soul food and a couple of prominent members of the community. The girls would have an open-mic segment where they could speak about the truce. The event would be in memory of LeLe.

"We're still iffy about the truce, so everyone needs this banquet for proof," Veronica said. "LeLe died over something really pointless and I don't want that to happen to anyone else."

But for all the positive talk, Cha worried the peace agreement wouldn't make any real difference in the community.

"The Ladiis and the Baddest, we can squash our beef, but nothing else has changed," she said. "I feel like I'm gonna die young; I always say that. I graduate in June and I don't know if I'm gonna make it. Nothing's changed."

CHA STOOD IN THE CORNER OF THE BANQUET space at the PEACE Foundation on April 30. She was quiet and wore a nervous look on her face. The banquet to celebrate the truce was scheduled to start any minute, and she was the only member of the Baddest in attendance.

Over and over again, Cha had made her plea: "If ya'll don't come tonight, that's bogus. I'm not gonna talk to ya'll. Could ya'll please come?"

Klouda paced the room. "I just really want this to work," she said as she watched the door. "What if no one shows up?"

By 6:40 p.m., girls filled most of the seats at the two rows of tables. Each girl had an assigned seat to ensure the Ladiis and the Baddest mingled.

Thandisizwe Jackson-Nisan, a close friend of the Neeley sisters, stood up before the meal to address the crowd. Veronica had written up a couple of thoughts and asked her to read them. She had been thinking back to the time LeLe asked for the beef to stop.

"I couldn't put pride aside and let go. Because she loved me, she continued to feed into the drama. Now not a day goes by that I don't think about how I should've just listened. It's sad because it took for her to die to put this behind us."

After dinner, the girls each had a chance to speak. Meka stood up with her hands clasped, tapping one foot as she unburdened her heart.

"I'm looking at every last one of you and all ya'll pretty," she told the room. "Every time we seen each other we was messin' up one another's face for no reason. A lot of people get bruises for life, a lot of people be hurt for life, a lot of people get rushed to the hospital. It's scary and I just can't see another one of you guys lying on someone else's ground or at the hospital."

It was unplanned, but Helena suggested the two groups line up and shake hands like sports teams do at the end of games. As all of the girls stood up, Bri sat at the far table, rolling her eyes, her arms crossed.

Helena snapped. "If you can't do it, you shouldn't have come here. Are you ready to stand up and shake hands? Get up. Get up."

After some pouting, Bri stood to join the Ladies line. One by one, the girls looked each other in the eyes and shook hands. A sense of relief washed over the room.

Each girl grabbed one of the pink or gold balloons from the tables and headed outside. Standing as a united group, they released the balloons into the blue sky.

"We love you, LeLe!" they all screamed.

Cha skipped out of the group laughing. "Can you believe this? We're together and everyone looks so happy. I have prom tomorrow and this is so much more important."