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Families face holiday with sadness, resolve - On Thanksgiving 2002, gunshots killed 2 people and changed many lives

*By STACEY MULICK November 26, 2003 Publication: The News Tribune Page: B01
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Some of the 11 young people were downstairs, playing pool and gabbing. Others were watching the movie "Men in Black II."

Upstairs, the adults were cleaning up after the big meal. The mood at the South End Tacoma home last Thanksgiving was festive, relaxed, carefree. Then the gunshots started, followed by the screams. "Before it could even register with me what had happened, it was over," recalled Harmony Spencer, who had been cradling her cousin, 5-year-old Jeremy Britt Bayinthavong, because he wasn't feeling well. The shots - fired by an unknown gunman at about 10 p.m. Nov. 28, 2002 - killed Jeremy and Kimberly Riley, a 19-year-old Hawaii native who had started classes at the University of Washington two months earlier. Three bullets struck the 21-year-old Spencer - one through her arm, another across her back and a third slicing her near her stomach. Another bullet hit the Tacoma woman's older brother, Jeff, cutting the nerves in his leg. "I can't remember what it was like to have a normal foot," recalled Jeff Spencer, 23, of Puyallup. "It's like a totally different foot." Nearly a year after the shootings, Tacoma police continue to hunt the gunman who walked up to the lower window of the split-level house in the 1000 block of South 75th Street and opened fire. Investigators say they believe the gunman targeted the house - or one of the two dozen people inside. Beyond that, they're not sure, police spokesman Jim Mattheis said. In the past 12 months, police have released no new information

on the gunman's identity or motive. They continue to look for a pickup spotted speeding away from the corner house shortly after the shooting. For the families touched by the bullets, the emotional and physical scars remain. "It's hard getting back to life after something this harsh," said Riley's father, Mike, who tracks news about his only daughter from the family's home in Volcano, Hawaii. "We wonder about what it could have been like, what it would have been like," said 52-year-old Riley, who makes handcrafted furniture for a living. "That is something we will never know." Few things are the same as they were a year ago. "Your life was thrown into a blender and they hit puree," Harmony Spencer said. Joe and Banjo Britt, who hosted last year's Thanksgiving Day gathering of their family and close friends, have sold the corner house and are living with family while building a home in Federal Way. "They were going to move anyway," Harmony Spencer said of her aunt and uncle. "It was just hard to be there. It was so surreal." The Spencer children and their parents, Leonard and Nancy, don't believe the shooting was random but don't care now who was the specific target. "It doesn't really matter who," Harmony Spencer said. "It affected us all. We've all been hurt." Leonard Spencer, 51, still thinks about the possibility that he walked past the hidden gunman moments after the shooting stopped. "They figured he stepped around the corner of the house and I walked right by him," he said. Leonard Spencer had been upstairs and darted outside to see where the noise had come from. "It was dead silent," he said of the foggy November evening. "There were no tire tracks. There was nobody running away." The lack of movement in the police investigation bothers the families, but they want one that's thorough and ends with a conviction. "To know there is at least a person out there that is just walking around having a life after he purposely took the lives of other people, nags terribly at us," Mike Riley said. "In the end, it is going to be solved through the community." He's prepared to return to Tacoma, a city he first visited the week after his daughter's death, when there's a break in the case. "The phone rings and you wonder: Is that the call?" Mike Riley said. "Since the minute my daughter was murdered, people have been looking for the person who did this. There's not a minute that has passed that he hasn't been sought. I wouldn't want them looking for me." He doesn't mind being so far away from the city where his daughter died, because it provides some distance from what happened. The Spencers, meanwhile, wonder whether they've seen the gunman in the mall, the grocery store or the neighborhood. "You just wonder if anyone is thinking about it as much as you are," Harmony Spencer said. "For us, it's never going to go away." With Thanksgiving looming, so has the families' anxiety. Friends invited Mike Riley; his wife, Carol; and their 23-year-old son, Jim, to dinner but they declined. They want to celebrate the holiday quietly among themselves. "My wife is going to have a turkey," Mike Riley said. He knows he'll be thinking about how his daughter loved to help make pies in the kitchen. "I don't want to focus on my daughter's death, which is almost what you do when you are on the anniversary," he said. "It's not the focus of the way we think about our daughter." The Spencers will host their family's Thanksgiving Day

dinner. "Whoever has done this," Nancy Spencer said, "they are not going to take any more holidays." - - - Stacey Mulick: 253-597-8268 stacey.mulick@mail.tribnet.com A witness saw a dark, older-model, full-sized Ford pickup speed from the scene of a Thanksgiving day double-homicide in South End Tacoma last year. The truck seen leaving had a light-colored canopy, a loud exhaust system and the word FORD written on the tailgate. A lead How to help Tacoma police ask anyone with information about the shootings to contact Tacoma-Pierce County Crime Stoppers at 253-591-5959. Up to \$26,000 is being offered for information leading to an arrest and charges filed in the case. Callers remain anonymous.

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