

A stubborn stain, a selfless act, a wrenching discovery: cleaning up after Chris Beaty's death in Indianapolis

By: Mary Claire Molloy

Published: June 1st, 2020, USA TODAY

INDIANAPOLIS – He knelt in the back alley, one hand steadying, the other scrubbing. As he worked, the bristles of the plastic brush turned red.

Blood washed down Vermont Street, mingling with a puddle by the yellow curb. The stain left in the alley was stubborn.

It was the stain of two nights of rioting and police confrontation that overshadowed daytime peaceful protests. It was the stain of one of two killings Saturday night near the protests in Indianapolis, both by bullets. There were flames in Minneapolis, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York City. People died in St. Louis, Chicago and here on this patch of concrete downtown.

Ben Jafari didn't know whose blood he was scrubbing, or whether the person was black or white. He knew George Floyd had died at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, the economy has left millions of people out of work, 100,000 people in the U.S. were dead from COVID-19 and that the country was a tinderbox.

Jafari, who lived a few blocks away, didn't know who was supposed to clean up the mess. On a Sunday morning in a week where it felt like the world was erupting and it was hard to say or do anything to make it better, he figured he could do this much.

"Somebody had to," he said.

Only later would Jafari learn that the blood had come from Chris Beaty, someone he knew. It didn't matter to him then who it was, he would have done it for anyone.

Jafari, 36, is a real estate developer and the managing partner of the nearby Colonial Apartments. He does not consider himself a political person, but he had marched in the peaceful protest downtown Saturday afternoon. He'd never cleaned up after a death before.

"So, he got shot over there," Jafari said, pointing to Talbott and Vermont streets. He traced the blood, which spread across the alley for at least 40 feet, and gave his best hypothesis.

“Then he ran here, wounded, and must’ve circled back,” he said, eyes following the red splotches as they increased in size. The metallic smell was overpowering.

“He must’ve died here,” Jafari said, pointing to the biggest stain at his feet.

“I really don’t know what to say.”

The Circle City was waking up. The morning sunshine tinted the destruction golden. The shards of shattered windows winked in the light.

Jafari scrubbed.

People, mostly white, were out on Massachusetts Avenue getting their Starbucks fixes and ordering Sunday brunch. A woman, pointing at her menu, said, “Oh, maybe hash browns? Let’s do that!”

Graffitied buildings declared, “I can’t breathe.”

Jafari scrubbed.

Further down on Mass Ave., a couple held hands with their little boy and little girl, the daughter’s pink dress a splash of color against the plywood that covered the windows of a looted Walgreens.

In the alley, a discarded protest sign demanded justice for George, Breonna, Ahmaud, Philando, Sandra.

Jafari was still scrubbing.

“I wipe it down,” he said, pouring more ammonia. “But it never goes away.”

Death was not familiar to Jafari. He’d only ever been to a single funeral. He typed “How to clean up blood” into Google. The internet suggested bleach. The grocery store down the street didn’t have any. The coronavirus pandemic had depleted the shelves.

The next best and available option was ammonia. Jafari made his way back to the crime scene with two bottles and the plastic brush, along with a broom.

“I felt like it was my duty to clean it,” he said. “Out of respect for the victim, out of respect for the city and the people.”

He didn’t think twice about it, he said. The realization would hit him later — he was cleaning up what had spilled from somebody’s son, who nine hours earlier had been alive, right here. It’s one thing to see the violence on TV, another to hear it in your own neighborhood, and something else altogether to kneel in someone else’s blood.

“George Floyd can’t happen again,” he said. “We’re all just trying to put things back together.”

When he gathered his things to go home, the stain was lighter, but still there. He looked down and saw that he’d carried the dead man’s blood home with him, on his shoes.

That Sunday night, he got a text from the property manager at Colonial Apartments. A tenant was missing.

Jafari, lying in bed, read the unit number and knew, right away, who it was.

Chris Beaty was an Indiana University football player and one of the program’s most supportive alums. In Indianapolis, he became a well-known business leader and entrepreneur. He and Jafari had attended IU at the same time. Jafari had been to plenty of football games, so he probably saw Beaty play, but they never crossed paths until later. They met at an Indianapolis nightclub and learned how many friends they shared. Beaty had a huge smile and a million friends, and Jafari became one of them.

Whenever they saw each other, they’d greet with a shake up, asking about each other’s lives, family, work.

“Hey, what’s good, Brother?”

Jafari teared up. The stain he’d been cleaning was not the blood of a stranger, and he could not leave a drop of it in the street.

He set out Monday at 7 a.m.

He returned to the grocery store and bought a heavy duty brush with thicker bristles. He picked up a bouquet of daisies. He knelt again beside the stubborn stain.

He started to scrub.