Violence has marred the childhood experience of adolescents in urban Belize. Across the gender divide, boys and girls alike have suffered from this menace. Children and adolescents have been victims of or witnesses to heinous acts of crime and violence. Gender may influence how individuals cope with a violent situation.

Losing a loved one can be devastating, especially when lost due to senseless violence. Lyla Bautista, age 11, a resident of Orange Walk Town who attends San Francisco R.C. School, knows this all too well. Her uncle Miguel Medina was murdered gruesomely, having been stabbed 42 times. Lyla is convinced that he could not have possibly done anything to deserve such a callous attack.

Uncle Miguel, as Lyla calls him, was a joyful and generous man who played a big part in her life. He was always at her family’s home. He would give Lyla and the other children pocket money to buy treats from the grocery store.

The New Year’s Eve dinner of 2015 was their last time together. “We did some food and he came to eat. We celebrated with him before he died,” Lyla shared. It was only hours after that momentous family gathering that his life was tragically cut short.
The news of his senseless murder devastated Lyla. Although she did not believe it at first, she later came to terms with the reality. Lyla’s mom reports that the girl would cry every time someone spoke of Miguel’s death. She needed something to take her mind off the tragedy and help her overcome her grief.

Since becoming a member of the Child Advisory Body for her community, under the Sustainable Child Friendly Municipalities Initiative, Lyla’s outlook on her uncle’s untimely passing has improved. She recalls a watershed moment that occurred on the second day of the Child Protection Training. Participants were asked to create a drawing to depict an instance of violence that impacted them. Lyla was reluctant to start but unexpectedly found that the exercise was therapeutic.

“When I drew that picture and explained to the lady what it was, I felt that was a big change for me ... I could let go of my emotions there, and I’m so happy about letting them go, because he’s gone and he’s in a better place right now,” Lyla said.

Her involvement in CAB and the Child Protection Training has vastly improved her outlook, and she is now able to talk about her uncle more openly.

Lyla has been able to overcome much of her grief through positive experiences that allow her to confront her reality.

Lyla goes to school every day. She still plays outdoors in her neighborhood with the other children because she has not lost hope that there are good people in her community. Even though Lyla still thinks about her uncle Miguel, she harbors no feelings of hatred towards the person who committed the crime.
“Our family will never be the same again because he’s gone, and that made a hole in our hearts that will be patched but never covered,” she said.

While Lyla’s challenge has been to overcome the grief she has felt over the loss of her uncle, for another youth, the challenge has been to cope with the incessant acts of violence in his community. Kaydeon, a 14-year-old student, thinks that he is risking his life every time he leaves his house, whether it’s to go to the store or school.

Kaydeon (standing in the center) doesn’t feel safe playing outdoors. He’s much more comfortable playing with his gadgets indoors.

Living on Baracat Street in southside Belize City, he feels that there’s always a need to be cautious and aware of the people around him. “There’s always someone that just wants to be idle and hurt somebody,” he said.

Bullying is one of the most common forms of violence children experience, and Kaydeon has himself been a victim. One day, a child and his parent assaulted Kaydeon at a neighborhood store. Kaydeon says that even though the youth no longer interferes with him, he is wary of being out in his neighborhood.

His fears increased when he witnessed a young man die after being gunned down in broad daylight. Kaydeon was leaving a store when he heard gunshots. On the opposite sidewalk, he saw the young victim, clad in a white shirt drenched with blood, gasping as he took his final breaths.
Ihesha, Kaydeon’s mom, says that she tries her best to ensure that Kaydeon doesn’t suffer the fate of the many Belizean youths whose lives are stolen by guns and gang violence. She says she can protect her son from a lot of things but not a bullet. She believes that raising Kaydeon in church will help him develop a strong moral compass to keep him out of trouble.

Kaydeon explores his concept of what his child friendly community should look like

Kaydeon does not believe that Belize City will be free from gun violence anytime soon, so he is looking forward to the day when he is old enough to move out.

The people most traumatized today by violence are the youth, particularly young males living in urban Belize. Although the two youths featured in this story shared different experiences, it is evident that their lives were rocked by senseless acts of violence in a way that changed their perspective on life. Kaydeon’s stance contrasts sharply with the outlook Lyla had after she lost her uncle. The persistent acts of violence that play out daily in Kaydeon’s community have caused him to recoil from seeking outdoor recreation in his neighborhood. He dreams about escaping the dangers that lurk there.

“I would rather die of old age than by a bullet,” he said.