

Friday

It's 11 p.m.:

Do you know where your teens are?



C.J. Bright, 19, gets a tattoo from Glenn Wilson as Brandy Frey, 17, waits at Dogstar Tattoo Co. in Durham. At top, Rachel Johnson, 14, and Andrew Weisbecker, 16, wait for their parents to pick them up after hanging out on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill.
STAFF PHOTOS BY SCOTT LEWIS

With this summer's spike in homicides, parents and children struggle to balance freedom and fear.

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DURHAM

At 7:30 last Friday night, C.J. Bright hopped in his black sedan, wheeled south to pick up Misty Oakley and then headed north to fetch their friend, Brandy Frey.

They set out for Northgate Mall, this trio of teens, where they wandered under the fluorescent glow until security guards told them it was time to leave.

Then they headed to Ninth Street, the Motley Crue cranking, the neon of the city blurring past. There a tattoo parlor caught C.J.'s eye.

"There's nothing better to do," he shrugged. And off they flocked, Brandy barely stable on her white platform sandals as she skittered across the street.

C.J. picked a design, shuffled into an oversized chair and bent his head while the needles stitched the Chinese character for creative power on his skin. Again, too soon, the

adventure was over.

So at 10:20, C.J., 19, Misty, 16, and Brandy, 17, did what teenagers across the Triangle, indeed across the globe, do when there's nowhere to be and nothing else to do. They started driving.

But in this summer of escalating crime — the numbers of homicides in Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill so far this year have already outpaced the numbers for all of 1999 — hitting the road, hanging out or looking for thrills are no longer as safe as they once were.

Seleana Nesbitt, 16, of Selma, was shot to death while riding in a car in the wee hours of the morning last month. Dominick Prince, 15, of Hillsborough, was shot and killed on a Saturday night in May, while at a friend's. A month before that, Usama Mahmoud Husein, 16, died in front of a neighbor's house in Raleigh between 11:30 and midnight.

The spike in homicides has city leaders scrambling and parents worried. The age-old quandary — how are parents to let teens strike out on their own while making sure they stay safe — has taken on a new urgency.

But that's not something C.J., Misty or Brandy were contemplating last week as their night wore on. They were in search of songs to soothe their anger. On the lookout for love wherever it might be. On a quest to break the boredom that perpetually imprisons them.

After all, it was a Friday in the summer and the night was still young.

On their own

Summers find Triangle teens at work, at camp, in school. But once the sun dips down, particularly on the weekends, the instinct that goes with the age — for teens to be with their own

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— kicks in. And the roundup begins.

Teens search out who's in town. Whose parents are out of town? Who's having a party? What bands might be playing? What's going on on Franklin Street? Ninth Street? They're looking for any situation that lets them be together, finding their own way.

By Friday night some plan is in place, however loose. Usually friends gather and take the night as it comes.

"Lots of times," says Lauren Lambert, 18, "we just end up hanging out in parking lots. Sometimes we'll go to, like, church parking lots because if you're at Burger King or something, the cops'll make people leave."

Meanwhile parents sit at home, wondering whether they've impressed upon their children how dangerous it can be to stay out late, wondering whether they've taught them well enough to be cautious and alert.

"I try not to think about it," says Lizz Torgovnick, 17, of the dangers that increase the later the night becomes. "I try not to be in sketchy places late at night and I try not to go to parties where I don't know people." But she does not try to come home before 3 a.m., not if her friends are out and they're having a good time.

What she will do is call — on her cell phone — and let her parents know where she is, who she's with and when she plans to be home. Cell phones have become an important tool for today's teens, one that allows them more independence while providing their parents some peace of mind.

Parents can contact their children if they're carrying cell phones, they can require their children to phone if they're going to be later than expected and a parent whose teen has a phone knows that if help is ever needed, it's just a call away.

"The worst thing that could happen is that my car would break down," says Jessie Landerman, 16. "And if it did, I'd just call Mom on the cell phone. I know that makes me sound like a brat, but Mom won't let me drive anywhere without my phone."

Technology doesn't completely do away with the worry, though.

"It's a tough one," says Hope Lambert, Lauren's mother. "I more or less have to come to terms with it if she stays out until 1 or 2." Lauren will be in college by the end of the month and free of her mother's supervision. "Still, I always love to hear that car pull in the driveway," Lambert says.

Learning to let go

As hard as it is for parents to permit it, giving teens their freedom is important, experts say. The teenage years are a time for growing, for learning social skills, for figuring out the world — something teens have got to do on their own.

"When we get into all the rule-making for them, we're taking that away, we're sapping that out of them," says Susan Smith Kuczarski, mother of two teenagers in Chicago and author of "The Family Bond: Inspiring Tips for Creating a Close Family" (Contemporary Books, \$12.95)

Kuczarski suggests involving teens as much as possible in the process of setting boundaries. That includes not mandating a specific time for teens to come home, but communicating with them nightly on what their plans are and when they think is a reasonable time to be in.

But she says parents should never stop reminding teens of how unsafe the night can be.

"Safety is something that parents have to over-emphasize because teens don't understand," she says. With her own teenagers, 14 and 16, she says, "I've gotten very detailed about why it is unsafe to be out. I just go over this and over this. And slowly, I think it's sinking in."

The safety lecture is one that Vickie McNeil, mother of an 18-year-old son in Durham, has given many a time herself. In the end, though, she says she has had to learn to let go and trust her teen.

"Certainly I'm worried," she says. "But I also have to put my faith and belief into place. We

went through the childhood period. This is just another period in the cycle of life. We can't be with our kids every second of the day."

Judgment calls

McNeil and others say one way to make the streets safer for teens is to give them supervised places to gather. Places like the Street Scene Teen Center in Chapel Hill, in the basement of the post office on Franklin Street.

Outside the center last Friday night, groups of teens came and went. Performing tricks on bikes, shooting pool or mostly just sitting, for hours at a time, waiting for the night to waste away.

Rachel Johnson, 14, drummed on the steps with a set of chopsticks. Andrew Weisbecker, 16, spoke darkly of his lot in life: no wheels, no money, no freedom. And Jamaal Christian, 16, scanned the scene, looking for girls, listening for songs, trying to pick up any signs of action, like a sensor seeking out sound waves.

A policeman stood guard outside the center and an adult supervised within. But at 11 the center shut down; the policeman moved on and the teens that were left were on their own.

Jamaal joined two girls he knew and the group set out, no particular destination in mind. They wandered down to Rosemary Street and onto the corner. There, Jamaal shouted out to an acquaintance driving by in

a truck. When the truck pulled over, the teens hopped into its bed.

"I'm just waiting to get a car," he said. "Then I'm, like, going to disappear. Poof!"

With a roar, the truck pulled out, and all seven teens in it did disappear. Into the hot, dark night, looking for a little action before boredom — or trouble — finally forced them home.

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ONLINE

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