The violence really never ends around Orr High School, and its basketball team is often caught in the crossfire.

A SEASON UNDER THE GUN

PART 1 OF 5 BY RICK TELANDER, PAGES 60-61
“I was born in Chicago/In nineteen-and-forty-one.
Well, my father told me, ‘Son/You’d better get a gun.’”
— "Born in Chicago" by Nick Gravenites

How long would you last? As a teen, maybe early 20s, a young man of color, here on the West Side?

That is, stay out of jail. Avoid violence. Learn. Have a future. Remain alive.

Who knows? Who knows at all?

I ask myself those questions often as I visit Orr Academy High School, which sits like a low, beige box on the southwest corner of Chicago Avenue and Pulaski Road.

To place the school, it is helpful to think of it as 40 blocks west of State Street and eight blocks north of Madison Street. On clear days outside Orr, the John Hancock Center looms to the east like a not-too-distant monolith in a foreign world.

A grand Chicago is there where the sun rises. But if you talk to policemen or teachers from the West Side, you will find that they know adolescents from those neighborhoods who have never been downtown, never seen the lake.

It's a fitting metaphor — this self-imposed, narrow encampment — for the killings that have shocked the world yet harm almost no one in the white community, in the suburbs, or in Chicago's famous and well-protected tourist and shopping areas.

And if you want a Ground Zero in Chicago's world of violence, especially as it influences and affects a public educational institution, you can't go wrong with Orr. Though
it has only about 400 students these days, the school is surrounded by the decay and danger that showcase the bleeding of an American city to much of the civilized world.

Lou Adams is the Orr boys basketball coach and also the assistant dean of students. That means he’s a campus peacekeeper and glorified security agent. Over 6 feet tall, solidly built, with a shaved head, Adams is a no-nonsense, imposing force at the school.

On this early December afternoon just before the start of the hoops season, Adams excuses himself for a moment to break up a budding skirmish near the front door. Two girls are going at it, with a lot of screaming, and gawkers are all around. Adams puts his arm around one of the girls, drags her away, soothes her; and the rest of the tumult swirls outside, onto the sidewalk, where police and Safe Passage workers patrol now that the school day is over.

“What was that?” I ask.

“Nothing,” Adams says dismissively.

But girls’ vendettas can be as bad as boys’. One is reminded of the 14-year-old who shot and killed 14-year-old Eridis Martin and wounded a 16-year-old girl in 2014 on the South Side. The feud was over a boyfriend.

After another disturbance by a girl at the end of another school day, Adams will admit, with a sigh, when it comes to vehement and emotional confrontations, “Girls are worse. Why?”

“Because of social media.”

Almost anything — from a robbery to a taunt on Facebook — can trigger a murderous reprise by somebody with a gun in certain parts of Chicago. Two weeks earlier, a 16-year-old boy and a 17-year-old girl were charged in the South Side shooting death of 15-year-old Javon Wilson over a pair of pants and some gym shoes. Wilson was the grandson of U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, who called the slaying “a manifestation of the tremendous urban crisis we are facing in Chicago.”

Over Thanksgiving weekend, 58 people were shot and eight killed in Chicago, mostly on the South and West sides. Included were a 37-year-old man shot to death in the 3800 block of West Adams Street, just two blocks from an Orr player’s home, and a 30-year-old man killed on West Harrison Street, about a half-mile from there. Also, in nearby Homan Square, police shot and killed a gunman who had just shot and killed one man and wounded another.

The violence really never ends around Orr. It just ebbs and flows, like a tide, immutable to the weak forces of a larger community that (a) doesn’t know how to stop it; (b) doesn’t care how to stop it; or (c) has distracting problems of its own. The dilemma of this moral and criminal crisis, which former Education Secretary Arne Duncan, now back in his hometown, calls “unconscionable,” is that most of us can say, “Well, it doesn’t touch me.”

But even if the human carnage doesn’t touch you, the secondary effect — like the growing, how long can that hold out when no less than President Donald Trump tweets he’ll “send in the Feds!” unless the “horrible carnage” ends.

But soldiers on the corners won’t save the kids who have been traumatized. And they’re legion.

“Post-traumatic stress is the right phrase,” says Duncan, the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools who now serves as managing partner of Emerson Collective, a philanthropic social-justice group established by Steve Jobs’ widow, Laurene Powell Jobs. “These kids are living in a war zone — the rate of death is higher than for our Soldiers. They are children who’ve never been able to get out of survival mode.”

On this day, Adams doesn’t care about any of that. The team’s first game is tomorrow, at the UIC Pavilion against a very good Miller Grove High School team from suburban Atlanta. The players change in the folded-up gym bleachers directly from school clothes into their rag-tag practice uniforms, which are basically anything they want to wear. Not one T-shirt or pair of shorts is the same.

“Let’s go!” Adams roars, and drills begin.

One player, Rayvond Turner, is not officially back with the sophomore team, though he could be. He was shot in the lower ankle not long ago, and though the injury has mostly healed — bullet fragments are still within — his mind hasn’t.

“The bullet ricocheted off the sidewalk and hit him between the two bones near his foot,” explains sophomore coach Carlos Enriquez. “He’s got a lot of anger. A lot of things he’s working through.”

Another player, 6-4 varsity anchor Dannie Smith, whom Adams called “the most skilled player on the team,” has his own issues. A month ago, his two closest friends, twins Edwin and Edward Bryant, former pals from Lincoln Park High School, where all three attended before transferring, were shot and killed in a drive-by near Old Town. Fifty-eight people were shot that weekend and 17 died.

Smith doesn’t say much, nor does he show much emotion, but something is surely broken inside him. I asked him about the brothers’ deaths, saying I was sorry for his loss.

“They were my two best friends,” he says. “Edwin played football, and Edward was taller and played basketball. They both enrolled at Marshall after we all left Lincoln Park. Edward and I were always talking about playing each other this year, how much fun that was going to be.”

He falls silent. I ask him how he’s doing with it all.

“I’m OK,” he says.

At the end of practice, Adams is tired. He is always on his cellphone, texting students and parents, letting people know about detention, suspensions, mistakes, disturbances, dangers.

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Coming Wednesday: Day 2. Orr sits in the center of the storm.
Orr power forward/center Dannie Smith takes a pass, looks and smoothly dishes an assist to teammate Tyron Mosley in this first game of the season against a tough Miller Grove High School team from Atlanta.

There are 24 teams in the two-day Chicago Elite Classic at the UIC Pavilion, with Chicago-area schools such as Curie, Joliet West, Simeon, Young, North Lawndale and others pitted against teams from as far away as Florida and Washington, D.C.

Orr was ranked 25th in preseason state polls, and one big reason is the skill set of Smith, a 6-5 junior transfer from Lincoln Park. Though he’s not the fastest or highest-jumping athlete on the floor, Smith has an unselfishness, court awareness and deft touch that make him a threat at both ends of the floor, and thus a favorite of coach Lou Adams.

A fervid screamer at times during games, Adams never screams at Smith. The youth was 17 when his two best friends — twins Edward and Edwin Bryant — were shot to death in a drive-by a month ago in the 1300 block of North Hudson near low-rise projects at the edge of Old Town. The Bryant twins also were 17.

“All those boys know each other,” Adams had explained to me. “Dannie couldn’t practice for a while, just couldn’t do it. I can’t really tell you how it is for these kids. I talk to them all the time about the dangers of the...
city. Every day. It’s not about basketball — I’m in a whole different world.

“I started [coaching] down in Englewood, and one time I took my entire team to church. We were different religions, but it was something we needed to do. Just the stress.”

Indeed, at times the pressure for city ballplayers can get so extreme — as it can for too many Chicago public school students — that their closest parallels as citizens are to soldiers who have been traumatized in combat.

Former Education Secretary Arne Duncan, now back in Chicago doing charitable work, recently asked kids in a classroom to hold up their hands if they knew one person who had been shot. How many knew two people? Ten?

“Then I asked who knew 20 people who had been shot,” Duncan says. “Half the kids’ hands went up.”

To say this is tragic and nearly beyond belief in a country supposedly at peace is to state the obvious. To reckon the psychological damage done to those in the combat zones — such as around Orr on the West Side — is to delve into the unknown, to what can only be pointed at, not quantified.

“The mental health part of this is huge,” says Duncan, who also visits young inmates in Chicago jails. “So many kids need counseling. One kid said to me, ‘We had a house full of guns when I was growing up. I wish we’d had toys.’ Hurt people hurt people.”

Smith is quiet on and off the court. He will help Orr to a tough 64-61 win on the third day of December, at the tail end of an unimaginably violent year in Chicago — 4,331 shot, 780 dead. Smith almost always seems to havelockdown, perhaps to keep thechaos.

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As any veteran Chicago street cop can tell you, the arrest and imprisonment of so many old bosses of super gangs such as the Gangster Disciples and Latin Kings have left the gang hierarchy in disarray, with the structured outfits replaced by dozens, if not hundreds, of smaller, barely coherent gangs that might consist of little more than teenage pals selling dope on the corner, but with guns accessible — which makes all the difference.

Indeed, the easy access to illegal guns — plus the constant payback for somebody new getting shot — is half the tragedy in Chicago.

Coupled with post-traumatic stress syndrome, still-developing brains, lack of impulse control, lack of leadership, crumbling families and, above all, a belief that the world has nothing to offer a young, impoverished black male other than hopelessness or early death, the plenitude of firepower makes for chaos.

A number of West Side and South Side ballplayers or their relatives have been shot and/or killed in recent years. The old “free pass” athletes used to get from neighborhood shooters seems to have vanished.

“That all changed when [former Simeon star] Benji Wilson was killed,” says Duncan, a 6-5 former star high school and college hooper, who still plays when he can. Wilson, who was 17, was shot near Simeon in 1984, and his jersey, No. 25, was worn in tribute by Chicago native Derrick Rose at Simeon and now with the New York Knicks.

Mycheal Henry, an Orr star who played at Illinois and DePaul and finished last year as a Big East All-Academic team member, lost his brother DJ when the 15-year-old honor student was shot and killed near Orr by an 18-year-old he didn’t know who was firing into a crowd.

Three years ago, about the time Orr senior All-City forward Tyquone Greer and former Orr player Deshawn King were shot randomly at a party and Marshall assistant coach and

formers star Shawn Harrington was shot and paralyzed near Orr while driving his daughter to school, something like critical mass was achieved.

At a home game against Marshall in late January 2014, only a few hours after Harrington had been shot, a skirmish broke out in the stands. A furious, emotionally fired Adams waded in to stop it. Players on both teams began to break down from the invisible pressure, with Marshall star Tim Triplett openly weeping in despair. Players spontaneously met at the center circle, with Adams leading them in prayer: The players linked arms and bowed their heads in an attempt to deal with a world spinning into anarchy.

“I’ll keep this short and simple,” Adams had said earlier. “This madness has to stop.”

But it didn’t.

For instance, a year later, young Triplett would be gunned down. And so on.

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Through the end of November 2016, the month preceding this game, the Harrison police district — which includes the area around Orr as well as West Garfield Park and North Lawndale — had more shootings and murders than anywhere in Chicago, including the notorious Englewood police district on the South Side. And this in a city in which murders have increased drastically since even last year from 450 to 780.

For now, the boys on the Orr basketball team are undefeated and very lucky. They have a sport to carry them. They are the blessed. They have a purpose and a goal — to win every game they can.

High scorer Alex Flute (17 points), a calm senior guard who made five of 10 three-pointers, acknowledges that this is Saturday, night is coming, and everybody needs to be careful.

“Stuff happens. Always be in by 10:30,” he says.

Dannie Smith will be careful. No question.

He thinks for a moment about the school he attended before transferring to Orr; Lincoln Park, located in a far more gentrified, more civil area nearer the lake.

“The kids aren’t as focused here as there,” he says wistfully. “It’s real quiet at Lincoln Park.”

“I can’t really tell you how it is for these kids. I talk to them all the time about the dangers of the city. Every day. It’s not about basketball — I’m in a whole different world.”

Lou Adams, Orr High School coach, on the toll violence takes on his players

ABOVE: Players from Orr and Marshall say a prayer for Marshall assistant coach Shawn Harrington, who was shot in January 2014.

RIGHT: Marshall’s Tim Triplett breaks down at the game. A year later, Triplett would be gunned down.

WORSHAM ROBINSON PHOTOS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

ONLINE MAP

• See a map of shootings around Orr High School at chicago.suntimes.com.

• Plus, read Day 1: At Orr, basketball — and the bleeding of a U.S. city.

TEAMMATES HUG Tyquone Greer after a victory against Fenwick in 2014.

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Coming Thursday: Day 3. First there’s gunfire, then there’s tipoff.
“Well, my second friend went down/When I was twenty-one years of age”
— “Born in Chicago” by Nick Gravenites

About eight hours before Orr’s first game of the season, a 64-61 win over a Georgia high school team at the UIC Pavilion, a young man was shot and killed on the West Side, about a mile from Orr.

The victim wasn’t named in early news reports, only that he and a female cousin were shot by someone firing from inside a silver vehicle on West Warren Boulevard.

As it turns out, the dead man was Ed “Bad Boy” Brown, 25, a 20-0 pro boxer from the Garfield Park area, home between bouts.

A couple days later, I asked Lou Adams, the Orr head coach, if he had heard of Brown.

Adams nodded.

“He was a good ballplayer in high school,” Adams said matter-of-factly. “A point guard for Al Raby.”

Adams went back to his business as assistant dean of students, hardly fazed by the short life and violent death of Brown. It was, after all, just more of the same tragic stuff that permeates the West Side.

I am left thinking about Raby.

Like a number of new schools in Chicago, Raby isn’t a name that leaps to mind. The crazy world of charter schools creates part of the confusion. Indeed, as the money-strapped Chicago Public Schools system has “undertaken a process to close, co-locate and consolidate schools,” as official documents put it, pop-up schools have appeared in odd places, sometimes taking over ancient school buildings that were vacant. In fact, Orr itself — which once had twice as many students as it has now — shares its vast building with a KIPP Charter School for elementary students.

Raby is on West Fulton Street in the old building that once housed Lucy Flower Vocational, which closed in 2003. None of this would matter much, I suppose, except
that charter schools often siphon off the best students from Chicago's public schools, sometimes through blatant recruitment, which can leave diminishing schools like Orr left to take charter schools' rejects and castoffs.

“We have to take everybody,” Orr principal Shanele Andrews said. “They don’t have to take anybody.”

Andrews has been at Orr for just a year, though she has spent years in the CPS system. The constant violence on the West Side disturbs her.

“I got a call this week that another student of mine has been shot,” she said sadly one day in her office.

Still, she has faith in the restorative, sincere efforts of her teachers and staff. Bittersweet irony abounds in that belief, in the fact that within the walls of Orr lies a kind of blessed safety.

“Shanele Andrews said. “They don’t have to take charter schools’ rejects and castoffs. Sometimes through blatant recruitment, which system. The constant violence on the West Side disturbs her.

“Heroin Highway.” The concrete trench cuts through the West Side like a cement gouge through a swamp, funneling in drugs and customers from the suburbs and all over the country.

“He has so much talent,” Flute said of O’Neal. “He could be so good.”

So could another very skinny 6-3 player. How skinny? His police record lists him as weighing 125 pounds. He has several arrests, including for robbery and criminal trespass. He isn’t playing right now. His name is Gerald Hunley, and the day before school started Sept. 6, he was shot three times.

“It was north near Howard and Western,” he said in his street clothes at a practice. “I was riding my bike. A guy in a white mask shot me twice in the back and once in the head. I think they thought I was somebody else.”

He recovered from the wounds and was walking with his girlfriend several weeks later near Damen and Howard when some youths tried to rob him, one of them stabbing him three times in the back.

Hunley nearly died on the spot — “There was blood spurting out of my back” — then spent two weeks in the hospital recovering. Half of one lung was removed. He lifted his shirt to reveal a pointillistic montage of scars.

“Those are from the tubes they had to put in my lungs,” he said of the front scars. Then he made a comparison few people in this world can make: “It’s way worse getting stabbed than shot.”

Yet he knows he’ll be back, has no doubt, not even about his wind, which was affected by the lung surgery.

He pulled out his cellphone and found a video showing him easily dunking the ball while in street clothes.

“That was two days ago,” he said proudly.

In Orr’s first game against perennial nemesis Marshall, on Orr’s home court, junior guard Brian Hernandez, the lone Hispanic on the team, went crazy, raining threes during a frantic stretch in the first half, his hand a launching pad for glorious rainbow arcs that split the net.

The 5-11 junior couldn’t control himself after his trey that put Orr up 44-31 at the halftime buzzer. He flexed like Superman, screaming to the heavens in unbridled joy, his teammates celebrating with him. For a moment, everything was good, nothing was evil, the demons of the real world had been vanquished.

Hernandez lives for basketball. After this win, he will go to the YMCA or an X-Sport health club and play more hoops, play until either place closes. He has played for 12 hours or more a day. He has even slept in gyms.

“When he was 5, he told me he wanted to be a basketball player,” said his Puerto Rican mother, Luz, through a family friend and interpreter.

“I would take a room right here,” Brian told me later, when we were in the basement of the Orr gym, where the dingy locker rooms are.

He told me about the time he and his older brother, Robert, did late-night basketball defensive slides all the way from the start of the 606 bike path to the end, from Hamlin to Ashland, almost three miles.

“Yes, it’s hard,” he said. “But my passion is huge.” He looked around. He’s so jazzed from the game. “To die with a basketball in my hands?” he said. “That would be my dream.”

Coming Friday: Day 4. Amid violence, a hope basketball leads to better things.
“Well, now rules are alright. If there’s someone left to play the game.”
— "Born in Chicago" by Nick Gravenites

Orr coach Lou Adams was suspended for part of the 2014-15 season for using two players who should not have played because of academic ineligibility or a failed residency requirement. The team’s Red-West conference record was dropped from 7-3 to 0-10, and the Spartans were dropped to the White division for the 2015-16 season.

“I did wrong,” Adams said. “I told my kids, ‘You do wrong, you pay the price.’”

But he has a beef with some of the rules that don’t seem to account for the realities of living in a dangerous and racially segregated city.

“Chicago ain’t built on no rules!” he said with vehemence. “Like I’m not gonna feed kids? Hell, yeah. I’m not gonna give them rides home? I see a kid on Madison, I’m not gonna pick him up? So he can get shot and killed? See a kid walking on Roosevelt, he has to go 25 blocks?”

Adams snorts in disgust.

“I have learned, for instance, not to ask players where they live but rather where they stay. Family situations are so unstable that camping out on a couch at an aunt’s or grandma’s house, or with anybody who will have you, is not uncommon.

“We have a mobility rate of 67 percent,” principal Shanele Andrews said of Orr students. That means two-thirds will have a different address at the end of the school year."

I mention that Chicago samaritan Arne Duncan went to Harvard. Adams knows Duncan, knows his good work.

“Arne’s a good dude,” Adams said.

But the reality at Orr is that the normal rules of society barely apply to the students. Life for them is part-Kafkaesque absurdity, part “The Hurt Locker” foreboding.

Wheelchair-bound gun-violence victims coach Shawn Harrington (left) and Jermaine Winfield were guests at an event honoring Jonathan Mills, a former North Lawndale star who was gunned down. Mills’ mother, Flora White, is at right of the banner.
school year than when they started. Chicago is the most segregated large city in the country, and Orr is an example of resultant segregated schooling, being 87 percent black and 13 percent Hispanic. It also has a terrible poverty rate, with 97.2 percent of the students categorized as low-income and qualifying for free meals.

Yet the resilience of many of the students is remarkable. This would include members of the basketball team.

Only two players — star forward Raekwon Drake and guard Brian Hernandez — believe they have a chance at the NBA some day. But all feel basketball can lead to college and something better than what they have. Guard Alex Flute, who just turned 18, said he’d “love to be an athletic trainer.”

Chances are much better than what they have.

Hernandez believes they have a terrible poverty rate, with 97.2 percent of the students categorized as low-income and qualifying for free meals. Yet the resilience of many of the students is remarkable. This would include members of the basketball team.

Orr players and coaches get fired up during a timeout in a game last month against North Lawndale.

Orr has a terrible poverty rate, with 97.2 percent of the students categorized as low-income and qualifying for free meals. Yet the resilience of many of the students is remarkable.

Orr players, guard Brian Hernandez (above) and forward Raekwon Drake (below), have NBA dreams.

After playing professionally in Canada, Mills was preparing himself to play pro ball in China. Wearing his basketball trunks en route to a workout at this gym, he gave an example of the banality of Chicago ghetto life: “I was recruiting a kid and he got killed, and I went to the funeral. But when I looked in the coffin, I didn’t recognize him. The kid in the coffin had braids. ‘Wait a minute!’ I said. Then I realized it was another ballplayer, not mine. I was at the wrong funeral.”

How many protests and marches have been held, how many shrines with crosses and teddy bears have been built trying to end our city’s gunfire? How many wrung hands and beaten-down charities? It all seems endless, doesn’t it?

But what can we expect when, as North Lawndale coach Thorpe put it, “These kids don’t care if they live or die.”

Then on Jan. 5, a video goes viral of four young black people — two male, two female — torturing a white boy on the West Side, and all hell breaks loose. Again. President Barack Obama called the event “terrible.” The alleged kidnappers are called “animals” and much worse on social media.

Before that day’s practice, I show the front page of the Sun-Times to Adams, with its mugshot photos of the arrested four above the headline, “HATE-CRIME HORROR.”

Adams shakes his head in near despair. A couple players come over and study the page.

One of them thinks he might know one of the guys. They return to their warmup drills.

As Obama had noted in a recent TV interview, violence is down across the nation in big cities. Then he added, “Chicago is the strange exception.”

Coming Sunday: Day 5. A place where playgrounds have little to do with play.
"All my friends are going/And things just don’t seem the same"
— "Born in Chicago" by Nick Gravenites

Things aren’t the same in Chicago. It may shock people to know that the city, with its ridiculous 780 murders in 2016, is not nearly as deadly as it was in, say, 1974, when there were 970 homicides, or 1994, when there were 931. The numbers in those years were inflated by the start of gang wars and the evil crack cocaine genie flying out of the lamp, respectively.

The 2016 numbers seem particularly grotesque, however, because homicides have declined dramatically nationwide in the last 20 years. Chicago now has more murders than Los Angeles and New York City combined. Murders in 2016 went up by more than 50 percent from 2015. That sets our town apart. And 2017 appears to be more of the blood-red same.

The besieged areas are almost exclusively in the minority-laden, poverty-stricken South and West sides. Remnants of devious mortgage practices, Daley-regime/white-man politics, the 2008 Great Recession that nuked real-estate values in working-class minority neighborhoods, plus the demise of manufacturing jobs everywhere, have made parts of the West Side, where Orr High School sits, virtual war-zone wastelands. We need not mention the effect that a demoralized, understaffed police force — one that now fears the Black Lives Matter movement and the incessant videos that can undermine even good cops trying to do their...
jobs — has on the rise in violent crimes.

In response, the black middle class has largely fled for safer places, with Chicago’s African-American population down by nearly 200,000 since 2000. People who can’t get out, who must stay and weather the fusillade of torment — they are the outliers. They are the survivors.

And that includes every member of the Orr basketball team.

One afternoon, I gave Dannie Smith a ride to where he’s staying. He had remained behind so I could interview him after practice, and I felt, as coach Lou Adams has said, “What, I’m gonna let him walk? And get shot?” No way.

In the car, I ask Smith what the biggest problem for him is regarding basketball.

“You mean, staying focused?”

I nod.

“The things around me,” he said. “The things I’ve seen.”

Of course, his two best friends, Edwin and Edward Bryant, were recently killed. And just last week he saw a dead body near Cicero and Chicago. He watched as police put a sheet over it.

He thinks back to his deceased twin buddies, just 17.

“I could have been with them. I talked to Edward that day.”

I asked Smith about the sweet urban tradition of playing hoops outdoors in the summer, when it’s too hot to do much else.

He shakes his head. No way.

“Too dangerous.”

This brings up another harsh reality caused by violence: Safety, if it exists at all, can only be found indoors. Playgrounds now have little to do with play, and a populace that has grown more and more obese and unhealthy — in deep need of exercise — can safely do little but sit on couches and play video games.

This “indoors-ification” of children is a quiet tragedy that is but one of the ripple effects of wild-west violence in a city where the police confiscated nearly 8,000 guns last year; where on the West Side the crackle of fired bullets is almost as common as dogs barking.

In a rematch against Marshall at the Commandos’ 86-year-old building on West Adams Street, there are a dozen burly, red-jacketed security guards at the upstairs gym, roughly one for every 20 people in the stands.

With an enrollment of under 400 students, 98 percent of whom are African-American, Marshall’s student body, like Orr’s, is a mere fraction of the size it was decades ago when it was a virtually all-white school. Some of the plaques in the hallway harken to a vanished society: guard Izzy Acker was a star on the Marshall teams that won 98 consecutive games in the early 1940s; Bimbo Gantman was all-city on the “junior” team, when such teams existed.

In the gym, there are banners proclaiming Marshall the “1964 State Fencing Champions.” In 1965, too. Those were the days.

As the varsity players sit in the stands and watch, Marshall wins the sophomore game 71-66, with the final minutes resembling flag football. Lou Adams, who is observing from behind the bench, gets so incensed with a call that he goes onto the floor and screams,

“That’s TERRIBLE!”

He gets a technical foul, and the ref tells Orr sophomore coach Carlos Enriquez, “Get him off the floor!”

Little Rayvond Turner — not to be confused with the varsity’s Raekwon Drake — played only a few minutes late in the game. He had 22 points in a previous sophomore game, outplaying everyone, but he’s in the doghouse since he showed up late for a game against visiting Young. Enriquez could have melted Turner with his eyes. “Sit the f--- down!” the coach yelled in the second quarter when Turner got up during a substitution.

Why was Turner late?

“I don’t know,” Enriquez said distractedly after the game, a bad loss. “I think a friend of his got shot.”

Really?

“Yeah.”

There wasn’t much sympathy to go with his statement. It strikes me that there isn’t time for much sympathy here. Don’t wanna ball, kid? There’s a dozen more out there who do. Desperately. You were shot in the foot? You got troubles? Deal with it.

After the game, I told Turner, now in the stands behind the Orr bench, leaning back in
“Keep going,” I said, rather lamely.
“Thank you, sir.”

During a night drive-along through the Harrison District with a Chicago police sergeant — a veteran cop and former Marine who has spent years in the toughest spots in Chicago — I see the dregs of the West Side doing what they do.

It is the coldest night of the year, 5 degrees, with a wind chill of minus-20, yet here and there, business is at hand.

There are the dope dealers near the liquor stores, the random guys in parkas and hoodies walking on the sidewalks, headed nowhere. There are even a couple hookers, or maybe just forlorn women searching for a high. Everybody's looking around, heads on swivels, as if they are meerkats on a frozen plain, fearful of stalking hyenas.

“Anybody who says drug dealing is not hard work hasn't seen it in person,” says my cop. “First, you have to look out for police. Second, you have to try not to get shot. Third, you try not to freeze your balls off for eight hours. Or try not to get roasted when it's, as the gangbangers say, 'Congo hot' out there.”

And for almost nothing.

Former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who has spoken with a number of jailed dealers, says $5 an hour is all that some
“Forty dollars for eight hours,” Duncan said. “As a shooter, selling weed. One kid told me he started selling drugs at 8. He told me it was really hard, but he had no choice.”

My cop says $100 a day is closer to what a decent dealer/shooter can make. Danger included.

Duncan added, “But we refuse to give them a job for $20,000 a year!” He wanted to make it clear that not everybody could be saved. “Seventy-five, 80 percent would take that deal, the real job. The other 20 percent, that’s the police’s issue.”

My cop, a personal friend, is driving his family car because he’s off-duty and simply doing me a favor, so I can see what is laid out before officers pledged to serving and protecting the public.

The sergeant has seen crazy things in the ghetto, and he feels hamstrung and angry about the perception of cops as an evil, invading force.

As we watch two small boys on bicycles at a gas station at Independence and Harrison, with an older dealer the policeman knows is “pimping them out,” the cop is conflicted by the rage he feels over the man’s criminal immorality and the subliminal, nearly religious, forgiveness he has for the situation that likely fosters such depravity.

“From my experience, unless there’s a caring male figure in a boy’s life — a father, coach, teacher, minister — things don’t go well,” he said. Which leads to another

It strikes me that there isn’t time for much sympathy here.
Don’t wanna ball, kid? There’s a dozen more out there who do. Desperately. You were shot in the foot?
You got troubles? Deal with it.

arriving at the game at the end of the first quarter. He compared himself to the pilot in the movie “Sully” saying, “I had to be the last one out of the gym.”

Just as entertaining was the fact that Young’s coach, Tyrone Slaughter, was at the Orr-Westinghouse game, even though his own team was playing at Marshall, because Slaughter had been tossed from his last game for receiving two technical fouls and was given a one-game suspension.

Against Curie, Orr falls behind by 17 points early, and a rout seems forthcoming. But this is a fierce group, and led on by Adams’ vein-bulging histrionics, they battle back. It is here that 6-5, walking-stick-thin point guard/forward Tyron Mosley shows the skills that remind one of a younger, shorter Kevin Durant.

Indeed, Adams screams at Mosley far more than anyone else on the team, because he thinks Mosley is so gifted and could play even better than he does.

“Man, is he something,” Adams has whispered, just watching Mosley run through drills.

Behind the skinny fellow’s all-around play and Smith and Drake’s shot-blocking and Brian Hernandez’s three-point barrage, Orr actually ties the game 59-59 late. Sadly, they lose 62-61 on a free throw. The Spartans finish the regular season with a record of 15-5, ranked 12th in Illinois by MaxPreps.com but No. 1 among all IHSA Class 2A schools. Orr won its first 2A playoff game on Wednesday and its second on Friday night, beating Uplift 69-61 using a barrage of long-range buckets. The Spartans play again Tuesday.

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on the ground, they’ve never heard a male tell I am reminded for some reason of the double slaying that occurred last month about a mile from Orr on West Fulton Street, with two 16-year-old boys, neither in a gang, shot dead in a drive-by. The unusual thing was one bullet careened through a gate and up the concrete stairs of a 65-year-old woman’s house, flying through her wooden front door and hitting her in the leg. Her leg was broken and she lost a lot of blood. But she lived.

Why do I think of this, out of all the killings and maimings that have occurred in my three months of reporting? I don’t know.

But also I think of a book I read almost 20 years ago, “The Rape of Nanking” about a little-discussed slaughter of Chinese civilians by Japanese troops at the start of World War II. Soldiers used Nanking residents to practice bayoneting and even for beheading contests. The author, a young, brilliant former Illinois journalist named Iris Chang, did research showing that somewhere between 260,000 and 350,000 civilians were murdered, some being nailed to walls, buried alive, hung by their tongues from giant hooks, and other grotesqueries too awful to ponder. No one can fully explain what happened or why.

When people are under stress and free from guidance, Chang wrote, “The veneer of civilization seems to be exceedingly thin.”

The researching of that veneer apparently took its toll on Chang herself; she committed suicide in 2004 at age 36. Chang had other issues, but as her biographer, Paula Kamin, wrote, “She suffered greatly with the darkness of the subject matter.”

We all suffer with dark topics, but the youth in Chicago’s worst areas suffer immeasurably with our city’s dark stain — the gunfire that will scar them emotionally forever, if they survive.

I’ll go back to the question I posed at the start of this series: How would you do if you were an impoverished kid of color growing up under the violent born-in-Chicago flag? Me? Knowing what I know about myself? I don’t think I’d make it.

On Feb. 15, Orr plays at Curie in the quarterfinals of the Public League tournament, and Adams is in fine form, picking up a technical foul early for berating the refs over what he thinks is a ridiculous call. He comes very close to getting tossed from the gym, but his assistant coaches guide him back to the bench and relative calm.

This drama is almost comical because all three of the refs know Lou well — one even socializes with him — but they are genuinely serious about giving him the heave-ho if he acts up anymore.

The Public League never runs short of