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Lesson from the street: Don't back down

Pride, violence permeate culture in Chicago's toughest, poorest areas

By Azam Ahmed, Tribune reporter

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Brandon Barnes and Derri Enoch squared off in the center of the street, their faces knotted with anger. Barnes, tall and slender, raised his fists and promised to level his close friend with a shot to the jaw. Enoch dropped his hands and dared him to do it.

The fight, which began as boyish horseplay outside a West Side community center, had turned serious.

A crowd of friends tried unsuccessfully to intervene. The grabbing, choking and slamming continued, neither Barnes nor Enoch willing to let it go. After 15 minutes, the pair settled against a parked car, their heavy breath sending clouds into the icy air.

Later that evening, sitting together in the community center's computer lab, Barnes and Enoch said they never considered walking away. The teens, students at Marshall High School, have learned a maxim on the streets: Back down at your own peril.

Youth violence has claimed the lives of 18 city students this school year and left more than 110 shot. To stem the scourge, the Chicago Public Schools have launched an unprecedented campaign to intervene in the lives of the most at-risk children and create peaceful environments at the most troubled schools.

Among the challenges officials face is reversing a culture of violence that pervades Chicago's toughest, poorest and most desolate stretches, where pride is a fiercely guarded commodity and showing weakness just invites more trouble.

This mentality, shared by many teens, helps explain how something as minor as a bump in a hallway or a hard stare can escalate into a brawl — or even a murder.



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"Sometimes you just can't walk away because it causes more trouble," explained Barnes, 17, a basketball player. "By walking away, you'll probably end up in a lot more fights."

Children learn the tragic paradox early.

"If you run, you look like a punk," whispered 11-year-old Kameron Autman. "Everybody is gonna start messing with you. Ain't nobody gonna respect you."

And in this world where violence often regulates the social order, reputation is currency.

"If they walk away from a fight, their fear is that they're going to lose any status they had," explained Deanna Wilkinson, who researches urban youth violence as an associate professor at Ohio State University. "If they lose that status they're potentially way more vulnerable because the next guy is going to think they can walk all over them."

Other factors are at work. Often, teens don't have the skills or know-how to calm a situation where respect is on the line, said Anthony Spivey, principal at Corliss High School.

"I've never seen a fight that took place in our school where there wasn't an opportunity for it to be resolved," Spivey said. "But the kids don't have the skills to be able to do that."

Spivey, known around school for following kids home to make sure they're safe, and breaking up fights even off school grounds, said a lot of violent behavior is learned at home and in the community.

He recalled the story of one of his students who was arrested for slapping a girl.

When he met the boy in the police station, he asked him where his parents were. The student told him both were in jail, having been arrested after beating a man to death with baseball bats in their home — in his presence.

"A lot of these kids are backed into a situation where they feel there's no other way out than to resort to violence, which is what they've learned in the community and from their family," he said.

Not all teens feel that way, and even among those who do, context often dictates how they face the world. On the street, in tense situations, they learn to mask their childishness behind a hard veneer. When they feel safe, in a mall or at the movies, they're like other teens, experts say.

At the North Riverside Park Mall in suburban North Riverside on a recent Saturday, 17-year-old Terrance Green slid through the brightly lit space eyeing the girls who passed. It was part of his weekly ritual, one he shared with his friend Wildon Dillard, 14, and cousin Treshawn Dixon, 17.

For the better part of two hours, they wandered aimlessly, pulled by the tide of young women who meandered through the same white-tiled space. Dillard, the youngest and most mature of the bunch, broke off to buy a new outfit for a party they were going to that night.

Having followed a young girl shopping for blouses to the edge of a store, Green and Dixon froze. They paused together at the edge of the store's entrance, too nervous to enter the store and strike up a conversation. A moment later, the pair collapsed into a fit of giggles, accusing each other of being scared.

The weekly outings are an escape for the boys, away from the constant tension of schools and the streets. The grind can grow tiring, when kids feel like they have to constantly be on guard.

"Everybody is on the defense; you can feel the tension," said Tio Hardiman, director at violence prevention group Ceasefire. "They have to watch everything."

Even at the mall, trouble is never too far away. As the boys stood in front of one store, a security guard came by and barked at them to keep it moving. A minute later, as the boys paused in front of a different store, a police officer told them to get lost or start shopping.

As he walked, Green said a group of boys who live near the mall have been threatening them.

"They get mad 'cause we talk to their girls," said Green, a junior at Manley High School. "Now they got beef with us. They want to fight us." Recently, he says, they've been calling his phone regularly from a blocked number, issuing threats.

"They want us to say we're scared of them," he said, strolling through the food court. "Like we just gonna let them pick on us. It don't work like that in my book. It don't work like that at all."

As he speaks, his expression changes. The giddy face melts into a furrowed brow and glassy eyes, like a switch has been flipped. Green calls it his "game face," the one he wears like armor and projects to the world that he's not scared.

"You have to wear that mask because that gives you a right of passage in this culture," said Minister Timothy White, who runs the Carroll Care Center, where the boys spend much of their free time. "You got to have that game face sometimes, it's just that simple in the community and culture we live in."

The game faces emerged again later that evening as Dillard, Green and Dixon stood in line outside a rowhouse on Washington Boulevard. The party seemed to the boys as good a place to go as any, though they didn't know whose party it was or anyone standing on the porch or waiting in line.

At the entrance, a woman frisked attendees and charged two dollars. The boys climbed the stairs, paid their fare and penetrated the dark throb. Their faces betrayed no emotion as they filed into the living room, emptied of everything except curtains, a ceiling fan and a flat-screen TV. They held little resemblance to the youths who had walked around the mall hours earlier.

The teens said such parties often end in fighting and sometimes gunshots; how you carry yourself makes a difference.

Moving through the packed crowd, the friends watched the unfamiliar faces, positioning themselves

one behind the next for protection. Green said it's their strategy at parties when they don't know anyone, to make sure no one gets jumped without the others seeing.

He said he doesn't look for trouble, but he's ready. And so are the others. They say it doesn't take away from the fun of the parties, where they often meet girls. But from the moment they entered until the police shut the party down an hour later, not one of them cracked a smile.

asahmed@tribune.com

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