

This American Life *Looks at a High School Marooned in Violence*

by David Carr

One of the discussions that comes up every time there is a mass shooting at a suburban school or a movie theater is how underreported other, equally disturbing killings are – like the ones at urban high schools and in city neighborhoods. Those deaths don't come in a single spasm, but instead are part of a chronic drip of bloodshed, day in and day out.

Harper High School is that kind of place. It's located in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago, where gun violence has become endemic and seemingly unstoppable. At Harper, 29 current or former students were shot during the last school year; eight of them died.

The school itself is a relatively safe place, but the beefs and fights in the neighborhood around it frequently mushroom into gunplay. On Friday, President Obama is traveling to Chicago and is expected to talk, in part, about gun violence and the city's rising homicide rate. Chicago's murder problem hit the national media's radar screen in a big way after the death of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, who was shot in a Chicago park about a mile from the president's home just days after she had performed with her high school band during the inauguration in Washington.

But what is really to be said or done about an ecosystem of poverty, crime and hopelessness that has turned the Englewood neighborhood into a kill zone for the students who attend Harper?

This American Life is taking on that story in a two-part series that begins this weekend. School administrators gave access to three reporters for a full semester this school year, to explore the aftermath of last year's violence as well as the current level of danger.

The project at *This American Life*, a news and storytelling radio show produced by Chicago Public Media and distributed by Public Radio International, grew out of story done by Linda Lutton, an education reporter for WBEZ radio last year. She returns as part of the reporting team for a longer look. Alex Kotlowitz, the author of nonfiction books including *There Are No Children Here*, and the producer of *The Interrupters*, a documentary about former gang members trying to prevent further violence, also reported for the series, as did Ben Calhoun, a producer for *This American Life* and a former reporter for WBEZ.

As it turns out, there is still plenty to learn about this brutal, if common, story. "Everybody hears these numbers and I think people are a little fatigued with this kind of story," said Ira Glass, the program's host and a former education reporter in Chicago. "We have this burden of trying to come up a story that they have not heard, which is the story of the people who are fighting back in a very real way, and I think radio is intimate enough so you can hear that and feel something about it.

"We never say straight up in the series, but part of the subtext of is how talented and competent the staff is in very trying circumstances," he said in a phone interview. "I think people assume the opposite."

For one hour this weekend and next, listeners are able to walk the hallways, sit in counseling offices and hear the staff plan for the worst and hope for the best.

The school's principal, Leonetta C. Sanders, an administrator at Harper for the last six years, is the one who decided to give reporters the run of her school.

“At the beginning of the story, Ira Glass, the host, says that if this were any other suburban school, we would all know the name of that school and we would all know what is happening here,” she said in a phone interview. “People need to know about these kids – their resilience, their strength, their determination to find a better life, it needs to be told.”

Ms. Sanders is relentlessly upbeat in the halls, but sometimes violence intrudes. A current or former student will be injured, and she has to head behind closed doors and make what could be life-or-death decisions about whether the school should have a homecoming event, for example, and risk further violence.

Listeners will meet students who don’t go outside, who forgo friends, who are vulnerable when they walk home alone but are viewed as a threat when they travel in groups. It becomes clear early on that the adults and children who live, work and learn in this environment are not hardened to the violence; they are wounded and scared, even if the bullets hit someone else. They worry their time will come.

“The thing that we don’t talk about is the profound impact living and working in this environment has on people, the profound impact it has on the human soul and spirit,” said Mr. Kotlowitz.

The two-part series contains all of the fruits of immersive reporting – strong portraiture, deep dives into causal relationships and persistent challenges to the conventional wisdom. And you will learn far more than you would staring at a cable television reporter trying to tread water with little in the way of reportable facts.

Disappointed in Harper High School Coverage

by DJ Cashmere

Dear Ira Glass,

I am a big admirer of your work and I often use episodes of *This American Life* in my curriculum. Your recent two-part episode on Harper High School [by WBEZ education reporters] was of immense interest to me. I am a teacher here in Chicago, and have taught in Chicago Public Schools in both Englewood and Cabrini-Green. I am currently teaching at a high-performing non-selective high school on the Near West Side, where I have the opportunity to serve a student body made up of low-income minority students, many of whom are from the Englewood and other South Side neighborhoods. One student with whom I have become close over the last three years has multiple siblings who have graduated from Harper. I also lived with a Harper teacher during the 2010-2011 school year.

The stories of these students need to be heard, and your team did an admirable job of bringing compelling narratives to light for a national audience.

With that being said, I have to tell you that I was severely disappointed in the scope and focus of your broadcast. While I understand that you were interested in investigating the impact of violence on Harper, I was still stunned that education and learning were completely absent from a two-hour broadcast about a school. In the end, I believe that your coverage served to excuse many of the most harmful practices in our schools today and perpetuate some of the most harmful myths about urban education.

Low Expectations of Staff

One of the harmful practices you present and excuse is low expectations of staff. Throughout your piece, you constantly show the staff mocking the students. Whether it is the security guard openly referring to the freshmen as “fresh meat,” the social worker making fun of the way a student comes to school under the influence of drugs, or the way the principal herself makes fun of a freshman girl’s non-uniform outfit, staff members are constantly depicted making light of the rules and playing fast and loose with the concept of respect and professionalism. Your interpretation of these interactions (“That’s classic Harper: you’re reprimanded, but with love”), in my view, misses the point. If these interactions are classic Harper, then they are part of the problem.

The staff members are not shown modeling professional conversation, nor are they shown giving the impression that they take infractions seriously. Students, in turn, are not shown learning how to speak professionally, nor are they shown learning how to receive legitimate criticism. I witnessed interactions like these constantly while teaching in Cabrini-Green. In my experience, they serve to create an adversarial environment, and they undermine the integrity of rules and expectations.

Reprimanding with love does not mean blending a lax attitude toward the rules with playful condescension. Reprimanding with love means making infractions into teachable moments, giving clear and consistent consequences, and caring enough about the students to hold them to the highest possible standard with both positivity and firmness.

Low Expectations of Students

Another harmful practice you seem to promote is low expectations of students. In the episode, you portray Ms. Crystal Smith as a tireless source of positivity, and in many moments, this is absolutely right. She does a beyond-admirable job of staying optimistic and trying to surround the students with positive messages, and this should be applauded.

However, students are incredibly perceptive, and they can sense when they are being condescended to. They know when the bar is being lowered for them, and they know when they are being babied, for example, when Ms. Smith says, “I thank you. For being in class on time, thank you. I love you!” No student should be lauded for getting to class on time. This should simply be an expectation. Later in the episode, faculty member Marcel Smith says to a student in the hallway, “Is that a pass in your hand? I’m so proud of you.” Again, the student receives praise for following a basic rule.

When you, Ira, celebrate, or at least portray uncritically, these low expectations in your show, the low expectations are reinforced and validated, and have the potential to rub off on your listeners.

Gangs are Inevitably in Charge

In addition to excusing harmful practices, you also perpetuate three myths. The first is the inevitability of gang dominance in schools.

“Today,” Linda Lutton explains, “whether or not you want to be in a gang, you’re in one.” When Linda Lutton asks Officer Washington how to avoid getting mixed up in gangs in Englewood, he says, simply, “You can’t.”

Instantly, I am suspicious, as I know students from Englewood who are not in gangs. Certainly, they must make some hard choices; Lutton herself explains that in order to avoid the gangs entirely, Englewood teens must avoid socializing in the neighborhood and, to a degree, at Harper. However, she notes, “It’s a price most teenagers anywhere would find almost impossible to pay.” She goes on to explain that, at Harper, gangs are not simply “the bad kids in the corner... They’re the defining social structure in the school.”

Presenting gang activity in schools in this fatalistic way is unproductive and inaccurate, as there are plenty of schools like Harper whose staff members are implementing policies that eliminate gangs from in-school culture. Lutton’s perspective feeds into the narrative prevalent throughout so many failings schools, which is that “this is just the way things are.” When the in-school war zone is conceived of as inevitable, staff members and students are seen as powerless, valiant victims of an unmasked-for war.

We Lack Models of Successful Urban Education

There is a moving moment in your broadcast in which Crystal Smith breaks down and opines, “I need to see where education works. And I need to see where success happens.” Your listeners’ hearts break with her; but she, along with your listeners, is deprived of any follow-up on the part of your reporting team.

There are two things I find fascinating about this statement in this episode. The first is that there are places where education works. Let’s talk about that! Why not counter the stories of failure with stories of success? I would love for Ms. Smith (and your reporting team) to come to my school, which is thriving (though still imperfect), or to any of the other wildly successful schools springing up all around Chicago that are effectively serving low-income students from rough neighborhoods. They do exist. Let’s share their stories.

The second thing that strikes me about Smith’s statement is its irony within the show, considering the fact that education is almost entirely left out of the full two hours of the reporting. It is easy to forget, in listening to the stories of Kotlowitz, Lutton, and Calhoun, that the story is titled *Harper High School*. One of the only legitimate references to the “high school” part of *Harper High School* is the insistence on the preservation of the Homecoming Dance, the administration’s laudable effort to provide the students with a ‘real high school experience.’ What was strangely absent, though, throughout the two hours, was an acknowledgment that Harper is, or is supposed to be, an educational institution: a high school.

What was not mentioned by your reporting team was that Harper High School ranked in the bottom 25 out of the approximately 125 high schools in the city of Chicago on ACT growth in 2012. If one looks at the starting scores of the freshmen taking the 2009 Pre-EXPLORE test (essentially the pre-ACT taken at the start of freshman year) and the finishing scores of those same students taking the ACT as juniors in 2012, Harper students grew about 2 points over the course of three years. Their final score was about 15, which is 6 points below the national average of 21, not significantly better than random guessing, and not good enough to get into college. Compare that to the 5 points of growth or more achieved by fourteen Chicago high schools last year (10 of which are non-selective enrollment schools, meaning that, like Harper, there is no selective enrollment process or academic barrier to entry). The gap between 2 points of growth and 5 points of growth is the gap between

three years of learning very little and three years of learning a considerable amount. It is the gap between not having the option to attend college and having that option.

I fully understand that the episode is about violence at Harper, but it is still striking that over the course of two hours, educational challenges, priorities, initiatives, successes, and so forth barely receive a nod in your coverage. It is impossible for the listener to know whether this is an editorial choice on your part, or simply a reflection of the institution's priorities. If the former is the case, I wish you had chosen differently, if the latter is the case, then that should be presented critically.

Perhaps if the school chose to be more focused on academic achievement and preparing students for college and the workplace, some of the violence might recede. A school entirely focused on responding to violence, it seems, does just that: it spends a lot of time responding to violence. A school whose primary focus is academic empowerment would see a different culture and different results. I know it's possible, because it is happening across the city, in rough neighborhoods, with low-income students, every day. Inner-city education must be proactive, not reactionary, and must be centered on education.

The Problem is Money

The final myth your coverage perpetuates is that money will solve the problems of urban education. Toward the end of the second hour, there is an acknowledgment of Harper's difficult financial situation. We learn that a significant part of Harper's budget is being cut as its turnaround funds are phased out. Principal Sanders fantasizes about increased funding. "Every day, I wish I could win the lottery," she laments, and your listeners are meant to second her wish, even help her out with a donation, if possible. Her wish list sounds wonderful, of course, featuring state of the art labs and increased access to technology.

However, at the end of the day, there's a logical fallacy at the heart of your episode: last year, with all this turnaround money that is about to be lost, the academic results were abysmal, and the violence was uncontrollable and catastrophic. And yet you ask listeners to donate to the school in order to make up the funds that are about to be lost.

What I don't understand is: What is the vision for change? At what moment do you have Principal Sanders, or anyone else, articulate to the listener a single step that will be taken, with or without new funding, to radically improve either the safety or the academic outcomes at Harper? Why are we to believe, with such abysmal results, that Harper can improve if it simply perpetuates the same leadership, the same strategies, the same funding levels, and the same mindset of the last several years?

At what point do we distinguish between effort and success, and hold adults accountable for success, for the sake of the children?

I believe that high expectations and a shift toward culture, discipline, and academic results could work wonders at Harper and schools like it across the city; I believe that high expectations of staff and students make all the difference in the world; I believe that gangs in schools are not inevitable; I believe that academic results matter; I believe that proactive policies and excellent staff and student culture matter more than money.

I believe this because I see evidence of it every day at my school and know that it is happening all over Chicago.

I hope that, in the future, you will choose to view struggling institutions with both compassion and a critical eye. I hope that we as a society will succeed in telling stories about the places where education is working, and that we will take the lessons of those places and bring them to places like Harper. I want things to get better, and believe they can, and believe they need to, and believe that that is what we need to be talking about.

Respectfully,

DJ Cashmere

Chicago Students, Affected by Their Community's Violence, Return from Visit with First Lady
by Lolly Bowean

When Michelle Obama visited Harper High School in April, she was moved to tears by the students' stories of dealing with gun violence, shootings and death.

But when the First Lady hosted some of the same students at the White House last week, she almost made them cry with her kindness and concern, the teens said.

Obama told the group of 25 students that she was proud of their accomplishments and encouraged them to finish school, earn good grades and pursue their passions despite the violence in their community.

And as the West Englewood students returned to their neighborhood on Friday, they were still bubbly about their trip and meetings with President Barack Obama, the First Lady, and White House staff.

"It was epic," said Cameron Littlejohn, a 19-year-old graduating senior. "They treated us like royalty. Michelle was very caring and loving. She said, 'I'm proud of you all and I love you all.' It made me want to cry."

The Harper students visited the Oval Office and toured the White House on Wednesday as a follow-up to the first lady's visit to their school. Obama chose to stop by the school in April after learning that 29 current or former students there had been shot in the last year, eight of them fatally.

In that first meeting, she told the students she would return the hospitality and welcome them into her home, said Harper Principal Leonetta Sanders.

The trip was organized by the first lady's staff, Sanders said. The mayor's office found corporate sponsors to cover the cost of travel and lodging, she said.

"The First Lady wanted the kids to be exposed to the White House," Sanders said. "She has passion for Harper and the kids. She has developed a relationship with our students and she wants to continue it. She said, 'I'm going to keep in contact, I want to know what you all are doing, what progress you are making.'"

During Obama's visit to West Englewood, she met with 22 students representing youth programs at the school – the brightest and most achievement-oriented students there, Sanders said.

But for their trip to Washington, the school took a more diverse group, Sanders said. Some were at the April meeting, including the school's two Gates Millennium Scholars, but there were also younger students and some who struggle with grades and behavior.

The first lady arranged for the students to take a tour and even go in some areas of the White House normally off-limits to visitors, Sanders said. She had the students meet with staff so they could see the cross-section of people who work to make the president's job easier.

"It really gave the students the opportunity to see that ordinary people can do extraordinary things," Sanders said. "The First Lady did that for us – she worked it all out."

But Obama has made it clear that she has also learned from the Harper students. On Thursday, she told a group gathered at a fundraiser about the students.

"These kids were facing impossible odds – jobless parents addicted to drugs, friends and loved ones shot dead before their very eyes," she said. "For these kids, instead of reveling in the joys of their youth – simple pleasures like applying to college, getting ready for prom, getting that driver's license – these young people are consumed with staying alive."

Obama used the Harper students' stories to encourage those gathered to invest in building a better country.

In Washington, the Harper students and their 10 adult chaperons attended a ceremony with the Baltimore Ravens football team and had lunch in the White House kitchen garden.

As a special part of their visit, the president greeted them personally.

At one point, they sat down and had another two-hour, private discussion with the first lady, the students said. But this time, instead of only talking about violence, they told her how they overcome the daily drama and what they want for the future, Littlejohn said.

"We just talked about how we survive and do the stuff we do to be great young people," said Littlejohn, who told the first lady he plans to attend Northern Illinois University in the fall. "I come from a regular family. For my family to see me with Michelle Obama – it's big. I was already on the right path, but I went to the White House and (learned) Michelle Obama believes in me. The President believes in me."

Malik Cook-Bey, 17, said at first he was afraid to speak up.

"I was stuck in a daze," he said. "I was amazed by her. She's so beautiful – even more beautiful in person than she is on television."

But eventually they started telling stories about their experiences in Chicago, and it felt relatable.

"She told us to just work hard and never forget where you come from," said Cook-Bey, a junior. "She said, 'You have to remember that's home. That is what made you.' I almost cried."

During their meeting, the president also dished some advice that hit home, said Kantrelle Kennedy, a 16-year-old sophomore.

“He told us that we have to be positive role models to kids younger than us. They look up to us and will follow in our footsteps. He said whatever we do, they will do. If we are out killing and gangbanging, it’s not a good example,” Kennedy said. “I will cherish this experience forever.”

Harper High Boasts Two Gates Millennium Scholars, Despite School’s Struggle with Violence

by Linda Lutton

WBEZ has reported a lot about Harper High School’s struggle with neighborhood violence. The stories prompted First Lady Michelle Obama to visit the school recently. This week, Harper High is celebrating some good news.

You might remember Deonte Tanner from *This American Life’s* story on Harper High. He was the kid who told me the extremes he goes to to stay away from gangs: *I’ve been in the house for about three years...I’ve been staying in the house a lot.* Last week, Deonte got a letter in the mail...

DEONTE: I opened the folder, it’s like, ‘Congratulations!’ That’s all I had to see, and I just fell out – just congratulations.

Deonte and one other Harper student, Brittney Knight, are winners of the prestigious Gates Millennium scholarship, awarded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

I met Brittney one report card day in the lunchroom, as she got this shout-out from Harper staff member Marcel Smith:

SMITH: Straight A student right here! Straight As, all As! Brittney Knight!

BRITTNEY: Oh my God, he’s embarrassing me, putting me on blast! But I like it though.

This is the first time Harper has ever had a Gates winner.

SANDERS: Just so proud, so proud, so proud.

Principal Leonetta Sanders hopes having Gates Scholars will help change Harper’s image as a low-performing school in a tough, tough neighborhood.

SANDERS: ‘Cause it really shows how – even in the midst of so much issues and challenges – that students can still prevail and move on and do great things.

Deonte and Brittney will have tuition, room, and board paid for at the college of their choice. If they go to grad school in one of the disciplines Gates highlights, that will be paid for too – all the way through a doctoral degree.

One thousand needy minority students are receiving the scholarship across the country this week; 54,000 applied.

Brittney said she found out during her shift at McDonald’s that she won the scholarship; paying for college had been a concern for her family.

BRITTNEY: It lifted a big burden off our shoulders, ‘cause we were just talking about how much loans we were gonna take out, and what we were gonna pay out of pocket, and then this came. It was a blessing.

Both students want to study education. The full list of Gates Scholars will be made public later this week.