

Harper High School, Parts One and Two

by Ira Glass, Linda Lutton, Ben Calhoun, and Alex Kotlowitz

Part I: Prologue

Ira Glass: Harper High School, South Side of Chicago. First day of school this year, first thing in the morning, everybody gathers in the gym for a beginning of the year assembly. The school's principal, Leonetta Sanders, is at the mic.

Principal Sanders: I need us to begin to quiet down.

Ira Glass: Sitting all together in a group are the freshman, looking the way that freshman do on the first day of school, like they barely know who they are.

Principal Sanders: The class of 2016. Where you at? The class of 2016, where you at?

Ira Glass: Down in front, sitting together, are the seniors, looking the way seniors do on the first day of school.

Principal Sanders: And then my babies are here. My class of 2013! Where you at? *(students wildly cheer)*

Ira Glass: The program is one third pep rally, two thirds business. Introductions and rules. Exactly the kind of first day stuff you would expect at any school, until it's not.

Principal Sanders: Last year was a difficult year for most of us, for all of us in the Harper community. You know, and the freshmen may not know. But we lost three students last year.

Ira Glass: This is actually underplaying the bad news. Last year, 21 kids, current and recent Harper students, were wounded by gunshots. Five recent students died. And that is all on top of the three current students that Ms. Sanders mentioned. Total: 29 shot. Eight of them dead.

Principal Sanders: But we know that their spirits are with us. So right now, I just want to ask for a moment of silence and prayer as we think about and remember the students that have fallen. So at this time, I'm just going to ask that we take about 20, 30 seconds just for a moment of silence for Marcus Nunn, Cedric Bell, and Shakaki Asphy. Right now.

Ira Glass: Watching this, it's hard not to think that if you grafted these facts onto another high school in a wealthier place, maybe a suburb – dozens of students shot, three of them killed – in other places, that would be national news, right? We would all know the name of that school.

It's worth noting that this is a gym filled with hundreds of teenagers who, this very same morning, have been asked over and over to be quiet. And who, like most teenagers, haven't exactly jumped to. When this moment comes, nothing moves.

Principal Sanders: Praise God.

Ira Glass: And then, high school resumes.

Principal Sanders: At this time, again, for the freshmen and some new students that are here, my name is Leonetta Sanders. I am...

Ira Glass: On Friday this week, President Obama went to a Chicago high school and spoke about all the shootings happening in our cities. We've all heard so much lately about kids getting shot. Last weekend was the funeral of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, an honor student who was shot in a park in mid-afternoon in Chicago, just a week after performing at an inaugural event in Washington.

Last year, the number of murders in Chicago rose, while in many other big cities, like New York and Los Angeles, it held steady or fell. It was 506 dead in Chicago last year. But of course, these deaths aren't evenly distributed all over the city. The majority are in a handful of neighborhoods, like this one. This is Englewood. Police statistics show that it is one of the most dangerous areas of the city.

Though, if you're picturing some kind of chaotic, depressing, ghetto high school in the middle of all that, Harper is anything but. Amidst boarded-up houses and vacant lots, it is a four-story yellow brick building. The grounds are neat and beautiful. The halls, walls, classrooms, cafeteria, everything is well taken care of. There's order. Between passing periods, the halls are kept clear. It's clean. You can tell the staff likes the kids. Even the security guards. There are 16 for a student body of just 550 or so. They joke around.

Security Guard: Let's go, freshmen! Let's go! Lot of fresh meat. *(laughter)* You can't be sleepy already. It just started.

Ira Glass: Principal Sanders sets the tone for the building. And just listen here to how she informs a girl who showed up on the first day of school out of uniform that the girl can never do that again.

Principal Sanders: Oh my god! You look so cute! Too bad you can't wear that white shirt! But y'all look so cute.

Ira Glass: That's classic Harper. You're reprimanded, but with love. One consequence of all the violence last year, Ms. Sanders and other administrators had to spend a certain amount of this first day back to school trying to convince worried parents that it is safe to send their kids back to school here this year. None of last year's shootings actually happened at the school.

Mr. Adams: Can I talk to him on the phone?

Mother: Uh-uh. He doesn't want to come back.

Ira Glass: This is an assistant principal, Chad Adams, and a mom who wants to transfer her son out.

Mr. Adams: He doesn't want to come back? But he's been with us for two years.

Mother: I know.

Mr. Adams: And we've put so much time and work and love into him. We want him to stay.

Mother: I know.

Mr. Adams: And what was the reason that – you told me that Grandmother said something. What was she saying again?

Mother: She said she don't want him up here, because the fighting and the stuff going on.

Mr. Adams: Is she worried about the killings?

Mother: Yeah. That's what she's worried about.

Mr. Adams: The people shooting at everyone?

Mother: Yeah.

Mr. Adams: So even if we've got someone to come to his house every morning and pick him up? If I drove over to his house every morning and picked him up, you still wouldn't want him to come?

Ira Glass: This is not, by the way, a theoretical question. Administrators do pick up some kids and drive them to school.

Here at our radio show, we first heard about Harper this summer when our colleague, Linda Lutton, who covers education at our home station, WBEZ in Chicago, did a story about the death of a 16-year-old sophomore named Shakaki Asphy, who played on the school's basketball team. Shakaki was shot while standing on the porch, talking to a friend, near the end of the school year.

Her murder was such a blow to the staff and students that even Principal Sanders – who's been at the school for years, and is definitely not easy to rattle – even Principal Sanders said it made her wonder if she could continue doing this work. She showed Linda this list that she'd been keeping for a year at that point, of all the kids who had been shot from Harper. Shakaki was number 27.

All of us here knew, of course, about the murders in Chicago. But when we heard Linda's story about this one school with 27 shootings at that point in a year, we thought, this is a school that knows this problem in a way that most of us around the country never see, don't know. And we wondered: what if we spend a long period of time there, to witness what they're witnessing?

Harper agreed to let us send three reporters in, starting at the beginning of this school year. And they gave us unusual access for more than five months, for a full semester. When violence struck, they let us record the administrators as the administrators jumped into action. They let us into private, difficult meetings with parents and students. And we watched the staff try to recover from the terrible year that they had last year, and try to make this year different. As you'll [read – this is a transcript of a radio program], they devote incredible energy to trying to keep their students alive.

Part I, Act One: Rules to Live By

Linda Lutton: Two weeks after that first day assembly, Assistant Principal Chad Adams, the same guy you heard trying to convince a mom to re-enroll her kid in Harper this year, is in the hallways. He spots a sophomore, a new kid, a transfer student named Jordan.

Mr. Adams: So you were at Milburn? Did you know...

Linda Lutton: Mr. Adams tells Jordan he needs to talk to him in his office. There have been changes in his schedule, he says. Though this is just a ploy. They go to his office, and Mr. Adams gets to the real purpose. He asks Jordan where he lives.

Jordan: 69th and Loomis.

Mr. Adams: 69th and Loomis?

Jordan: Yeah.

Mr. Adams: So that way? Who's on that block?

Jordan: Like, what you mean?

Mr. Adams: You know. Who's on that block? Who runs that block?

Jordan: Oh.

Linda Lutton: What Mr. Adams is trying to figure out is what gang Jordan is affiliated with, and what gangs he might potentially have conflicts with here at Harper. Without hesitating, Jordan tells Mr. Adams he is affiliated with a gang called Face World. And they're friendly with a half dozen other gangs. They're "cliqued up," kids say.

Jordan: Well, we're cliqued up with J-Town right there on 69th.

Mr. Adams: Who else're you all cliqued up with?

Jordan: Hoodville, [Low Block], Hit Squad, [C.O.B.]...A lot of people want to get into it with us though. I ain't going to lie.

Mr. Adams: I know. Your name was hot last spring. What was going on last spring?

Jordan: It's a war zone around there. I can't lie. It's just a war zone. People like us, we're so close to each other, it doesn't make no sense. Our opposition is right down the street. Literally, it's on the next block. So we on 70th and Rockwell, and they on 71st and Rockwell. That's how close we is.

Linda Lutton: They talk about this for fifteen minutes. And what's remarkable is how matter-of-fact it is. They might as well be talking about what bus Jordan needs to take home, or where the cafeteria is. There's no shame to admitting your gang affiliation. It's nothing you have to keep secret.

Mr. Adams has one more goal for this meeting.

Mr. Adams: All right. So I haven't met you yet because you weren't here last year. But I'm Mr Adams. I'm the assistant principal. This is my office. So can we make an agreement today that if something happens in the block, or something happens in the school, that you'll come to me to help you fix the problem? And we'll use this? (*points to his head*) Look at me, Mr. Rogers. We'll use this instead of this? (*points to his fist*) Can we make an agreement?

Jordan: See, I'll make an agreement like, if something happened in school. If something happened in school, I'll probably come to you, tell you what's going down. But outside, it's a whole different story.

Mr. Adams: And I'm not saying that I'm going to be able to help you with your problems outside the school. I'm just saying, if something happens on the block that might lead back into the building, that you'll come to me so we can fix it here, so you don't have to worry about it here.

Jordan: I'll try to keep my word. I'll try to keep that agreement. But it's probably going to be hard, though.

Mr. Adams: OK. And that's OK. I know it's going to be hard. It's not an easy agreement.

Jordan: If I get into a problem with one of them [...] people in the school, I ain't going to lie. I'm probably not even going to come here. I'm probably just going to go do it right there. Because the problem that escalated, because there ain't no talking with them.

Linda Lutton: Maybe you think you have an idea of how street gangs operate. Crips and Bloods, People and Folks, controlling huge swaths of a city, shooting it out over drug territory. A single gang leader controlling thousands of members. A strictly enforced hierarchy branching out underneath him, with gang colors and hats tilted to the right or left.

For this hour, forget all that. The gangs in the Englewood neighborhood today are not those gangs. There's no central leader, no hierarchy, no colors. The fights aren't over drug territory. In fact, lots of these gangs aren't even selling drugs. They're different gangs, with different rules. These rules apply absolutely to boys. Girls get slightly more leeway.

Rule Number One: Look at a map. When I ask kids what their parents don't understand about gangs these days, they say it's this. Their parents tell them not to join a gang, as if there's some initiation to go through, some way to sign up. Today, whether or not you want to be in a gang, you're in one. If you live on pretty much any block near Harper High School, you have been assigned a gang. Your mother bought a house on 72nd and Hermitage? You're S Dub. You live across the street from the school? That's D-Ville.

When you ask kids or cops or school staff how it got like this, they'll tell you that at one point, this whole area was controlled pretty much by a single gang, the Gangster Disciples. But, and this is how most people tell this part of the story, Chicago police have been so effective locking up the big gang leaders that the hierarchy of those gangs has crumbled. And that's left a lot of room for newcomers.

Your gang might control nothing more than the block you live on. In Harper's attendance area alone, which is a couple square miles, there are more than 15 gangs, also known as cliques, sets, factions, or crews. Some don't have

anyone in charge, but they do have guns. That's what every kid has told me. *Otherwise, why would you call yourself a gang?*, they say.

Aaron Washington is a police officer assigned to Harper. He's there seven hours a day, seems to know every kid in the school. He says that for protection, for survival, kids walk to school with the kids in their clique, often through enemy territory. So I ask him, what if I'm a kid and I really don't want any part of this gang stuff? How can I avoid it?

Officer Washington: You can't. It's not going to happen.

Linda Lutton: He says it used to be possible to be neutral – what they called a "neutron."

Officer Washington: There's no neutrons anymore. It used to be if you play sports, or you were academically better than the average kid, they didn't bother you. Now it's different. It doesn't matter. If you live here, you're part of them. You live on that block, or you live in that area, you're one of them. The way they get to school, they have to come to school with one of these factions, one of these gangs. They're going to come to school with them. They don't have a choice.

Linda Lutton: I can hardly believe that a Chicago police officer is telling me this, admitting that kids don't have a choice about being gang affiliated. I've never heard police talk like this. Later, I ask Officer Washington if he'll get in trouble for saying this. I mean, aren't cops supposed to just tell kids, hey, don't join a gang?

Officer Washington: I'll put it like this. I'm not saying it's OK to be in a gang. And I'm not saying I approve of it, I agree with it. If I could take them all and say, "Hey, look here, ain't no gangs," I'd do that. But this ain't a fairy tale.

Linda Lutton: And this is the point. Gangs aren't the bad kids in the corner here. They're the defining social structure in the school. It's who you sit with at lunch, the kids you say hi to in the hallway. It's the water everybody swims in.

Assistant principal Adams guesses that fewer than 10% of Harper students are actually gangbanging. That is, active on the block, involved in crime. He thinks all the rest of the kids in the school are just caught up by where they live. OK. So Rule Number One is: know your geography.

Rule Number Two: Never walk by yourself. One day at dismissal, I thought I saw a freshman walking home alone.

Linda Lutton: I stopped you because you're walking by yourself.

But I was wrong.

Student: We're walking with them.

Linda Lutton: Arnel pointed over his shoulder at a couple of girls about 15 feet back.

Linda Lutton: So you're actually walking with the girls back there?

Student: Yeah. I always walk with people home.

Linda Lutton: What's the advantage?

Student: It's not trying to get jumped on and shot. Because there be fighting and shooting up here almost every day. Because won't nobody mess with somebody in a group, walking in a group.

Linda Lutton: And that's true. But it's complicated because of rule number three.

Rule Number Three: Never walk with someone else. See, walking into a group can send its own message. If you're with a group of boys in Englewood – on your porch, walking home from school – you're highlighting your affiliation, which makes you more of a target. It's a huge Catch-22 for kids in this neighborhood. If you walk alone, you risk being jumped. If you walk with someone else, you risk being labeled as a gang member and being shot.

Rule Number Four: Don't use the sidewalk. Every day at dismissal, kids drift out of Harper High School and walk along Wood Street – actually, right down the middle of Wood Street. It's a strange scene. Cars drive slowly, waiting for students to move out of the way. One teacher told me that when she first arrived at Harper, she thought this was just plain hooliganism. The teenagers taking over. One afternoon, a girl named Alex explained, that's not it at all.

Alex: We feel safer like this. For some reason, we just feel safe like that. we never like to walk past trees and stuff, there's too much stuff going on.

Linda Lutton: "Too much stuff going on" is shorthand here for the shootings, the fights, the craziness. It's better to walk down the middle of the street, where you can keep a broad view of things, and where you have a few more seconds to run if you need to.

Rule Number Five: If they shoot, don't run. One senior, Antoryio, was on the Harper High School football team. In fact, he's one of the best backs in the entire city of Chicago. On the field, he zips around linemen like they're not even there, cutting and weaving and then racing for the end zone. Those are skills he purposefully ignores when shot at.

Antoryio: I fall to the ground.

Linda Lutton: That's your strategy?

Antoryio: Yeah. Because if you run, you'll probably get shot in the back or something like that. So I just fall to the ground. Most people shoot from – say if we in front of my house – will shoot from the corner. Or do a drive-by in a car. So I just fall to the ground.

Linda Lutton: OK. By now, you may be wondering, if these gangs aren't fighting over drug territory, what are the shootings about? That brings us to Rule Number Six.

Rule Number Six: You can be shot for reasons big and small. If you ask the police or school officials or kids what the shootings are about, they'll mention girls, money owed. There was a paintball incident that led to real guns going off. Petty stuff, like losing a fist fight. He-said she-said arguments. Often, they'll tell you a shooting is over nothing.

Retaliation for earlier shootings is a big reason for getting shot. Shootings can ping pong back and forth between rival gangs for years. Of course, you can also be shot for walking off your block.

And finally, Rule Number Seven: Never go outside. When I asked kids for advice about staying alive in this neighborhood, they told me the best advice was to stay away from your block as long as possible, every day. Get involved in something at school so you can stay as late as they let you. When you do go home, don't leave the house. Don't even go on the porch.

If you want to see the lengths you have to go to not be part of the gang, you should meet a senior named Deonte. Being anti-gang is Deonte's entire identity. He's an outspoken Christian. He holds Bible study in his living room. Other kids come to him for advice, a role he wholly embraces. He's poised to be the valedictorian. When you talk to Deonte, you get a sense of what it takes to stay away from the gangs.

Linda Lutton: Do you ever go out, just around the neighborhood?

Deonte: Oh, no. No, not at all. And in a way, that can be bad as well. Because that's when depression is easy to set in. That took a hold of me, because I've been in the house for about three years. I've been staying in the house a lot.

Linda Lutton: Do you feel lonely?

Deonte: At times. At times I feel lonely. At times, I would want to have some friends. Because I'm not really friends with anybody.

Linda Lutton: If you think about high school, how important friends are during that time, imagine going through that with your whole goal being to avoid your school's social structure. Completely, for four years. It's an incredibly high price to steer clear the violence. It's a price most teenagers anywhere would find almost impossible to pay.

Part I, Act Two: A Tiny Office on the Second Floor

Ira Glass: So the place in the school where staff deals most directly with the effects of the violence on students is the Social Work Office, as you'd expect. Alex Kotlowitz has this story about one of the students that the social workers took under their wings.

Alex Kotlowitz: I first met Devonte, a junior, back on the first day of school, when he and his mom came in for a meeting with Principal Sanders. Devonte was a Harper student who had been temporarily transferred, and was now just returning. Sanders was happy to see him, but everyone seemed a little tense, a little careful. I couldn't tell exactly what was going on.

Principal Sanders: We're not going to push you to get into any activities. Just you take your time right now, just get back into the swing of school. We're starting a whole fresh slate, here.

Alex Kotlowitz: It was only later that I learned the full story. That last February, Devonte accidentally shot and killed his 14-year-old brother. After the shooting, the Harper staff had been concerned that kids might taunt Devonte. So he was transferred to a different school. Now that he was back, a few weeks into school, he's been stopping by the school social workers' office two or three times a day to meet with one of the social workers there, Crystal Smith.

Crystal Smith: Close that door for me, because I don't want people walking back, all up in our conversation and stuff. You know?

Devonte: Mm-hmm.

Crystal Smith: Is that OK?

Alex Kotlowitz: The shooting happened last winter after school. Devonte says his brother had somehow got his hands on an old handgun, which neither of them thought worked. In their third floor apartment, they both handled the weapon. While Devonte was holding it, it somehow went off. A judge later ruled it an accident – reckless discharge of a firearm. Devonte’s brother Damion died an hour later in the hospital.

Devonte hasn’t had any intensive counseling since the shooting. So for Crystal, establishing a relationship with him is tricky.

Crystal Smith: What’d you eat for lunch? How’re you going to not let me share with you?

Devonte: I ate a chicken patty.

Alex Kotlowitz: To make him feel safe enough with her to talk about his feelings, most importantly about his guilt, she often bounces around in their meetings from totally superficial things, like lunch, to more substantive subjects, like Devonte smoking marijuana. He tells Crystal he hasn’t smoked in a while. She does an impression of him when he’s high.

Crystal Smith: When you’re smoking, you be like, (*slurring*) Wassup, Miss Smith? I be like, dude, you know you high, right? (*slurring*) Nah, I’m straight. (*laughs*) That be you. You don’t even be remembering that we done had a conversation, do you?

Devonte: Nope.

Crystal Smith: It’s OK, though.

Devonte: I do remember this one though.

Crystal Smith: What?

Devonte: My mom said she might throw my little brother’s bed away. And I don’t want her to throw it away.

Alex Kotlowitz: He’s worried his mom might throw away his little brother’s bed?

Crystal Smith: So we talked about – can I say this? It helps him to sleep at night if he sleeps in his brother’s bed. But his mother was contemplating throwing the bed away. So I had told them that if I need to, I would call her and let her know why it’s important for him to be able to keep the bed. Right?

Devonte: Mm-hmm.

Crystal Smith: You still with me?

Devonte: Yeah, I’m with you.

Crystal Smith: If it’s too much, you just say, I’m done.

Devonte: Nah, it ain’t too much.

Crystal Smith: OK.

Alex Kotlowitz: The day after his brother’s funeral, Devonte showed up at Harper wearing a t-shirt with a picture of his brother on it. There were food stains on the shirt, leading Crystal to believe he’d probably slept in it. Crystal says before the shooting, Devonte barely came to school. He was aggressive and surly with the staff.

But here he was, the day after burying his brother. And Crystal realized that Devonte needed to be at Harper. That he needed her. She’s still just at the beginning of figuring out what she can do for Devonte. He’s cracked the door, she told me. But it’s the size of a mouse hole.

I spent most of my time at Harper in the Social Work Office. Crystal has a caseload of 55 kids, each of whom struggles with a learning disability or some kind of emotional issue. Another part-time social worker and a school psychologist also have a case load of kids. But they make strong personal connections with lots of Harper students, not those they’re assigned to. And more often than not because of some violent incident.

Harper, of course, has just come off this horribly violent year. And I guess the question I had – and honestly, the question that the social workers ask themselves – is: *Can they make a difference?*

Crystal is in the halls for every passing period with a consonant patter of positivity.

Crystal Smith: I’m so proud of you. I see you trying hard. Keep it up, OK?

Student 1: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: I’m so proud of you. Go, go, go, so you won’t be late. Go, go! Go! Y’all moving around, right?

Student 2: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: Thank you so much. Let me appreciate you in advance.

Alex Kotlowitz: “I appreciate you in advance” – a phrase I’ve never heard anyone use before – is one of Crystal’s trademarks.

Crystal Smith: Do you have your headphones in while you’re talking to me?

Student 3: I'm not...it's low.

Crystal Smith: Is it off? Could you take them out so I won't feel like I'm being disrespected?

Student 3: You're not!

Crystal Smith: Thank you so much.

Student 3: It ain't nothing playing.

Crystal Smith: I appreciate you in advance. Terrell! How was your summer?

Student 4: It was OK. Safe.

Crystal Smith: Safe?

Student 4: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: You're the only person that said that to me. That means something to me. I'm glad it was safe.
Good morning gentlemen!

Alex Kotlowitz: Even when a kid characterizes his summer not as fun or relaxing, but as safe, Crystal sees the bright side. I've seen her practically tackle students to tell them, *you're a valuable person. You matter.* When she's doling out advice, some of the kids laughingly call it "mom patrol." Sometimes, though, I wonder if the kids see past her perkiness. Because she's really a force.

Crystal Smith: I thank you. For being to class on time, thank you. I love you!

Alex Kotlowitz: It's six weeks later, late September, and the Social Work Office is packed. All times of day, kids pile into the Social Work Office, a crowded, windowless room stuffed with three desks, a filing cabinet, and a paper shredder. So many kids that at times you have to jostle for a place to stand.

Some of the kids come because their educational plans mandate social work visits, and others come just because they like talking with Crystal and Anita Stewart, the school's other social worker.

Devonte is often in the office. Before the incident last February, where Devonte accidentally shot his 14-year-old brother, he didn't have much of a relationship with Crystal or Anita. But now they're really getting close. Earlier in the year, Devonte had told them he wasn't sleeping well. And today, Anita and Crystal want to talk about it.

Anita Stewart: So what about sleeping and all of that, Devonte? Are you sleeping OK?

Devonte: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: What do you do at night to help you, though?

Devonte: To go to sleep?

Crystal Smith: Mm-hmm.

Devonte: I take some NyQuil.

Anita Stewart: Oh...

Crystal Smith: You still taking NyQuil?

Devonte: Man, I take it on a regular basis. Because I need to go to sleep, man.

Crystal Smith: So we need to talk about-

Devonte: I need to sleep tight.

Anita Stewart: What happens if you don't take the NyQuil?

Devonte: I don't go to sleep.

Crystal Smith: Can I ask you a question? What are the thoughts that you have when you get ready to go to sleep?

Devonte: None.

Crystal Smith: You're having some kind of thoughts that you're trying to escape. So that that way-

Devonte: I just be up thinking about stuff.

Crystal Smith: What? One thought that you be thinking about.

Devonte: One, my brother. I be thinking about a lot of stuff.

Alex Kotlowitz: Devonte tells Crystal and Anita that he looks at pictures of Damion, his brother, every night before going to bed. He shows them the pictures on his phone. One is a school portrait. Another's of Damion in his casket, dressed in a blue suit and a crisp white shirt.

Devonte: It looks like me in this casket, like I'm asleep.

Crystal Smith: Your mama's got it in her phone, too.

Devonte: You saw it in her phone?

Crystal Smith: Because she showed it to me. Remember, we had the meeting.

Anita Stewart: Devonte, do you feel like your family is supporting you with this?

Devonte: With what?

Anita Stewart: With what happened to your brother.

Devonte: No. Don't nobody talk about it. Don't nobody say nothing.

Anita Stewart: It's just everybody just going around like it just didn't happen. But you know it happened, because you look at the picture every night.

Devonte: Yeah.

Alex Kotlowitz: Devonte also has a video of his brother. He huddles with Crystal and Anita, watching it on his phone. It's of three boys, clearly high, hanging out in a kitchen, cracking jokes and laughing. Damion's off to one side, sitting on the floor.

Crystal Smith: This is your brother here, right?

Devonte: Yeah. He was a little strong little boy, too.

Crystal Smith: Yeah, he looks – you could tell.

Alex Kotlowitz: Crystal and Anita are hoping to start a trauma group with Devonte and three other boys at Harper, who are also struggling because of the violence. Devonte's non-committal. Crystal seems almost desperate to get Devonte to see the importance of talking about his experience.

Crystal Smith: Can I just tell you – can I say that again? At some point though, because you are a junior, and we've only got one more year, we're going to have to start being able to talk about that, so that that way we can start helping you get through the process of that. You're going to have to feel safe somewhere to talk about it.

Devonte: I feel safe wherever I'm at.

Crystal Smith: I'm talking about the stuff with your brother.

Devonte: Oh.

Crystal Smith: I'm talking about the stuff that makes you take the NyQuil at night. That you're not talking to nobody about. That's a weight that you have to carry. Do you know what it's like to carry weight?

(Devonte laughs, uncomfortably)

Crystal Smith: No, I'm for real. Don't nobody know every day you feel like this. And it's just like, can't nobody see it. But then I can't – you know what I'm saying? I see it, and I know it. But then I don't know if you're ready. You see what I'm saying? To help get some of it off. I don't understand. I'm saying, I'm with you on what the weight feels like.

Crystal Smith: Ms. Grant, first I just want to check with you, and just see how you're doing.

Ms. Grant: I'm fine. I'm all right.

Crystal Smith: You're doing all right?

Ms. Grant: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: OK.

Ms. Grant: I'm taking it one day at a time.

Crystal Smith: That's all you can do.

Alex Kotlowitz: One day after school, in the last week of September, it's report card day at Harper. And Devonte's mom, Ms. Grant, is the first parent in the building. Crystal makes a point of seeking her out, and asks if they can sit and talk at a table in the cafeteria. Anita joins them. Devonte's actually doing reasonably well. He's getting B's and C's in all of his classes, except for music, which he's failing. These are his best grades since he began high school.

Crystal Smith: I want to tell you just how, first, impressed I am with Devonte's academic and social, emotional growth since the accident happened.

Ms. Grant: He did come a long way.

Crystal Smith: He has really, really, come a long way. He is so much more open with me now. And I just want you to know what we're going to continue to work on, which is the guilt that he feels about the accident.

Ms. Grant: Mm-hmm.

Alex Kotlowitz: On the night of the shooting, Ms. Grant was sitting in her car outside of her building. Devonte was with Damion in the third floor apartment, their sister in another room. After the gun went off, Devonte sprinted downstairs to his mom, yelling, "Mama, call an ambulance. I accidentally shot Damion."

Ms. Grant says she ran upstairs and saw Damion on the floor. No blood, just not moving. Ms. Grant says the police held her in the apartment while the ambulance took Damion to the hospital. He died before she arrived. Ms. Grant was only able to spend a little bit of time with Damion's body before she was told she was needed at the police station. Since Devonte was a minor, his mom had to be present for his questioning.

I had met privately with Ms. Grant a week or so before the report card meeting with Crystal. She told me that an autopsy report concluded that Damion had been shot in the chest. In our interview then, as in the meeting with Crystal, Ms. Grant seemed to vacillate between being certain the shooting was a complete accident, and then being not so certain.

Ms. Grant: I can't turn my back on Devonte, because Devonte's my child, too. Being angry at him is not going to bring Damion back. I know that they wouldn't hurt each other like that. That's one thing I do know. Even though, you know, you still don't know what happened. Even though I really, really, truly don't know what happened. The autopsy report says one thing, and my heart says I don't know.

Alex Kotlowitz: Ms. Grant tells Crystal she knows she's hurt Devonte's feelings since Damion's death, and she feels bad about it. She says the night of the funeral, the adults went to a bar. When she got back to the apartment, Devonte overheard her saying, *I believe Devonte shot my baby*. She didn't know he was listening.

Ms. Grant: He got up and he slammed the door. He texted me, "I'm going to be with my brother. Forget all y'all. I didn't do nothing to hurt my brother." And I felt so bad. It was about 3 o'clock in the morning, and he left. "I didn't do nothing to my brother. I'm going where my brother's at." He kind of scared me. I texted him back, "Go on ahead. You grown anyway. So? Go on ahead." I texted him back that. But he was mad at me for that. "Y'all thinking I hurt Damion. What makes y'all think I hurt my brother?"

Alex Kotlowitz: I'm going to state the obvious, but life at home for Devonte has got to be really, really hard. Ms. Grant, who works part time in food service at a local Naval base, says that many days she cries alone in her room. She says Devonte's older sister, who lives with the family, won't talk to Devonte anymore. At one point, Ms. Grant told Crystal, "The house is like Hell."

Devonte has basically two places to escape to, the streets or school. And on the streets, Devonte made clear to Crystal and to me, it's hard to relax, to let your guard down. He hangs with a lot of older guys, he says, and just a few weeks before this, a friend was shot, right in front of him. So that really leaves just school – more specifically, this office – as a place where he can be himself and try to move on.

Part I, Act Three: Game Plan

Ira Glass: So we pick up our story right now at the beginning of October, during Homecoming week. The football team is something that is going very, very right at Harper High School. They are 5 and 0 at this point in the year. Though of course, this still is Harper. What happens in the neighborhood still affects the team. When we started reporting here in the school, we expected to find some football players who had been touched by gun violence. We really did not anticipate answers like this next one that Linda got.

Linda Lutton: Who do you know in football who's been either shot or shot at?

Rodney Jackson: Probably the whole team, except freshmen and sophomores.

Antoryio Barton: I think everybody was shot at since my four years of being there.

Rodney Jackson: Yeah.

Antoryio Barton: Everybody on the team.

Ira Glass: That's number 11, junior Rodney Jackson, and number 4, Antoryio Barton. A player named Sandillio Wright was shot at one day, and then played a game the next day. Harper's quarterback, Kwame Ware, was actually hit a few years back. Shot in the leg. One of this year's recruits had a bullet go in the front of his leg and come out the back. He's slower now, he says, but he can still cut.

About half the kids on the team are affiliated with one gang. There are five or six other gangs represented on the team, some of them opposition. But football actually seems to be the one place at Harper where everybody truly puts those rivalries aside. Ben Calhoun was at Harper for Homecoming week.

Ben Calhoun: At this point the school year, Harper had been pretty violence-free. There'd been some fights, some big ones, but week after week was going by without a shooting. This was something that people, especially staff, they talked about it in this careful way, like they didn't want to jinx it.

The big events of Homecoming week – the dance and the game – were on Friday. Thursday afternoon, every student's in the school's bleachers for a pep rally – cheerleaders, DJ in the front playing songs that the students dance to, that the staff occasionally feels uncomfortable to.

This season, Harper's not just undefeated. They've been demolishing other schools. Scores like 46 to 0, 47 to 0. They're good, really good. Last year, Harper went to the Chicago Public School championship, a real feat for school that's so tiny. They were up against a Chicago sports Goliath, Simeon High School, a school known for producing professional athletes.

The day of the championship, Simeon had four times as many players suited up for the game. Harper's roster is so small, just about everybody has to play both offense and defense. Harper lost that game. But they came so close. People are psyched for a second chance.

Pep Rally Announcer 1: If we know the football team, tomorrow is going to whoop a little butt on Marshall's!
Ben Calhoun: The team runs in one player at a time, and eventually, they get to a senior, a popular kid named Damoni Ware, who goes by the nickname "Money."

Pep Rally Announcer 1: Number two, Damoni Ware! (*wild cheering*)

Ben Calhoun: Then Damoni runs out, like everybody else, like a high school kid on a good day. Then, just a couple minutes later, Money's walking out to the front again. This time, it's because he's one of four candidates for Homecoming king.

Pep Rally Announcer 2: Da Money Ware and Joshua Meyer!

Money Ware: Josh was walking up there with me. He was a contestant for homecoming king. And when I was walking up there, they called his name right after mine. And he told me what happened. He was next to me. He said it out loud. He wasn't trying to whisper it or nothing. He just said it in his regular tone of voice. He said, "Little James just got shot."

Ben Calhoun: Money told us about this later. About how, at the rally, as he stood there with his friend Josh, Josh was on the phone, relaying news about another friend of theirs, named James Williams. James had been shot just a few blocks from Harper – meaning probably about the time Money was running under the cheerleaders' pom poms, someone was shooting at his friend.

Money Ware: He lives in this house right here.

Ben Calhoun: Money actually lives across the street from James. Standing next to his house, Money can point to James's front door.

Money Ware: And this, right there. You see the house with the lights on? It's this house next to it. And they live in that house right there, with the big brown porch. He lives in that house. He's named Little James.

Ben Calhoun: James Williams, the kid with the big brown porch, the kid who'd been shot during the pep rally. He used to go to Harper, but he hadn't been there this year. Back on the day of the pep rally, minutes after the shooting, the first details coming in were hazy – just that James had been taken to the hospital, and so far he was still alive. There was already speculation about who was involved, and about possible retaliation by 6th Ward, the gang that controls the block where James and Money live.

Money remembers that as he left the pep rally, and he went to the last practice on Thursday, before the big game on Friday, he wasn't thinking about the game anymore, or Homecoming. He was thinking about his friend.

Money Ware: I didn't know if he was OK or not, so that had me messing up in practice. That threw off my whole day of practice. I wasn't really running. I was tip-toeing. I wasn't really trying to make a tackle, trying to make a play, because I was trying to worry about was he OK.

Principal Sanders: We don't know yet. He was up at the gas station on 67th and Damen. And we just got word that a former student was shot. So right now, he's in critical condition.

Ben Calhoun: After school on Thursday, while the football team's practicing, word's spreading about the shooting. Principal Sanders is trying to gather information. And when I find her, she's in the parking lot, trying to figure out the school's response.

Principal Sanders: And another thing that didn't look good – three different gangs that came out the door, they just kind of took off running.

Ben Calhoun: You mean when they just came out of school here.

Principal Sanders: So they came out, went to the parking lot, and they just took off. Three different groups. For what, we don't know. So that's another indication that something's going on.

Ben Calhoun: Sanders's concern is fallout from all this. The Homecoming game and the dance are scheduled for the next day. They'll be big school events, events where kids from other schools will be, events where security is a challenge. Sanders was worried that James Williams was just the beginning.

Principal Sanders: Definitely. We have a dance tomorrow, so that's going to have a major effect. Especially when they find out exactly who the shooter was. Yeah. That may have a grave impact on whether or not we even have a dance.

Ben Calhoun: Harper staff doesn't just struggle to protect their students from the violence in the neighborhood. They also try to protect what they see as the students' just normal high school experience – things like Homecoming, and clubs, and prom. Sanders said it was for these reasons that the idea of canceling the dance really bothered her. But she also knew she might have to.

Principal Sanders (*over intercom*): Good morning, Harper staff members. At this time, I need all the members for the AAR to report to the melon room. Once again, all members for the AAR, please report to the melon room at this time.

Ben Calhoun: And do students know what that is when they hear it?

Principal Sanders: Not really. They don't really know.

Ben Calhoun: Friday morning, the day after the shooting, the day of the homecoming game and dance. This meeting that Sanders is paging people to is an AAR, short for After Action Review. The school's main meeting to figure out how to handle James Williams's shooting.

The name AAR actually comes from the military. A couple years ago, Chicago Public School officials were visiting at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas to research military training tools, tools they might use to prepare people working in the city's roughest schools. They came across the AAR, the army's tool for analyzing events, for assessing damage, compiling information, and trying to figure out how to respond.

At most schools, this situation – a former student shot, the threat of more possible shootings – even schools that have plans for these sorts of crises rarely have to use them. And if they end up in a situation like this, they scramble through it. A district administrator told me, think about it. The natural response for a school after a shooting is to go into panic, and to grieve, and then to hope that it never happens again. That's normal.

And so when the Chicago schools first brought the AAR in from Fort Leavenworth and suggested it to Harper, some people said it felt wrong, like they'd be planning for students to be shot. But the staff at Harper knew it'd be better to have procedures, and a plan to contain the damage. That's the AAR.

Principal Sanders: Marcel, Coach, any word on how James is doing? OK. Did he have surgery yesterday, or you don't know? No. OK.

Ben Calhoun: Harper's AAR meeting is held first thing the day after the shooting. One of the first parts of it is just white-boarding the social and family relationships of the victim, to see who could and would be affected, and to consider how.

Principal Sanders: OK. So we all know James was shot yesterday, right when we were getting out. Member of 6th Ward. I had heard stories about his brother, Jaman, in the neighborhood. Anybody got any word on how he's doing?

Ben Calhoun: The group includes all the deans of the school – social workers, the football coach, guidance counselors, the psychologist – about two dozen people all together. And the conversation moves pretty fast. They summarize the information they've been able to gather. They list kids with connections to the three gangs involved.

Principal Sanders: So we already know, number one, that we need to pull all those guys. Can we name them? Who are they?

Ben Calhoun: People rattle off names around the room, kids that'll be pulled out of class later.

Principal Sanders: Any freshmen?

Ben Calhoun: The school just wants to ask them what's going on, and what might happen, and to get them out of the building, especially at dismissal time, when things could get dangerous. As for Money, the football player and James's friend from across the street, they want to ask him what's been happening on the block.

They talk about following what kids are saying online, and who'll do that. A faculty member named Marcel Smith says the students have realized that the school's been monitoring Facebook. They've stopped posting stuff there.

Male Staff Member: And real quick, since they know we're on Facebook, everybody is tweeting.

Principal Sanders: So we ain't got no Tweet account with them. Who's got a Tweet account?...So they [know] our game now.

Female Staff Member 2: Yeah, they're off Facebook.

Principal Sanders: They're off of Facebook now...

Ben Calhoun: There's also the issue of James's brother. James left Harper the year before, but his younger brother Jamon still attends. He's not in school that day, but they talk about having someone check on him, and also having someone explain to the kids in each of the classes what happened. They talk about the kids who took off running the night before.

Principal Sanders: –running down the street.

Ben Calhoun: Also on the table is the issue of Homecoming. Sanders is visibly unsure.

Principal Sanders: If I have not said this, I probably need to say this. So I need as many people at this dance tonight as possible.

Ben Calhoun: Sanders is married to a Chicago police officer, and so are some other people on staff. Since the previous day, she's been trying to round up off-duty police officers to volunteer as security at the dance. She's also asked central office for additional security.

Principal Sanders: But yeah. I need as many people tonight as possible. And when we have dances and things like this, no, I can't pay you. But your presence is definitely needed. Because we need people to watch inside so that nothing happens. As well as – and I usually have the security, the men standing outside, along with police.

Ben Calhoun: As everyone leaves, Sanders tells someone on staff she's worried about security at the homecoming game itself.

Principal Sanders: Because my issue is if they believe the Breeds did that, half of my football team are Breeds. So you know what I'm saying? It's not like they pat them down at the games. I don't never see them patting nobody down at the games. You know what I'm saying? So that's hard to – I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

Ben Calhoun: Just so it's clear, what Principal Sanders is saying is that half of her football players have ties to the gangs who are supposedly behind the shooting. And obviously, that's worrisome. Because they might become targets. And they're at the center of every large school event she has planned in the next 24 hours.

Coach Reed: OK. You want to talk to him, or no? Get over here and talk to Mama.

Ben Calhoun: All day long, Harper staff implements the plan from the AAR meeting. For Coach Antoine Reed and others, that means spending the day gathering information and pulling student out of class. It's an unusual situation. Sending kids home, not because they've done anything wrong, but as a matter of prevention. This student here still hadn't quite figured out that he wasn't in trouble.

Coach Reed: Until I say – did I ever say you was in trouble? If you were in trouble, who's the first person you think you're gonna see? I don't care where you're at. I don't care if you're on the roof and you get in trouble. The first person you're going to see is me. You wasn't in trouble.

We understand what's going on, and that issue is not resolved yet. He's still in the hospital. Everybody's still angry. And we're not taking any chances. You know what I'm saying? So it's not that you're in trouble, it's that we're taking precautionary measures. We know how it's going to look today at the end of the day.

Let's not be naive. Me and you live around here. So what is it going to look like at the end of the day? So you're not going to be there in the big picture when it takes place. That's all. So thank me, because you're not going to be getting in trouble today. That's what you can do.

Ben Calhoun: Throughout the day, Principal Sanders shores up the security plan for the game, and also for the dance. She's disappointed that more Harper staff don't agree to stay late to act as security.

Ben Calhoun: You're not going outside at the end of school today?

Anita Stewart: No. I'm going to go outside and get in my car and go home.

Ben Calhoun: This is social worker Anita Stewart. Anita tells me she won't be staying late. Just like Coach Reed, she'd spent the day talking to kids about what happened, and she scared. Anita doesn't want to let Harper down. But with a family and kids of her own, she decided she isn't up for it.

Anita Stewart: I'm not going to go out and stand around. There's too much going on. And I think I got fair warning from the kids to stay out of the neighborhood. The kids are telling me: *Stay out of the neighborhood.* And I'm going to ride with the kids and believe what they're telling me.

Ben Calhoun: This isn't typical for her. Anita spends a lot of time trying to intervene with kids so they don't end up shooting each other. She's constantly going out into the neighborhood around Harper, after school and on weekends, talking kids down from fighting. Going to rival cliques and mediating. Reminding everyone: *This is stupid. Stop it.* But

today, Anita's struggling. She's sitting in her office, trying to deal with the reality that, no matter how much she or anyone does, no matter how much they hope, inevitably there'll be more violence.

Anita Stewart: The hardest thing is knowing that something is getting ready to happen and you can't stop it. That hurts. Because you don't know where it's going to happen. But you know that the strike is getting ready to come, but you don't know where it's coming. And it hurts. It hurts because the kids are not bad.

(She starts to cry)

But you know that something is getting ready to happen, because the kids, they tell you. And it's like you can't stop it, because you don't know where it's going to happen. And I'm trying to do what I can.

(Sobbing, she stops speaking.)

Ben Calhoun: Just before dismissal, just like Anita feared, there's news of more shooting. A parent and a student were on their way home, and someone fired shots. Nobody was hit, but it looks like it might have been retaliation. And so the school has to decide what to do next. Cancel the homecoming game, cancel the dance, or risk it. Push back against the violence, and try to preserve a little bit of high school normalcy for the students.

Every option they have seems like a bad option, and it's getting late in the day. They have to decide all of this, and they've got to decide soon.

Part Two: Prologue

Ira Glass: Leonetta Sanders, the principal of Harper High School in Chicago, has a decision to make. And she has to make it right away. She has to decide whether to cancel the school's homecoming game and dance.

Leonetta Sanders: Coach Reed, I need you in the Melon room at this time, Coach Reed. Coach Sales.

Ira Glass: She calls her staff together for a meeting. The day before this, when everybody was at a pep rally in the gym for Homecoming, a 16-year-old who attended Harper last year and dropped out, who still had friends here, was shot just a few blocks from school. Immediately, the staff jumped into action.

If you [read Part One], you [know] this part of the story, where the gang responsible for the shooting had members on the football team. So Principal Sanders was scared that there might be retaliation at the game or at the dance. They sent home a handful of kids they thought might be in danger.

Here is what happens next. When the staff now assembles on Friday afternoon, Principal Sanders informs them that there's news. Another incident.

Leonetta Sanders: OK, so I just got word that there was a shooting. But it was a shooting in the neighborhood. Anthony Harper's father picked him up. And by the time he crossed 67th, they were shooting. So it's starting already.

Ira Glass: Nobody was hurt in this latest shooting. Though I think to any outsider, it's hard to imagine Harper not canceling Homecoming at this point. The school has just come off a terrible year in which 29 current and recent students were shot. Eight of them died. Dozens more were in incidents where bullets were fired, but they didn't get hit.

These murders, as you would expect, were hard on faculty and students alike. But partly because it's been so tough, Principal Sanders wants very badly to give her students the fun, normal stuff that other high school students get, as much as she can. She really wants them to have a Homecoming dance. And so, her decision:

Leonetta Sanders: We are going to move forward with this dance. I have been on the phone, basically, all day with Tony Ruiz, Chicago police. So they're going to be standing on corners. Tony Ruiz says he's going to have some undercover police cars and rapid response.

Ira Glass: When school lets out at the end of the day, it's tense. There are more police cars than usual. Harper security staff and administrators are out on the sidewalks in force. Principal Sanders is wary as she looks up and down the street for any kids that seem out of place, who might be there for the wrong reasons.

Leonetta Sanders: I'll make sure I – who is that? He don't go to Harper. Who is that?

Man: I'll check. When I go back in, I'll check.

Leonetta Sanders: You know, when they get cold, they start wearing these damn black hoodies. It's really pissing me off. Why's he walking this way?

Ira Glass: Sanders talks to one of the police officers. He throws on his lights, drives down the block, questions the kid, puts him against the wall and checks for weapons, and then lets him go. And very soon, it's time for the game.

Girls: Let's go Cardinals! Let's go! Let's go, Cardinals!

Ira Glass: There's no violence at the game, unless you count the incredible trouncing the Harper Cardinals give to Marshall High School. Final score, 40 to 0. Later, at the Homecoming dance, dressed up kids slowly stream through the metal detector.

Leonetta Sanders: If you're not a Harper student, have your IDs out.

Ira Glass: As for the dance, after all the worrying and the beefed-up security, what ended up happening is nothing – the best possible outcome. The teenager who had been shot on Thursday, James Williams, made it to the hospital and survived. Maybe because of that, there was no other immediate bloodshed. Kids dance in a darkened gym. On the bleachers, you can make out Barielle, the Homecoming Queen, her dainty crown bouncing up and down at the center of this mass of kids.

For the staff, who have been here at this point for 14 hours, the significance of this moment is not lost. It's regular life. They were able to give the kids regular high school for a night – a dance. Three girlfriends collect crumpled dollar bills together to make \$10 so they can pose, one in wobbly high heels, in front of the fake Roman columns and sky-blue backdrop the photographer's set up.

Photographer: On three: one, two–

Girl: That's him!

Photographer: Three. There you go.

Ira Glass: We sent three reporters to Harper High School on Chicago's South Side for five months, starting at the beginning of this school year, because of all the shootings they've had. We have all heard a lot about gun violence and kids in the last few months, and we wanted to understand what the staff and families at Harper know about this violence that most of us around the country do not know.

We're going to be focusing more on the students in this hour. We're going to get to know a few of their stories. Stay with us.

Part II, Act One: The Eyewitness

Ira Glass: Most murders in Chicago – 82% of them in 2011 – happen in public places, parks and streets and alleyways and cars. And lots of kids at Harper will tell you that they personally have actually seen someone shot. One of the three reporters we sent into the school, Alex Kotlowitz, has this story about a student who has seen more than his share.

Alex Kotlowitz: In the five months I spent at Harper, nearly every time I visited the school's social work office, which was often, Thomas, a junior, would be there, too, during classes, passing periods, lunch, whenever. So much that one day I asked him, *Hey, every time I come here, you're here. Why do you hang out here so much?*

Thomas: Nay, I ain't gonna give you no answer for that. Every time I come here, you come. And I'm for real.

Alex Kotlowitz: No, every time I come, you're here! (*laughs*)

Thomas: Sometimes, I just need to talk to somebody. That's why I come here.

Alex Kotlowitz: Thomas has witnessed an incredible amount of violence. Last June, he was standing on the porch of an abandoned building, talking with another Harper student, Shakaki Asphy, when she was shot and killed. This, though, wasn't the first murder Thomas had witnessed.

Back in 2006, he was at a birthday party for a 10-year-old girl, Siretha White, nicknamed Nugget, when someone shot through the front window. Thomas says he remembers being led out of the house by the police and seeing Nugget laying on the floor with what appeared to be her brains next to her. Nugget's killing happened when Thomas was 10. Shakaki's murder was when Thomas was 17. And as his social worker, Anita Stewart, tells it, there have been many, many in between.

Anita Stewart: Last summer, one of the kids in the neighborhood got shot in the face. He witnessed that. Then it was a student here that got shot in the leg. He was a witness to that.

And there was some guy – and I don't know. He never really fully told me about this story. But he got shot in the head. And he was talking about his brains being on the ground. So he witnessed that.

Alex Kotlowitz: Thomas's brother has been shot on three separate occasions. Thomas witnessed all of them, including the time his brother was paralyzed.

Anita Stewart: Good morning, Thomas.

Thomas: Good morning.

Anita Stewart: And I can understand why you didn't get here on time this morning. You know that your sister says that she wakes you up every morning.

Thomas: My mama just brought me here.

Anita Stewart: Lower your voice. I'm right here. It's so good to see you this morning.

Thomas: Why you just come talking about—

Alex Kotlowitz: Thomas and Anita have an interesting relationship. He's pretty combative, kind of churlish. At times, it almost seems like he doesn't even like Anita very much. But the truth is they're incredibly close.

Anita splits her time between Harper and another high school. And the two or three days a week she's at Harper, Thomas always comes to see her. She frequently visits him on his block and at his house, and affectionately calls him Big Baby. I don't think Thomas opens up much to many people, but he does with Anita.

Thomas: You know Nugget's little brother got shot Monday.

Anita Stewart: No. Is he OK?

Thomas: He got shot in his stomach and his leg.

Anita Stewart: Her little brother? How old is her little brother?

Thomas: Like 15.

Anita Stewart: And what school does he go to?

Thomas: I don't know.

Anita Stewart: So what did you think about it when you heard about it, after you heard about it?

Thomas: Nothing.

Anita Stewart: Nothing?

Thomas: Just another person got shot.

Anita Stewart: Just another person got shot? (*She sighs*)

Alex Kotlowitz: You can hear it in Thomas's voice, muffled and sluggish, as if he's speaking from deep inside a cave. Even his physical demeanor makes it clear he'd just as well disappear.

His braided hair hangs over his eyes. He often has a hood on. He won't look you in the eye. Anita's trying to pull him out of his hiding.

Alex Kotlowitz: Hey, Thomas. What did you think of the memorial for Shakaki?

Thomas: I walked past it. I don't know.

Anita Stewart: Have you looked at it?

Alex Kotlowitz: At the end of October, on the first floor, the school put up a memorial display for Shakaki, the girl Thomas was standing next to when she was killed. It's a glass case filled with pictures of her and her friends, a basketball signed by her teammates, and a note Anita had written to her after she died. Shakaki, who, like so many kids at Harper, half-expected to die young, had told Anita if she was killed, she wanted her to put a note in her casket. After she was killed, Anita wrote the note, but couldn't bring herself to put it in with Shakaki.

Anita had worked with Shakaki for two years. And she's still struggling with her own grief over her death. And partly, it's the shared grief that draws Anita and Thomas together. Like Thomas, Anita hasn't been able to bring herself to look at the memorial.

Anita Stewart: Because I haven't looked at it. I saw it. But I could not go up there. I'm not ready to go up there yet. So why haven't you gone up there to look at it?

Thomas: I don't need to go up there right now.

Anita Stewart: OK. I do have a question for you, Thomas. With all of the things that you have experienced, which one is constantly on your mind? You've experienced so much.

Thomas: I don't think about none of that.

Anita Stewart: You don't think about none of it? None of it's on your mind. Not the situation with your brother? What about at the bus stop? What about at the party?

Thomas: No, I don't think about that.

Anita Stewart: You don't think about the party when you were a kid?

Thomas: Man, I got older. That stuff is old now.

Anita Stewart: It's old? You remember what happened, right?

Thomas: Right, but—

Anita Stewart: Does it really get old, Thomas?

Thomas: It's done now.

Anita Stewart: It's done. I know and I understand that it's done. But does it really get old, where you can say, *OK, this is over, I don't think about it anymore?*

Thomas: But if I think about it, I'll do something.

Anita Stewart: You'll do something like what?

Thomas: Try to hurt somebody.

Alex Kotlowitz: *Try to hurt somebody*, he says. Trying to hurt someone or wanting to hurt someone – these are things Thomas has said a lot. One time when I asked him where he thought he might be in ten years, he said, *Might be in jail, because I think I'm going to hurt someone.*

Mostly it felt like tough talk, like teenage bravado. But on this day, when talking about Shakaki, it started to become clear that this kind of talk, talk about hurting someone, isn't just tough-guy bragging. I began to realize that Thomas was trying the best he could to be honest about some feelings he has, feelings that scare him. Thomas begins by haltingly explaining what happened the night Shakaki was shot.

He was standing on the porch, Shakaki next to him. They were just hanging out, just talking. Thomas's brother was in his wheelchair on the sidewalk in front.

When the shooter, dressed in a gray hoodie, came running up alongside the building, Thomas pleaded with him not to shoot. But the shooter fired several rounds, hitting Shakaki three times and Thomas's brother once in the thigh. Thomas ran but quickly came back. He says that when Shakaki was laying on the ground, he first thought she'd be OK.

Thomas: Because when she got shot, then anyways, she gonna be all right then.

Anita Stewart: She was talking, right?

Thomas: She was on the ground. She was talking. But all she kept saying, it burned.

Alex Kotlowitz: When the ambulances finally showed up, they took Shakaki and Thomas's brother to the hospital, leaving Thomas alone. He didn't go home. He was just alone.

Thomas: Then they took her. Then they took my brother. Then I walked off mad. I walked to the gas station to see who I could see.

Alex Kotlowitz: At the gas station, he didn't find anyone.

Thomas: And ever since that day, I was just trying to hurt everybody. I didn't sleep that whole week she got killed. She got shot on Saturday. She died Sunday. I was sleepless for a whole week.

Alex Kotlowitz: He was filled with grief, anxiety, guilt. And then he got into a fight.

Alex Kotlowitz: And what did you get into a fight over?

Thomas: Nothing important.

Alex Kotlowitz: Thomas says an older kid on the street pushed his little cousin to the ground. Thomas was furious. He went after the older boy.

Thomas: It wasn't no fight. I just hit him. And he walked off crying a whole lot. I didn't know his teeth was in my hand until I looked at it.

Alex Kotlowitz: Thomas punched the boy so hard, one of the boy's teeth got stuck in Thomas's hand. Later that night, his grandma took him to the hospital. And he eventually had surgery on his hand.

He told me that once he hurt his hand, he was able to sleep again. It was that simple. Getting into this stupid fight...it brought him relief.

Thomas has said many times that he knows something violent is going to happen again. It could be random. He says bullets fly all the time.

One could come through the living room window and hit his grandma. Or a stray bullet could hit Anita when she's on the block. What happens happens, he often says. And when it happens next, he knows he'll need relief again.

Thomas: If it happens again, I don't think I could stop.

Alex Kotlowitz: You're worried that will be the breaking point for you?

Thomas: No, I ain't worried about nothing. If it happens again, though, I know I could hurt a lot of people if I wanted to.

Anita Stewart: I don't think you want to. I really don't think you want to.

Alex Kotlowitz: Anita's trying to convince Thomas to deal with his feelings in other ways. Not long ago, they visited Shakaki's gravesite together. Anita says it was a big deal for Thomas to go. "I'm proud of him," she told me.

Part II, Act Two: Your Name Written On Me

Ira Glass: In the unofficial school calendar for Harper, there are these anniversaries of days that certain kids were shot or the birthdays of those same kids. They have a big enough effect on what happens at school that the administration and the police department keep track of these days. They can be dangerous.

One of the important anniversaries in the fall is T.G. Day, named for Terrance Green. In all kinds of ways since his death at 16, Terrance Green has become one of the iconic figures in the neighborhood around Harper. Ben Calhoun looked into how that happened.

Ben Calhoun: Terrance Green was murdered during summer break, July of 2009. But more than a month later, when kids came back to school, the grief over his death was still flooding from the neighborhood into Harper.

Crystal Smith: It was the largest fallout of a student death I had ever seen before. Even the boys couldn't hold back their tears.

Ben Calhoun: Crystal Smith, one of the school's social workers, says that in some ways, that wasn't so surprising. Terrance was popular and charming and funny. But she was still not expecting what she saw next.

Crystal Smith: I started seeing this TGC, TGC, TGC everywhere. Whether I was seeing it on book bags or tattooed on one of the kids. And I was like, what is that? And they were like, oh, you know, this is the Terrance Green Crew. It turned into a whole different gang.

Ben Calhoun: The new clique, the new gang that Terrance's death gave birth to, today controls 23 city blocks in the neighborhood east of Harper. It's called Terrance Green City, and goes by the initials TGC. Sometimes it's called True Gangster City.

For TGC and two or three other allied gangs, the dates of Terrance's death and his birthday in November, in the neighborhood...those days are a big deal. Hundreds of people turn out for street parties. And around those times, the hostility over Terrance's murder, it can all come back. Crystal remembers last November. The staff was told to clear out of the building immediately when school ended.

Crystal Smith: And they had called in for extra police support. Somebody told me, they were like, they brought the big guns out.

Ben Calhoun: Assault rifles. Some of the police outside the school were carrying assault rifles.

Crystal Smith: But then as I was driving down the street, it was just like a scene I had never seen. I had never seen so many kids posted on the corners at one time. And I had never seen them standing outside with bats and sticks and stuff. And they were, like, on every street.

Ben Calhoun: Three years after Terrance Green's murder, the legacy left by it continues to sprawl. Many tributes to Terrance remain online. There are also slide shows, collages, videos, some with slick editing and production. Lots are on YouTube.

Boy (*singing*): Yeah, TGC, you already know, man. Young Life, Seven Deuce man. RIP my [---], man. Prince TG, Prince [---] TG. Yeah, we gonna miss you. I got you tatted on my arm, man. The grief's still sitting on us, so we got your name written on us. You know how that go.

Ben Calhoun: The mythology around Terrance and the devotion to him, it's intense. Kids who know Terrance use his last name, Green, in place of their own. This was confusing at first, when I met several of his friends who told me their last name was Green. But the most troubling example of Terrance's legacy was this series of videos made by kids.

The footage is choppy and grainy, like it's shot on a cell phone. It's of about a dozen kids walking around the street at night. They range in age from maybe 9 or 10 to early high school. Here, they are threatening and taunting a rival gang, S-Dub, which is also called the Dub. It's the gang that's widely believed by students, Harper staff, and police to have killed Terrance.

Girl: For the rest of my life, I'm screaming, [---] the Dub!

Boy: [---] the Dub!

Girl: [---] the Dub!

Ben Calhoun: Toward the end of the video, one particular kid appears. He looks like he's barely out of middle school, somewhere between 12 and 14. In his right hand is a gun, a semi-automatic.

He points it at the camera. He shouts hate at opposing gangs. He praises the territory he says he's protecting, Terrance Green City.

The feud between TGC and S-Dub that followed Terrance's death has turned into a long chain of retaliation. Principal Sanders says her staff knows of seven murders and more than 10 other shootings that lead back to Terrance. This list includes Cedric Bell, one of Harper's students killed last year.

And it's not like Terrance's story is one of a kind. There's other cliques around Harper named after kids who were murdered. There's Bird Gang northwest of the school named after Martel Barrett, whose nickname was Bird. He was killed the same year as Terrance. There's Face World, named for a kid whose street name was Face. There's Frank World and Dome City.

It makes you wonder about the lives of these kids, kids like Terrance. Why did his death lead to songs and kids using his last name in place of their own to assault rifles outside Harper and a remapping of the violence around the school? Why this 16-year-old?

Tony Owens: This is an eighth grade graduation picture.

Ben Calhoun: What a cute kid.

Ben Calhoun: Terrance grew up in a house with two loving, hardworking parents. This is his dad here, Tony Owens. He's a full-time bus driver and a union official for the Chicago Transit Authority. His mother, Lorraine Green, works at a bank. Together, the couple raised five kids.

Terrance's siblings, at this point, have all graduated from high school. One's in college. The rest are all doing well. His older brother is a pastor.

Tony Owens: Hey, hey, here's my man, Boogie here.

Ben Calhoun: How are you doing?

Boogie: It's nice to meet you.

Tony Owens: He's here. Hey man, what's up?

Ben Calhoun: A friend of Terrance's dropped by during one of my visits to Mr. Owens. Boogie was one of the closest people to Terrance. They were friends since third grade. As you're going to hear, there are some big differences in the way they see Terrance's story.

But here's the stuff they agree on. Terrance was an amazing athlete and a leader. When he was in middle school, he played quarterback for a youth league team that went to a national championship.

And they both say the problem started when Terrance was in high school. He and Boogie had to walk to Harper through a rival neighborhood. The kids there would bully Terrance and his friends. And then Terrance, he had a teenage fling with and then dumped the little sister of a gang member from the other neighborhood, from S-Dub, the gang that people believe killed him later.

Tony Owens: And she told him that my brother going to get you. She told Terrance that: *My brother is going to get you. My brother gonna get you, because he wasn't dating her.*

Ben Calhoun: The way Mr. Owens describes the situation, it was half girl problem, half bully problem. There were some fights in school, some fights on the street. And one Friday afternoon, Terrance got shot in a drive-by. Police reports show the brother was brought in for questioning but was not charged. No one was ever charged.

And this is where Boogie's version of the story separates from Mr. Owens's on a crucial point. Mr. Owens says Terrance and Boogie and their friend's weren't in a gang. Boogie says that was true, but only at first.

Boogie tells the story this way. When it all started, there was the gang that the girl's brother was in, S-Dub. They were fighting with the older guys in Terrance's neighborhood who were in a gang called Seven Deuce. Boogie has no idea what that war was about – girls, money, who knows? They'd been at it for years, he says.

He and Terrance and their friends, they were separate from all that. They were just kids. They were interested in sports and music. They could cross into S-Dub's territory.

They'd go over, hang out, play basketball. It was no big deal. But by the time they got to high school, it was like a switch flipped on them.

Boogie: Once they come through, and we taller now. It's all about height and stuff like that. So they call it hard legs, shooting at any hard legs. That means male – any male that look of age.

Any male that look of age will get shot. So that's where it started, right there. You involved now. That's the thing. Now you a part of it.

Ben Calhoun: Boogie says the guys from S-Dub, they just assumed they were with Seven Deuce because they were young men living in the neighborhood. So S-Dub would drive up, point guns at them, threaten them. They'd steal from them and take their stuff, embarrass them in front of girls. It was humiliating.

And avoiding all that didn't seem like an option. Police or parents or teachers weren't about to step in and fix it. So they turned to each other. They did what a lot of teenage boys might do in that situation. They decided they weren't going to back down.

One member of TGC tells me Terrance got his friends together for a meeting. He said he was starting something new, a new group. He named it YUNG LYFE, which stood for young, unique, noble gentlemen living youthful and fulfilled every day.

Boogie: Fear drove us to really get into it. We felt like we had to fight fire with fire. Like Terrance, he always was a stronger leader because he was the quarterback of a football team. So he knew how to lead a team. So we thought if they want to come burn us down, we gonna come burn they town down, too.

Ben Calhoun: All this was news to Mr. Owens, Terrance's dad. He never knew that Terrance and his friends were fighting back this way. And when he hears "fight fire with fire," the implication of that, it isn't something Mr. Owens is really ready to accept.

Tony Owens: You know, let me cut in just for a minute. When he say they retaliated off of that, I mean, what can they do? They didn't have no guns. I don't see how y'all could retaliate when you all didn't have what they had.

Boogie: They had more power than us. But we had more heart. Terrance had a big heart.

Ben Calhoun: You can hear how delicate and respectful Boogie's trying to be with his friend's dad. But Mr. Owens insists, *you didn't have any guns*. And finally, Boogie admits it pretty plainly.

Boogie: Yeah, they had things like guns and all type of weapons. But we had the same. We just didn't have as much as them. They had cars and all type of stuff. We were still using CTA.

It was crazy. But when they got back and forth, when the war really started, if they came on our side, they would have to worry about making it back to their side. And it was the same way for us.

Ben Calhoun: Other friends of Terrance's have told me, by the summer when he was killed, the shooting was pretty much constant. One said, "I'm not going to lie. We were shooting pretty much every day. It was wolf season," he said.

When they talk about what all this was like, you can totally see why they memorialize Terrance the way they do – because there'd been this moment when they felt scared and unprotected. He was the one that rallied them. He was their leader. And because he was their leader, he became a target. "He died for us," Boogie told me.

You can see why they'd want to name their neighborhood after him. Boogie says part of what made those years so frightening for them is that they were underdogs. They were younger, smaller. And they had to figure out for themselves how to fight back. The older guys, the ones in Seven Deuce who'd started the war, they hadn't recruited them. They hadn't taught them how it all worked.

Boogie: I'm not blaming it on nobody. But the older guys on our side, they kind of set us up for failure because they let the pressure fall on us. They didn't give nothing to us. But they let the weight fall off onto us. Now it's off of them. All the weight is off of them.

But now it's our problem. Their problems are our problems now. The weight was put on our shoulders and just dumped.

Like the older guys, they so separated from us. It's so segregated that we don't even know their names. But they the ones who started the war which led to Terrance getting killed. But I couldn't even recall one of their names if I wanted to.

Ben Calhoun: Of course, to an adult, this is upside down world logic, that the one thing that could have helped them and maybe saved Terrance's life was being recruited and trained by a gang, that the only adults who could have helped them were gang members. And the more Boogie said stuff like this, how they inherited this war, the more upset Mr. Owens got.

Tony Owens: Don't say you was inheriting nothing, because you wasn't. Inheriting means somebody gave you something. And nobody gave you nothing.

Boogie: And that's what I was saying.

Tony Owens: I'm saying you didn't have nothing to do with what was going on. Y'all was just kids is in hood. Y'all didn't know nothing about these guys. And I never heard this before.

Ben Calhoun: Mr. Owens has lived in the neighborhood since 1986. He thought he understood how the gangs worked. They were organized. They sold drugs.

You joined, got initiated. You became a bad guy. It was clear who was in them and who wasn't. The world Boogie was describing, where his son was kind of drafted into a gang war he didn't even really want to be a part of, that didn't make sense to Mr. Owens.

Towards the end of our conversation, we looked at a map of that new reality. We looked at the gang map Harper High School uses, where Terrance's initials, TG City, sit on a big rectangle southeast of the high school. Mr. Owens had never seen anything like it.

It upset him even more. "TG City?" he said. He'd always thought that was just a nice nickname the kids had given to the neighborhood, a way of remembering his son, not a gang.

Tony Owens: And that's what you just showed me. I'd never seen it. I never heard it before. I don't like that. I never heard it. I don't like it.

I don't like it. I do not like that. When you showed me a map of the gang names and TG in that, oh, no. That's his initials. He don't fit in that. He don't fit in that.

Ben Calhoun: After a few minutes, we walked outside to take a break and get some fresh air. Mr. Owens stood on his porch. He told me a story about how the last time he'd seen Terrance was on his porch. It was morning. Mr. Owens was on his way to work. And he watched as his son walked around the corner to see Boogie and go get a haircut.

Today he stood there, staring at the house kitty-corner to his. On one wall of it, there was spray paint that said TGC. Mr. Owens stared, shaking his head. "I don't like that," he said. "I don't like that at all."

Part II, Act Three: Get Your Gun

Ira Glass: Chicago's gun control laws are strict. There are no gun shops in the city, no shooting ranges. There's a ban on assault weapons and high capacity magazines.

But somehow, of course, kids are being shot by other kids. Teenagers can't just walk into a store or a gun show and buy a gun. So how do they get them? The third of our Harper reporters, Linda Lutton, asked.

Linda Lutton: I talked to eight Harper students at school one day.

Linda Lutton: Can you all come in a little tighter?

Linda Lutton: Most them are freshman, 15 years old. It was often hard at Harper to get kids to talk about how they felt about the violence in their neighborhood. But when it came to something concrete, like where a kid around here would get a gun, it was easy to get into a detailed conversation about dirty guns and clean guns and the prices of each. They said if it's a cheap gun on the street, you have to be careful.

Boy 1: It'll usually have a murder or something on it.

Linda Lutton: And they know how clean guns, guns with no murders on them, end up on the street.

Boy 2: They got they gun cards. And then when they sell them, they just report them stolen – like a month later, reported stolen.

Linda Lutton: OK, what's the cheapest? Even if it's a dirty gun with a murder on it, what's the cheapest?

Boy 1: Like \$100.

Boy 2: It depends on what kind of gun it is.

Linda Lutton: \$100. And what kind of gun would that be for \$100?

Boy 2: Because you gotta trick some people. They would be like, give me \$100 for a .22 caliber. Boy, I don't even play with those. What, I'm going to give you \$100? I'll give you \$25 for it.

Linda Lutton: The boys argue for a while over how much a .22 caliber handgun would be worth – \$25, \$40, \$150, or if it's worth anything at all since it's not a big gun. And who are they getting the guns from?

Linda Lutton: As a kid, how do you know where to go to?

Boy 3: I go to one of the guys.

Boy 4: That's what I was going to say, too – one of the guys.

Linda Lutton: What does one of the guys mean? What does that mean?

Boy 2: One of your friends.

Boy 4: Well, like for some people, like if you're in a gang or something, you gonna automatically have that. So if you've got connections to a gang, then you gonna have it.

Linda Lutton: So how do you know who in the gang has the gun?

Boy 4: We know. We know.

Boy 1: I've actually made phone calls. If I wanted a gun—

Boy 4: That's what I'm saying, too.

Boy 1: I could make a phone call.

Linda Lutton: Of course, this isn't the most satisfying answer to the question: *Where do you get your gun?* To shrug and say "From my friends" doesn't explain how your friends get them. Guns arrive in the neighborhood through all the means you've probably heard of – straw purchasers, gun-show loopholes. The feds recently charged a college student with buying duffel bags full of guns at Indiana gun shows for resale on Chicago streets.

A University of Chicago crime lab analysis has shown that the biggest proportion of police-recovered guns, around 40%, are purchased legally just outside Chicago, in the suburbs or in Indiana. One of the police officers who works at Harper told me \$40 or \$50 would be a normal price around the neighborhood for a revolver. \$100 will get you a semiautomatic.

But talking to these kids, I realize they often can get a gun for nothing at all. They're free. This kid got two guns from his brother.

Boy 4: When my brother got it, of course he gonna give to me. Because my brother, he went to jail for a charge. He's still in there right now.

Linda Lutton: For a gun charge?

Boy 4: Yeah. My brother got several guns, though. But the one that he got caught with, they got it. But he got several of them. So I'm going to look after them for him while he in there.

Linda Lutton: One kid says he was given a gun by fellow gang members who handed it to him, he says, for having a certain rank in the gang. He was 14. Another boy who's backed away from his gang and moved out of Englewood says he could still get a gun if he needed it for something, as long as he promised to bring it back. Another boy says his mom has a gun, a legal gun. She keeps it in a box, he says.

Boy 3: I was 12 when I got my first gun. I was 12. I found it. I saw it. I found it.

Linda Lutton: He was near 67th Street, three blocks from Harper.

Linda Lutton: Just in the middle of the day, you're going to your grandma's house. And you find a gun.

Boy 3: Yeah, it was 4 o'clock. And I walked through the alley because I had come up to my grandma's backyard. And something just told me, look down. It was five, six houses down from my grandma.

Boy 5: People stash guns outside. They don't want their guns in the house.

Linda Lutton: All the kids agree: if a gun's in your house, the police can find it in a raid. So people stash them. This one was on the side of the garage.

Boy 3: It was on the side of the garage like somebody tried to throw it in there while they was running. But they missed or something. It was just laying, not on the garage, on the garbage. You know, the garbage in the alley? It was just laying next to it. And I just picked it up, brung it home.

Linda Lutton: The boy kept the gun for a while. Later, because he couldn't figure out how to get any bullets for it and because, he says, he had no use for it, he gave it to a friend. When I asked what type of gun it was, the boy said he was too little to know at the time.

He only knew it was black. But now that he's older, 15, he does know. It was a .45.

Linda Lutton: So where do you keep a gun, if not at home? I'm still not clear on that.

Boy 4: Abandoned house, I'm going to say that.

Linda Lutton: What, like next door to you maybe or something?

Boy 4: Well, not next door to you. It could be like a block or something. But it can't be that far.

Linda Lutton: How do you protect it, then? How do you know somebody's not going to get in there and get it?

Boy 4: Because you hide it.

Linda Lutton: Well, maybe I live on your block, too, and I'm—

Boy 4: Well, one of my guys, he had a banger. And he put it in an abandoned house. He put in the basement. And in the basement, they got a little vent. And he just scooted it all the way back and closed it. And that's it.

Linda Lutton: So if he needs it, he's got it.

Boy 4: Yeah.

Linda Lutton: But it's not on him. It's not in his house.

Boy 3: You're just close.

Linda Lutton: As you'd expect, some guns are more popular than others.

Linda Lutton: Do young people want a certain type of gun?

Boy 3: A .30, with a long clip – a clip like this out the gun.

Linda Lutton: He's not talking about a specific gun but an accessory, a magazine that holds 30 rounds.

Linda Lutton: You like those? Why?

Boy 3: They got the most shots. You can shoot forever. Let out 15. Run back to where you going. Somebody else come out and let out five more. There you go.

Linda Lutton: A lot of these students say they know kids who are only alive because the shooters have such bad aim. That could be another reason why the long clips are popular with kids. It's a good accessory to have when you can't shoot.

Part II, Act Four: Devonte, Part Two

Ira Glass: One of our reporters, Alex Kotlowitz, spent his time at school in the social work office because that's a place that directly and intensively addresses the effects of the neighborhood's violence on specific students who go to the school. [You read about] one of the school's two social workers, Anita Stewart, earlier.

Crystal Smith is the other one. Crystal is relentlessly bright, positive, cheerful, peppy – like, aggressively so. Here's how, early in the year, she says goodbye to a kid in her office who is leaving for class.

Crystal Smith: Hello. You are a person, OK. You are valuable. And you matter. Mwah, mwah, mwah. OK, go.

Ira Glass: By late November this year, though, things have kind of changed. Alex explains how.

Alex Kotlowitz: It's the Tuesday before Thanksgiving break. And I run into Crystal Smith, who's just coming in to work. She slams the door, then collapses into her chair.

Alex Kotlowitz: How you doing?

Crystal Smith: I just got here. I've been battling my brain and just not feeling well since last night. But I'm here.

Alex Kotlowitz: Since last night? What happened last night?

Crystal Smith: Well, yesterday when I was at work, my whole face became numb. And my lips were tingling. My hand was numb, so I went–

Alex Kotlowitz: Crystal tells me that last night she went to the ER. She was worried she was having a stroke. But the doctor told her it was most likely symptoms of stress. But Crystal isn't just having a bad day. Work has been wearing her down. And others, it seem, are having a hard time, too.

A week earlier, an administrator became so concerned about Crystal that she sent her, along with the school's other social worker and the school psychologist, to a counseling session just for the three of them. She wanted them to begin to process and move past all the crises and the shocks and the funerals they've been through the past year. Crystal and Anita, the other social worker, told me the session was helpful. But they also said it felt sort of pointless.

"It's not over," they said. Yeah, there haven't been any students killed this year. But the shooting hasn't stopped. I point out that that's how the kids must feel sometimes, and they agree. In the office, I tell Crystal that she looks tired.

Crystal Smith: Yeah, I know. Next week, I'll try to be my, you know, ball of energy. I'm going to try. I don't know, maybe your book stressed me out. (*She laughs*)

Alex Kotlowitz: Crystal's been working towards a second master's degree, and in one of her classes this year has been reading a book I wrote over 20 years ago called *There Are No Children Here*, where I follow two brothers living in the projects on Chicago's West Side. For a couple of years, I followed the boys as they grappled with violence, poverty, and the gangs. And Crystal wonders if reading it isn't adding to her stress.

Crystal Smith: It was really interesting, though. To think that 20 years later, nothing has changed, that's the scarier part.

Alex Kotlowitz: You mean in the neighborhoods?

Crystal Smith: Right. Right. That the same cycles are being repeated over again. OK, now what happened to the cousin, the one with the four kids?

Alex Kotlowitz: She's doing great. Her kids are going off to college. She lives up in Evanston, works in a bank.

Crystal Smith: Really? She got out.

Alex Kotlowitz: Yeah.

Crystal Smith: Really. I am so happy to hear that. I needed to hear that. I needed to know that. Wow. I need to see where education works. And I need to see where success happens.

Alex Kotlowitz: One of the things that's stressing Crystal out is her relationship with a junior named Devonte. Earlier in the year, Crystal begin meeting regularly with Devonte, who accidentally shot and killed his 14-year-old brother last February. Since then, his sister has stopped talking to him. And things have been strained with his mom.

Before the accident, Devonte was kind of notorious as a problem kid at Harper. He would curse out the staff. And he hardly showed up for school. But since the beginning of this school year, Devonte's been turning it around.

He comes to see Crystal sometimes two or three times a day. In spurts, he talks about his feelings, especially his guilt over his brother's death. He's pulled up his grades, getting Bs and Cs in almost all of his classes, the best grades he's ever had in high school.

So much of this success, I think, has to do with Crystal. For three months, she's let him know he doesn't need to go through this all alone. She encourages him to think about the future he wants for himself. Once when Devonte had stopped by, Crystal had pulled out photographs from a recent vacation she took with her husband in Jamaica.

Crystal Smith: So look, this is part of the resort that we were on. Every morning, you wake up and you see that.

Devonte: I like that. Almost look clean.

Crystal Smith: It is clean. And the water is so blue, you could see all the way down to the bottom. Yes, you can.

Devonte: I don't need to go out there, though.

Crystal Smith: You do need to go out there. Look.

Devonte: The sun is small, isn't it?

Crystal Smith: I know. But I got a better picture of the sunset. I'll bring that later. And I'm going to give you one, because I want you to always make sure that you focused on getting to the sunset. OK? OK.

Alex Kotlowitz: So this conversation took place earlier in the fall. Now, today, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, it seems like Devonte is drifting. Like Crystal and Anita, he just seems spent.

Crystal tells me Devonte's become agitated. He's announced that he's only going to come to school three days a week. I asked Devonte if he'd sit down with me and explain what's going on. I began by asking him about his relationship with Crystal.

Devonte: Now, I started getting along with Ms. Smith during sophomore year or something like that. And she started loving me.

Alex Kotlowitz: I think she's really fond of you. She worries about you.

Devonte: Mmm-hmm, all the time. She worries about me all the time.

Alex Kotlowitz: Do you like it that she worries about you?

Devonte: Yeah. I like for a person to care for me and stuff.

Alex Kotlowitz: I started to ask Devonte a bit about his brother and about the accident. But he told me that he didn't really want to talk about it – which, you know, fair enough. He told me that he hates memories.

Devonte: I don't like to think of stuff. I be wanting to give up on my life sometimes.

Alex Kotlowitz: Is that right, Devonte? Why?

Devonte: I don't like my life no more. I hate myself.

Alex Kotlowitz: Why do you hate yourself?

Devonte: I don't know.

Alex Kotlowitz: You hate what happened, right? But you don't hate yourself?

Devonte: Peoples be looking at me stupid, all the...

Alex Kotlowitz: Do people say things to you, Devonte?

Devonte: Uh-uh.

Alex Kotlowitz: So you just think people are looking at you differently?

Devonte: I see people looking at me other different type of ways.

Alex Kotlowitz: Do you think Ms. Smith does?

Devonte: No. And I'm talking about people in my family. I feel that they don't care about me no more. Like if I leave this world, they don't care.

Alex Kotlowitz: You think they're angry with you.

Devonte: I heard my sister say, my little brother go, everybody go, and don't never come back. And I don't want to flip out on nobody. I've been thinking about me just giving up.

Alex Kotlowitz: That conversation happened two days before the Thanksgiving break. When I next meet up with Crystal a few weeks later, she tells me that Devonte has stopped coming to school, that she hasn't heard from him. What's worse, though, is that she says she's heard from some of the school staff that he's been picked up by the police on a gun possession charge. Crystal calls Devonte's mom to find out what's going on.

Crystal Smith: Hello, can I please speak with Mrs. Grant? Hey, it's Crystal Winfield Smith. How are you? Good, good, good. The police are there looking for Devonte? What?

Alex Kotlowitz: Devonte's mom confirms that, yes, Devonte had been picked up on a gun charge, and that earlier in the week went to court for a preliminary hearing. She says that once Devonte heard that he could get locked up for 19 months, he got scared and took off. He literally ran out of the courthouse. He's now on the run. She says she's not sure where he's staying now.

Crystal knows that Devonte will just get more caught up in the streets, fending for himself, and that at some point the police will get him. And when they do, he's facing serious charges – the gun charge itself, violation of probation, which he was on for the accidental shooting, maybe running from the court.

Crystal Smith: It makes me feel like I lost him. And how could I lose him when I'm reaching my hand out? Grab back.

Alex Kotlowitz: A few days later, Crystal calls Devonte. She tells him not to say where he is, so she won't have to lie for him. She then runs through what, for them, has by now become a familiar exercise.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Crystal asks. *The good Devonte*, he replies. Then Crystal reminds him: *Don't forget he's in there.*

Crystal Smith: And so it was very hard for me. And I said, *OK, son. I love you. And take care of yourself.* And he said, *I love you, too, Ma.* And I hung up. That's that.

Part II, Act Five: Reverse Turnaround Backflip

Ira Glass: The time of year that we're in right now is hard for Principal Sanders because it's budget time, planning next year's budget. Harper is actually in a good situation this year with money. But as Ben Calhoun explains, that's about to change.

Ben Calhoun: Harper's in a unique spot at the moment because it's what the Chicago school system calls a turnaround school. A few years ago, the system said Harper need an overhaul. So they turned over most of the staff, brought in new people, and infused the school with money, a lot of money.

Just to give you an idea, Harper's total budget this year is \$8.9 million. \$1.6 million of that is turnaround money. Last year, the turnaround money was even bigger, almost \$2 million.

One former district official involved in Harper's turnaround told me that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who used to run Chicago's schools, said to his former colleagues, with these new turnaround initiatives, like the one at Harper, he wanted to "take the issue of money off the table." In other words, give them whatever they need. So the plan was pretty much to boost the school with a lot of federal, state, and city money. Then, as the changes took hold, slowly ramp down the money.

And then five years later, the funding would go back to normal. That's next year. Next year is when the money goes away.

In the fall, I sat down with Principal Sanders and the school's operations manager to talk about all this. They told me the money has done so much. There's a new culinary learning room, new computer equipment, small stuff like a new ID machine.

Principal Sanders talks about the first year of turnaround like it was amazing. There were four assistant principals, reduced class sizes. There was the kind of support staff – social workers and counselors – in numbers that other schools only dream of.

The operations manager told me he's been a Chicago Public Schools money guy for fifteen years. He's been at more than ten other high schools. He told me he's seen programs like the turnaround program before. It was called other things – intervention, reconstitution – but he says bluntly that Harper is the first time he's seen it work, partly because there's just been more money this time.

Next year, though, Harper will lose the last \$1.6 million of turnaround money, about 18% of its budget. And the biggest effect of that will be layoffs.

Marcel Smith: What's up, [----]?

Girl: Hey!

Marcel Smith: How you feeling?

Girl: Good!

Marcel Smith: Hey, Miss Carter. Is that a pass in your hand? I'm so proud of you, Miss Carter.

Ben Calhoun: What effect will layoffs have on Harper? I spend a couple mornings with a staff member named Marcel Smith. Marcel works on a program that tries to rescue kids who are failing out. Harper has a lot of initiatives like that. There's mentoring programs and enrichment programs, all boosted by turnaround.

So on paper, that's what Marcel does. But if you walk around with him, you see what Sanders sees, all the little things that would never be considered part of his job. The day I was with him, in the morning, Marcel came across a young man standing in the hallway.

Marcel Smith: What's going on, son? How you feeling?

Ben Calhoun: The kid was keeping a straight face. But he was clearly upset. It turned out he'd been asked to leave his class. As Marcel turned to deal with him, he asked me to turn off the recorder, so I did.

They talked for a minute. Marcel took the kid to his office, sat him down, told him to wait. And we walked away. He didn't want to use the student's name. But he explained what was going on.

Marcel Smith: Apparently, the students were given an incentive for being on time. And it was food.

Ben Calhoun: Cookies. It was cookies. And this student, along with everyone who'd gotten to class on time that day, was allowed to go up and take a cookie. But this particular student was dealing with a difficult and maybe dangerous situation at his house. So he hadn't gone home the night before. And because of that, he hadn't eaten.

So when he went up to take his cookie, he took two. The teacher told them to put one back. Not wanting to reveal his situation to the rest of the class, he didn't say anything. He just refused.

He told Marcel he was just so hungry. That's why he'd been kicked out. Marcel had a box of cereal in his office. And I walked with him as he zipped down to the cafeteria. They were out of regular milk.

Marcel Smith: Ladies? Ladies, how y'all doing? Can I get two chocolate milks, please? Thank you.

Ben Calhoun: Back in Marcel's office, the student sat quietly, staring down, and ate a plastic bowl filled with Honey Nut Cheerios and chocolate milk. Then he got up, politely washed the bowl and spoon, said thank you to Marcel, and the two went back to his classroom. You see situations like this all the time at Harper, situations that could so easily unravel.

And without thinking anything of it, they get addressed because someone is there and makes the effort to figure out what's going on. It's stuff that'll never show up in a school budget. But it can be the difference between a kid going back to class or getting suspended.

Leonetta Sanders: Kids, you know, you can't tell kids when not to have a good day. Like, you can't have a good day on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because I'm not going to be there. You can only have bad days on Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Ben Calhoun: This is exactly what Principal Sanders is worried about next year when the turnaround money goes away: the people she'll have to give up. Marcel's position is funded through next year. But he's exactly the kind of person who there won't be money for. Assistant Principal Chad Adams, the school psychologist, numerous teaching positions – not currently funded for next year. The social workers who you've heard working with Thomas and Devonte – there's Crystal, and there's Anita – next year, Anita will go away. And Crystal will only be part time.

Altogether, Harper expects to lose at least a dozen people, about a tenth of the current staff. Two of the security staff who have seen Harper go through overhauls in the past say it always changes when the money is added. But then everything goes backwards once it's lost. There's more fights. The violence gets worse.

Leonetta Sanders: You know, I mean, there's not much we can do. \$1.6 million is a lot of money to lose. Every day, I wish I could win the lottery and just pay people out of my pocket.

Ben Calhoun: When Sanders first said that, it was a joke, not much to it. Except for what Ms. Sanders said then. She told me she does find herself thinking about what she would do if she won the lottery. And a lot of that money, she'd put it into the school.

Leonetta Sanders: I would hook Harper up. And everybody would be sitting back like, *Daaaang*.

Ben Calhoun: And then she laid out her plan.

Leonetta Sanders: And I would say, yeah, I mean, they would have the state of the art labs. Every student would have access to a computer. Any of the capital resources, human resources, that we needed, they would have.

Ben Calhoun: Sanders kept going like this for 4 minutes and 38 seconds. With her imaginary millions, she bought big things, like vacant land near the school. She rehabbed houses where students who are homeless would have a place to stay. She created transportation programs to get kids to and from school safely.

She did little things. She took a kid who came to school in a hoodie in the middle of winter, and she bought him a coat. She bought detergent for kids who didn't have soap to wash their uniforms. She spent, and she spent. Ten years, she said. She'd structure it out so that the money would be spread out over ten years.

Leonetta Sanders: So things like that, if I was to win money...it's such a need here. It's just such a need here.

Ben Calhoun: How often do you find yourself budgeting out that imaginary money, that if you had it?

Leonetta Sanders: I do it a lot. (*laughs*) I do it because every time, it's like a different situation. And I just sit back and say *What if? God, what if?*

Part II, Act Six: We Are Harper High School

Marcel Smith: All right, be safe.

Ira Glass: Last day of the semester. This is the day that we ended our reporting at Harper. Marcel Smith is saying goodbye to kids who are on their way home.

I saw that somebody tweeted after our first episode about Harper High School was broadcast. Somebody said that we found the most violent school in America or in Chicago or something. And I just want to say: That is not true. Nobody keeps statistics like that. We just found a high school – a high school that's seen a lot of shootings. And there are others.

Liz Dozier: Hi, I'm Liz Dozier, the Principal of Fenger High School on the far South Side of Chicago. We've lost nine students to violence in the last little over three years.

Shontae Higginbottom: I am Shontae Higginbottom. And I'm the new principal here at King College Prep High School here in Chicago. And this year, I've had two students who were shot during our Christmas break. And then we had the last case with Hadiya Pendleton. And she died.

John Lynch: My name is John Lynch. I'm the Principal of Castlemont High School in Oakland, California. So I've been at Castlemont High School for the past two and a half years. And in the time that I've been here, six students have been shot. And two of those students who were shot were actually killed.

Bertie Simmons: I am Bertie Simmons. And I am the Principal of Furr High School. And it's located on the Far East Side of Houston, Texas. In the last two years, I could name five students that were shot and killed.

Rahel Wondwossen: My name is Rahel Wondwossen. And I am the Principal of Cohen College Prep High School. We are located in Central City, New Orleans. At Cohen College Prep High School last year, we had two students who were shot. Both, thankfully, survived. And in the city of New Orleans, we had more than 10 students who were shot and killed.

Laquanda Jackson: My name is LaQuanda Jackson. I'm the Principal of Simon Gratz Mastery Charter High School in Philadelphia. This year, we have lost one student to gun violence. Last year, we lost two students to gun violence. And the year before, there were six.

Alberto Carvalho: My name is Alberto Carvalho. I am the Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools right here in Florida. Over the past four and a half years, I have buried or attended viewings for 44 children who have died violent deaths right here in our community.