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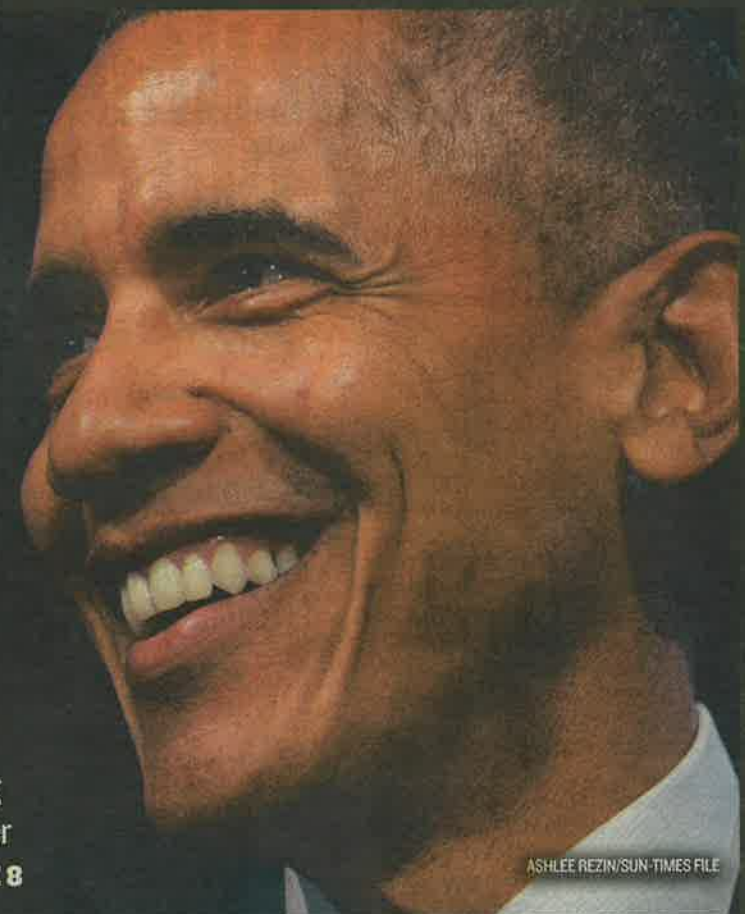


45° 40° COMMERCIAL



DIVIDED HIGHWAYS

State Rep. La Shawn Ford announces plan to name long stretch of I-55 the Barack Obama Expressway while other lawmakers vie to rename I-294 for former president **PAGE 8**



ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES FILE

A SEASON UNDER THE GUN



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SPECIAL REPORT



THIRD OF FIVE PARTS BY RICK TELANDER



Orr's Emanuel O'Neal looks for an open teammate during a game Feb. 15 at Curie. ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES

FIRST THERE'S GUNFIRE, THEN THERE'S TIPOFF

"Well, my second friend went down/When I was twenty-one years of age"
— "Born in Chicago" by Nick Gravenites

About eight hours before Orr's first game of the season, a 64-61 win over a Georgia high school team at the UIC Pavilion, a young man was shot and killed on the West Side, about a mile from Orr. The victim wasn't named in early news reports, only that he and a female cousin were shot by someone firing from inside a silver vehicle on West Warren Boulevard.

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

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

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



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

I am left thinking about Raby. Like a number of new schools in Chicago, Raby isn't a name that leaps to mind. The crazy world of charter schools creates part of the confusion. Indeed, as the money-

strapped Chicago Public Schools system has "undertaken a process to close, co-locate and consolidate schools," as official documents put it, pop-up schools have appeared in odd places, sometimes taking over ancient school buildings that were vacant. In fact, Orr itself — which once had twice as many students as it has now — shares its vast building with a KIPP Charter School for elementary students.

Raby is on West Fulton Street in the old building that once housed Lucy Flower Vocational, which closed in 2003. None of this would matter much, I suppose, except

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that charter schools often siphon off the best students from Chicago's public schools, sometimes through blatant recruitment, which can leave diminishing schools like Orr left to take charter schools' rejects and castoffs.

"We have to take everybody," Orr principal Shanele Andrews said. "They don't have to take anybody."

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

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

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

Andrews recently had a senior come to her and tell her he didn't want to graduate, that he was afraid. I asked, afraid of what?

"Afraid he'll be thrown out of the house," Andrews said. "At 18, you're on your own."

Students will purposely fail classes so they can stay at Orr, so fearful of the primal world outside.

"They have lots of coping mechanisms," Andrews said. "We have homeless kids, kids from group homes. It's a tough time to be a teenager."

Sports, indeed, are probably the easiest and best way to make it through adolescence in a deeply troubled world. The guys on the Orr basketball team put up with a lot just to be part of the joy of the game.

It strikes me later that the one time I had heard of nearby Raby, in business only since 2005, was a few years ago when the cheerleading coach was stabbed by a 16-year-old female student while breaking up a fight among girls outside the school.

Sports, indeed, are probably the easiest and best way to make it through adolescence in a deeply troubled world. The guys on the Orr basketball team put up with a lot of running, a lot of getting yelled at, a lot of hardship (nobody has a car, and taking public transportation can be very dangerous) just to be part of the joy of the game.

One of the players, Emanuel O'Neal, a long-armed, extremely skinny swingman who made two critical free throws against the Georgia team, is missing from



Orr's Brian Hernandez gets in position for a rebound against Westinghouse on Jan. 11. | ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES

practice today. It's Christmas break, and Orr is now 4-1, its lone loss being a one-point heartbreaker against Young.

"Emanuel hasn't been here all week," Adams said.

Problems?

"Yeah," Adams said, offering no more.

Dannie Smith will miss a practice. Others will, too. So will senior and quiet team leader

Alex Flute. The guard, who went to St. Joseph in Westchester as an underclassman, stays so far away — an hour and 45 minutes by bus and train, he estimates — that getting to practice when school is out, or any time, for that matter, is not easy.

Players miss practice when their mothers are sick, when they have to take care of siblings, when ... who knows? Terrible things happen all the time on the West Side.

Indeed, Flute said he's worried about Emanuel, who lives in a very bad area near the Eisenhower Expressway, aka the "Heroin Highway." The concrete trench cuts through the West Side like a cement gouge through a swamp, funneling in drugs and customers from the suburbs and all over the country.

"He has so much talent," Flute



Orr's Raekwon Drake dunks during a game Feb. 15 at Curie. | ASHLEE REZIN/SUN-TIMES

MORE ONLINE

• To read Parts 1 and 2, go to chicago.suntimes.com.

said of O'Neal. "He could be so good."

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

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

He recovered from the wounds and was

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

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

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

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

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

"That was two days ago," he said proudly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coming Friday: Day 4. Amid violence, a hope basketball leads to better things.



Ed Brown, during his childhood at Garfield Park boxing gym. COURTESY OF GARFIELD PARK BOXING GYM