

## INTRODUCTION

*By Miles Harvey*

This book began with a brutal murder, a viral video and a cup of coffee.

The murder took place on Sept. 24, 2009, in the Roseland neighborhood on Chicago's Far South Side. On that Thursday afternoon, a fight broke out between two groups of students from the nearby public high school, Christian Fenger Academy High School. There had been a shooting outside the school earlier in the day, and now tensions exploded into a wild melee near a local community center. Acting "out of impulse," as one of the participants later put it, about 50 young people swarmed toward each other, a few of them wielding huge pieces of lumber as weapons.

Somebody slammed one of those boards into the skull of a 16-year-old named Derrion Albert; somebody else punched the honor student in the face; somebody else swung another board down on him like an ax; somebody else stomped on his head and left him to die; somebody else shot a video, laughing while he filmed. And when that video went viral on the Internet, it caused a national uproar. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described the killing as "terrifying, heartbreaking and tragic," while Attorney General Eric Holder, who traveled to Chicago with Duncan shortly after the incident to call for a "sustained national conversation" on youth violence, claimed the murder had left an "indelible mark" on the American psyche.

I normally don't pay much attention to the platitudes of politicians, but by that time I was beginning to realize that Derrion Albert's death had left an indelible mark on my psyche, too. Chicago is the most racially segregated city in the country,<sup>1</sup> and it's easy for those of us who live here to think of other neighborhoods as distant planets. Before that video, I had pretty much viewed youth violence as someone else's problem. But now I could no longer turn away. I wondered how such carnage could happen in my own city, and then I began to wonder how I could stand around and *let* it happen. But what was one white, middle-aged creative-writing professor supposed to do about it? What was *anybody* supposed to do, for that matter? The problem just seemed too big and scary and complex.

Then one day I happened to have coffee with Hallie Gordon, an old friend. As the artistic and educational director of Steppenwolf for Young Adults, Hallie produces plays aimed at teenage audiences. She spends a lot

of time with young people, and she's passionate about their problems. Like me, she was frustrated and angry about Derrion Albert's death; unlike me, she had a plan. Her dream, she explained, was to produce a documentary theater piece about youth violence in Chicago, a production that would weave together the real stories of real people, told in their own words. The trouble, she said, was that she didn't have anyone to go out and do the interviews. For me, it was one of those *aha!* moments. "What would you think," I asked her, "about the possibility of my students doing those interviews?"

Our plans were modest at first, but things quickly snowballed. Before long, Hallie had not only received the enthusiastic backing of Steppenwolf Artistic Director Martha Lavey, but she had also enlisted the support of other arts and cultural organizations in Chicago. The result was *Now Is The Time*, a citywide initiative aimed at inspiring young people to make positive change in their communities and stop youth violence and intolerance. Partner organizations eventually included the Chicago Public Library, Facing History and Ourselves, and more than 15 of Chicago's finest theater companies.

The administration at DePaul, meanwhile, proved equally enthusiastic, allowing me to set up special courses for both graduates and undergraduates and providing the project with financial and logistical support through the Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning, the Egan Urban Center, the Beck Research Initiative, the Vincentian Endowment Fund and other programs.

Soon my students started coming back with stories—amazing, heart-breaking, brutal, beautiful stories, far more stories than we could fit into a single play. Long before *How Long Will I Cry?: Voices of Youth Violence* premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre on Feb. 26, 2013, we knew we needed to collect as many of those stories as possible in a book.

The interviews for this volume were conducted over the course of two years. While more than 900 Chicagoans were being murdered in 2011 and 2012, creative-writing students from DePaul fanned out all over the city to speak with people whose lives were directly affected by the bloodshed.

Most of the interviews lasted one or two hours, after which students took their audio recorders home and transcribed the entire session word-for-word, a hugely time-consuming task. Whenever possible, the student then went back for a second interview, attempting not just to firm up facts but to

pin down whatever it was that made the participant tick, even if it was hard for that person to articulate.

Often, these second interviews produced remarkable results. Young people who had denied gang involvement in the first interview, for example, opened up about their lives on the streets—and about their anxieties. Parents of victims began to talk more frankly about their murdered children. Community activists and public officials set aside their well-rehearsed talking points and spoke from their hearts.

Once the interviews were complete, students began shaping the raw transcripts into narratives for this book—a process that the legendary oral historian Studs Terkel once likened to “the way a sculptor looks at a block of stone: inside there’s a shape which he’ll find, and he’ll reveal it by chipping away with a mallet and a chisel.”

In our case, it wasn’t just one sculptor at work, but a team of artisans. All the narratives in this book have gone through several rounds of careful revision and editing by graduate students—a gifted group that included Lisa Applegate, Bethany Brownholtz, Rachel Hauben Combs, Stephanie Gladney Queen, Molly Pim and the members of Professor Chris Green’s editing course. Our goal was always the same—to make every piece as coherent and compact as possible, without losing the poetry of the speaker’s voice.

One of the trickiest issues we struggled with was dialect. It was true, for example, that some of the African-Americans we interviewed said “ax” instead of “ask.” But it was equally true that white interviewees, with their nasal Chicago accents, often pronounced the same word “ee-yask.” And if we used a phonetic spelling of one ethnic group’s pronunciation of a word, shouldn’t we do the same for all groups? Linguists, after all, insist that *everyone* speaks with a dialect. Keeping this in mind, I urged my students to steer clear of nonstandard spelling and try instead to capture the cadences, speech patterns, inflections and slang of their subjects. Nonetheless, we found that some words and phrases sounded too formal in standard English, while others simply got lost in translation. The terms “finna” and “fitta,” for example, no doubt derive from “fixing to,” but they now have taken on linguistic lives of their own. In the end, we decided to use dialect on a case-by-case basis, but only sparingly and always with the dignity of the speaker in mind.

Once the narratives were close to completion, we sent them to the respective interviewees for fact-checking and review. I confess that this part of our plan did not sit well with me in the beginning. Years of training and

experience as a journalist had taught me that allowing a source to see a story in advance was questionable on an ethical level and often unwise on a practical one. But the students convinced me that we had a special obligation to the people who had opened their lives and hearts to us. If we were planning to present these narratives as *their* stories, told in *their* words, didn't they deserve to have creative control over the material?

It took weeks—and in some cases, months—to track down all the people whose stories appear on these pages. Nonetheless, this book is deeper and richer as a result of that final round of give-and-take with participants, many of whom supplied vivid new details that helped make the material come alive on the page. And it's a tribute to their courage and honesty that relatively few of them ended up asking to remove, alter or otherwise sanitize things they had said, no matter how sensitive or controversial.

This book contains crude language and graphic descriptions of violence—the result of our decision not to censor the narratives. There was only one exception to this rule: protecting the safety of our subjects. Toward that end, we have changed the names of several people who risk retaliation under “no snitch” codes or might otherwise be endangered by identifying themselves. In a couple of cases, other minor details have also been fudged to protect the security of certain participants. As with all of the narratives in *How Long Will I Cry?*, however, their stories remain faithful to the speakers' words and have been verified to the best of our abilities.

The title of this book (and the theater piece) comes from a conversation I had with the Rev. Corey Brooks, a South Side pastor who, in the winter of 2011 and 2012, spent 94 days camped out on the roof of an abandoned motel to draw attention to gun violence. When I asked Brooks what Bible story had been his biggest inspiration during the vigil, he pointed to the Book of Habakkuk from the Old Testament. Set in an age of bloodshed and injustice, Habakkuk tells the story of a prophet who goes up to a watchtower. There, the prophet speaks to God:

*O Lord, how long will I cry, and you will not hear? I cry out to you “Violence!” and will you not save?*<sup>2</sup>

Those words were written about events that transpired in 600 B.C.—but when I read them in 2012, I was struck by how they spoke to the frustration and rage that so many Chicagoans feel about the slaughter on our streets today—the same frustration and rage that had prompted Hallie Gordon

and me to undertake this effort in the first place. I was also struck by how that passage touched upon the two goals Hallie and I had envisioned for this project from the start.

This book embodies both definitions of the word *cry*. On the one hand, it is intended as an expression of grief, a means of mourning the hundreds of young Chicagoans whose lives are lost every year. On the other, it is meant to be a howl of protest, a call to action, a cry for peace. But more than anything else, it is an effort to *hear*. When we began this project, I told my students that we live in a world where everybody's talking—blogging, texting, tweeting, Friending, shouting each other down—but nobody's really listening. So that was their assignment: just go out and listen.

No book, of course, will stop the violence. But I believe in the transformative power of telling stories. I believe that stories connect us with other people and open us to new worlds, that they help us discover ourselves and show us ways to change, that they have the power to heal. And I believe this, too—that stories can save lives.

The people in this book regularly find themselves in difficult and dangerous situations, the kind where one choice seems worse than the next. What's amazing is how often they respond with grace, resourcefulness and bravery. My hope is that *How Long Will I Cry?* might inspire readers to act with similar courage. For young people in violent neighborhoods, that may mean the courage not to give in to the perverse logic of gangs, not to reach for a gun, not to lose sight of your own humanity and potential. For the rest of us, those lucky enough to live in places where our children don't have to risk their lives every time they step out the door, it means the courage not to turn away. These stories belong to us all.

#### ENDNOTES

1 These results are from a January 2012 census data study conducted by the Manhattan Institute. See Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor, "The End of the Segregated Century," *Civic Report*, No. 66. [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_66.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_66.htm)

2 This version of Habakkuk 1:2 is from the World Bible translation, with one minor change. I have substituted "O Lord" for "Yahweh," as is often done in other translations.