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CHAPTER 8

Hope, Intervention, and Tragedy

MY TIME WITH SHAWN, Layboy, and other members of the DFW Boyz often led me to ponder their immediate safety and future prospects. Although I recognized the seriousness of their actions and knew that, according to research, they were at high risk for either violent victimization or felony arrest, my concerns were often suppressed by their illusion of control and the assumed invincibility of youth. The boys constantly expressed the belief that they were untouchable in the streets of Indianapolis, and that confidence proved to be somewhat contagious. In retrospect, I should have been more concerned. The depth and duration of their commitment to both the gang's collective identity and the appraisals of the broader intergang environment were a potentially fatal combination, yet I was often more worried about their ability to assimilate into conventional society as they matured and, I hoped, grew weary of gang life.

My hope for change in the boys' lives was not unreasonable, despite the array of challenges they faced. Gang membership typically does not signify an unbreakable contractual agreement with the gang; most youths only temporarily participate in gang life. For example, one study in Rochester, New York, found that most youths join a gang for less than one year (Thornberry et al. 2003). Unfortunately, core members of the DFW Boyz who were featured in this book were fully invested in gang life. They considered themselves gang members long before I entered the research field, and two years later they were still actively representing the DFW Boyz in the streets of Indianapolis. That degree of commitment to gang life presents an especially difficult challenge for policy makers, civil servants, and ordinary citizens seeking to address the gang problem in their respective communities. A mere eighteen months of field research cannot satisfactorily account for the inevitable changes

that occur in the lives of gang members. Investment in the gang and, by extension, the intergang environment, is in constant flux. Still, my time with the DFW Boyz revealed some fundamental dilemmas relating to change and the prospects of intervening in gang members' lives. There is hope for intervention, but the challenges remain significant.

In this chapter I explore some of the dilemmas of intervention and change. My intention is not to fully develop a comprehensive gang control program but rather to acknowledge the complexity of change in active gang members' lives. Gang members negotiate the prospects of change while still invested in the appraisals of the intergang environment. Even within the small network of the DFW Boyz, this negotiation varied greatly. Some of the boys expressed very little desire to get a job or to finish school, while others appeared quite motivated to do so. Such motivation was accompanied by a degree of ambivalence, however, as they had to choose between, or try to balance, two attractive yet competing social worlds. For anyone seeking to intervene in gang members' lives, understanding this ambivalence is essential, since gang members must negotiate that ambivalence if they are to desist from gang life. Unfortunately, the prospects of change do not protect gang members from the consequences of their behavior.

A CAMPUS TRIP AND DILEMMAS OF INTERVENTION

Researchers generally agree that any serious attempt to address the gang problem should include a concerted effort to make conventional avenues for success more accessible to gang members.¹ Active gang members need a realistic alternative to gang life, but providing them with such an alternative is not always easy. They often lack the education, training, or cultural acumen to transition smoothly into a well-paying job, if one is even available (see Fleisher 1998). Many gang control programs, therefore, use job training, job placement, or educational programs to help members find non-gang alternatives (see Spergel and Grossman 1997; Spergel, Wa, and Sosa 2005).² When combined with systematic efforts by police to suppress gang activity, some of these programs have demonstrated a remarkable ability to reduce violence (see Kennedy, Braga, and Piehl 2001), but less is known about their capability to transform gang members' lives. Given my close relationships with

Layboy, Shawn, and other gang members, I considered the challenges of intervention to be vitally important.

Sacrificing the ethic that a researcher should not disrupt the research setting, I made consistent efforts to give Layboy, Shawn, and other gang members access to conventional outlets for success. As noted earlier, I helped them fill out countless job applications. I also occasionally drove them across the city so that they would not miss summer school classes. These efforts produced frustration, but they also led to insights regarding the challenges that confronted the boys. They were unable to find jobs, and when I was not around they often could not or would not find transportation to summer school, so they dropped out. My time with the boys led to more questions about intervention than actual solutions. Most notably, while I recognized that access and opportunity were part of the solution, the boys might not have ignored the power of their peer environment for a good job or even a college education. When given a reasonable opportunity to pursue other, more conventional endeavors, how would they negotiate two divergent worlds?

In early July of 2008, I was again in my car with Shawn, Layboy, and their cousin TJ. Instead of driving around the city in search of food, jobs, or other DFW Boyz, we were making the one-and-a-quarter-hour trip to Bloomington so they could witness the university setting. I had first gotten the idea for the trip more than one year before, when I invited Sidney, the OG who was my first reliable contact, to speak to one of my classes. It was the first time Sidney had stepped into a college classroom. Afterward, as we walked through campus, he looked around at the buildings, the well-manicured lawns, and the abundance of blooming spring flowers, and simply said, "Tim, if I had only known this was here." The statement effectively communicated an awareness of the opportunities he lost while running the streets at an early age. His father died of natural causes when he was young, which forced his mother to raise eight children on her own. Soon after his father's death, Sidney's family moved from a large home on the near-north side of Indianapolis to a low-income apartment complex along Thirty-eighth Street. Sidney quickly embraced street life and spent much of his adult life in prison. If he had fully understood the possibilities of college life, perhaps Sidney would have focused his energies on pursuing an education. Perhaps the allure of the streets was too strong, and he would have rejected such a

conventional institution. In his mid-forties, he could only ponder life's elusive possibilities.

Throughout the course of my research, Sidney insisted that seeing a college campus would dramatically alter the perspective of a gang member. He continually argued that gang members were just misguided youths in need of direction. Although I thought he underestimated the violent capabilities of Indianapolis youth, his reaction to seeing a college campus convinced me that it might have a similar effect on Layboy, Shawn, and TJ. When compared to other gang members in this study and other studies (see Fleisher 1998; Decker and Van Winkle 1996), the boys were actually in a relatively good position to succeed. Even though they had been expelled from multiple Indianapolis high schools and were behind on their credits, all three were still in school. Shawn, who was entering his senior year of high school, had mentioned a vague interest in going to community college. Although he probably lacked some essential skills for college, he was taking college prep courses in school and seemed to be competent in upper-level algebra classes. I did not doubt Shawn's intelligence. Over time, I grew to believe that Shawn would become a high-achieving leader in whatever he pursued. His leadership ability was already evident, as younger and older peers gravitated to him and were willing to follow him. I only questioned the direction of his pursuits. Would he succeed in the streets, or through more legitimate avenues?

Layboy and TJ were also capable, though probably less talented, but they did not express much of an interest in their long-term future. Perhaps this lack of interest was caused by their inability to anticipate the important transition from high school to adult life, making it easier to remain content in their youthful obsessions. In addition to violent victimization and being arrested for criminal activities, one of the insidious consequences of gang membership is that it tends to disrupt the developmental trajectory of adolescent members (Thornberry et al. 2003). Troubled youths join gangs in response to chaotic life conditions, only to enter a group and intergroup environment that undermines their development. For example, a gang member's need to establish a tough reputation in school supersedes his or her concerns for school performance. Too many youths abandon conventional avenues for success to pursue the illusion of promise offered by gang life. Most gang members

eventually become disillusioned with this promise, but upon leaving gang life, they are confronted with the reality that they have squandered important developmental years on the streets. To obtain good jobs, they need an education, which they ignored when they were in the gang, but to get an education, they need a job that is both flexible enough to negotiate the time commitments of school and lucrative enough to cover both living and schooling expenses. A GED may be sufficient to find menial work, but additional education or training is needed to find stable employment. The longer they stay in the gang the more difficult these educational goals are to attain.

The streets are full of older, inactive gang members living day to day by working in menial jobs. Some former gang members are lucky to find moderately well-paying construction or labor-intensive jobs that are not guaranteed over the long term. Others find work in the margins of the non-illicit underground economy that is pervasive in urban areas (Venkatesh 2006). Sidney, for example, had seemingly worked in every type of labor-intensive job available to him. He dug trenches for plumbers, shingled roofs, refurbished cars, hustled for day-to-day carpentry/construction work, and worked as an unlicensed electrician/repairman. He claimed to be too old to risk the dangers of digging trenches and shingling steep roofs, and he continuously searched for safer jobs that required some skill. Although he was capable of doing skilled labor, his aspirations placed him in competition with people who were properly licensed and had not gotten their only formal education from Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. Recognizing that such work was unlikely, he constantly came up with new ideas to tap into the underground economy. He frequently mentioned to me that \$25,000 would change his life, as it would let him start a landscaping business or allow him to buy and remodel abandoned homes. Although there was nothing inherently wrong with Sidney's struggle, it did produce overwhelming frustrations in his life, and it created persistent temptations to regress into criminal activity. Sidney was not alone. Throughout Indianapolis, and in other cities, middle-aged adults, young adults, and older teenagers become disillusioned with gang life or the streets in general and desperately try to regain what they lost or acquire what they never had. The developmental years wasted in gang life are essential for establishing a lifetime of stability, and many former gang members struggle after leaving their gangs.

Although their school performance was likely substandard, the fact that Shawn, Layboy, and TJ could reasonably expect to obtain their high school diplomas and at least attend a community college placed them at an advantage over some of their peers.³ Some of the gang members in this study had dropped out of school, while others were substantially underprepared in their formal education. I once helped a teenage gang member with his math homework and quickly realized that he could not learn the algebraic order of operations because he lacked a basic understanding of multiplication.

Layboy, Shawn, and TJ demonstrated an ability to transition seamlessly from the social context of the streets into one where conventional behaviors were expected. I could take them to restaurants and not have to worry about severely loud speech or vulgar language. When applying for jobs, they generally knew how to act in front of prospective employers. On one occasion, Shawn applied for job at a sports store in a mall on the outer edges of the city. The manager was present and interviewed Shawn for a job. Shawn was dressed normally for a seventeen-year-old from Indianapolis and spoke intelligently about his aspirations and previous work experience. His gang tattoos were clearly visible, however, which probably required the prospective employer to deal with an apparent contrast between two different forms of communication. Ultimately, Shawn did not get the job; the tattoos were presumably enough to deter the employer. Still, it demonstrated that Shawn could behave in a manner that was consistent with the expectations of employers and college admissions staff.

Although the boys were heavily invested in gang life and capable of engaging in severe violent activities, I remained hopeful that their long-term prospects did not have to parallel Sidney's experience. They might see the opportunities provided by a university, largely isolated from the concerns of the street, that could alter their perception of life's possibilities. In effect, I hoped that in twenty-five years they would not be saying, "If only I had known." Their prospects of actually attending a university were unknown. I thought they might attend a local community college and perhaps transfer to a four-year school. My agenda for the Bloomington trip was merely to expose them to a world quite different from their own and convince them that such a place was not unreachable.

The university or college setting is a unique social environment that provides an attractive alternative to the intergang environment. To some extent, the recreational activities of university students are not dramatically different from the activities enjoyed by gang members. Both groups party, play sports, hang out late into the night, play video games, and pursue sexual relationships. In fact, some college students probably pursue these activities more vigorously than Shawn, Layboy, and TJ. Therefore, the boys would naturally be drawn to the endless activities available on campus. More importantly, the pressures of the intergang environment would be largely absent on a college campus. Few, if any, of their peers would be immersed in a social system that reinforced the legitimizing power of violent behavior. Most college students would probably avoid self-defined gang members or view gang members as novelty acts on campus. Indeed, college would be accompanied by sudden immersion into a social system quite different from the intergang environment. How would the boys adapt to a social environment that was generally apathetic or wary of gang affiliation? Would this new environment eliminate or reduce the boys' need to endlessly build and maintain a violent reputation, or would the boys enter a new environment seeking to establish a campuswide reputation for toughness? To me, either option seemed possible.

The first place the boys wanted to see was the basketball arena, and we were lucky that the gym floor was accessible. While we stood on the edge of the court and the boys stared at the more than 17,000 empty seats above them, two basketball players were shooting free throws nearby. Layboy, Shawn, and TJ were less impressed by the players than they were by the size of the arena. They had been to professional games with a community organization, but they had never been on the court. They fantasized about the prospects of playing in the gym and talked excitedly about what that experience would be like. I told them about the relatively affordable student season tickets and the excitement of each game. We lingered for about twenty minutes without any disturbances, before they were ready to move on and see the rest of campus. The rest of the tour resembled those moments on the basketball court, though without some of the excitement. They walked through the campus, impressed with the physical surroundings, but they were more intrigued with college life. Like many teenagers, they talked mostly about college

girls, parties, playing sports on the fields or basketball courts, working out in the weight room, and eating at some of the food vendors. They were not particularly interested in the library or other academic facilities, but they found the size of some lecture halls intriguing.

As we ate lunch in the student union, they began to ask me more serious questions about the life of a college student. Although I could not comment on the nonacademic life at the school, I could inform them about the academics. This conversation involved a number of basic points. First, students had more freedom in college than they did in high school. The amount of time they spent in class each week was much less than in high school, and the professors would not force the boys to do their work. In this sense, college students were given more autonomy than their high school counterparts. The boys approved of this freedom. Second, I warned them that, with more freedom, they had to be more disciplined than they were in high school. The biggest problem I saw with college students was not lack of intelligence but lack of discipline. To succeed, they had to read, study, and turn in work without prompting. The boys, especially Shawn, seemed to think this was not a big deal. Finally, I told them that the transition from their current academic situation to college would be difficult, and they might be behind some of the other students. This, I said, was not a byproduct of their intelligence but caused by their current inattentiveness to school.⁴ They had the ability to succeed, but they would have to work hard to catch up to their peers. They did not seem as excited by those comments.

I had arranged for the boys to meet with a financial aid representative after lunch, but as we passed some time, I asked them what they thought about the university. Layboy and TJ did not have much to say besides superficial comments about the campus and college girls. Shawn, however, said, "I could get used to this. It's quiet down here." For some reason his comments surprised me and reminded me that while life on the streets of Indianapolis often appeared mundane, the threat and prevalence of violence produced a sense of chaos in boy's lives. No campus is perfect, but in Bloomington Shawn would have been free from both the pressures of the intergang environment and the drama that accompanied gang conflicts. He would not have had to worry about episodic violence and the prospects of retaliation. He would not have had to worry about environmental pressures to maintain his reputation. He would not have

had to deal with the daily tedium of street life, as there were more than enough recreational options on campus. He would also have been eligible for a campus job, or he might have been able to find one off-campus. Given our failed attempts to find him a job in Indianapolis, this was an important realization. Undoubtedly, he could have found ways to get in trouble, but life as a college student would have been relatively quiet. Perhaps exposure to another world would have been enough to motivate Shawn to desist from gang life.

Despite this, I realized that the expense of college would likely cause practical problems if the boys had actually wanted to attend. A more realistic path would have first involved two years of community college. When we met with the financial aid officer, this assumption changed dramatically. The boys had signed up for Indiana's Twenty-first Century Scholars program in middle school. Essentially, the program provides all students below a certain income level the opportunity to attend a public college in the state with full financial assistance. The only requirements for this scholarship were that one had to sign up for the program in middle school, maintain a 2.0 GPA, and make a pledge of good citizenship. Thus they could have attended any number of colleges in Indiana for free if they met both these requirements and the school's standards for admission (for more information see Indiana.gov). I was surprised to learn about this opportunity and naturally concerned about some of the requirements. The boys had been arrested multiple times, but they had never been convicted.

Shawn would have likely benefited from the opportunity to attend college and immerse himself in a social environment that was largely detached from the intergang environment. But thousands of teenagers enter college every year, and it would be naïve to suggest that these students and their parents would not have justifiable concerns about the presence of Shawn on a college campus. Moreover, college administrators and professors might reasonably be uncomfortable with Shawn in their dormitories and classrooms. After all, he had repeatedly demonstrated a willingness and ability to engage in excessively violent behavior. How much of that behavior was directly produced by his social environment, and how much of that behavior had become internalized and would translate to other social settings? He was immersed in a social system that emphasized violence, but through conversations and actions

he also reinforced the use of violence. To what extent would he change in a new environment? Would he compartmentalize his gang identity to the streets of Indianapolis and conform to the college campus? Was his role as a gang member such a dominant and unwavering part of his personal identity that he would not dramatically change in a new social setting? Perhaps the more difficult question should be directed at decision makers who can help change gang members' lives. How much are you willing to risk by providing an opportunity to someone who desperately needs assistance?

Unfortunately, the answers to these questions cannot be found in this study or others. Gang scholarship as a whole lacks sufficient micro-level theory to explain gang member behavior. Thus, we do not understand important differences between gang members, nor do we understand the psychological effects of gang membership. Many scholars argue that gangs arise out of adverse socioeconomic conditions, but researchers do not understand how gang membership influences an individual's decision when he or she is given the opportunity to attend college. This study suggests that intervention is not just about exposure, opportunity, and assistance; it also involves complex issues of identity. The gang member embraces a violent identity and negotiates an environment that both reinforces and questions his or her commitment to that identity. The challenge is in explaining variation in commitment to the gang identity and understanding members' capacity to develop alternative identities.⁵

As we left campus, I began to think about the ramifications of Shawn's attending college. Layboy interrupted my thoughts by saying, "Where do you live? Can we see your house?" Given their willingness to open their lives to me, I thought it would send a poor message to the boys if I denied their curiosity. Therefore, I drove the short distance to my house and pulled into my driveway. My 1,350-square-foot house was something of a disappointment to the boys, who seemed to expect something more substantial. They looked around the neighborhood at the other modest houses, which differed primarily in upkeep from the houses along East Thirty-eighth Street. Layboy asked me why I did not lock my car here, when I often did in Indianapolis. It was a good observation for which I did not have a good response. I took them through the house and, again, they did not seem impressed. My pregnant

wife and nine-month-old daughter were home, and the boys awkwardly talked to my wife while I held the baby. As I write this, I am reminded that most of the DFW Boyz I met in the course of my research currently have young children.

The significance of this scene was not that it foreshadowed events in the boy's lives, but that I was quite comfortable bringing violent gang members into my home to meet the two people I hold most dear. In retrospect, this decision was not misguided or foolish. Layboy, Shawn, and TJ were undoubtedly gang members who were heavily involved in violence and other criminal activities, but they generally seemed like normal teenagers. At a time when some scholars and practitioners like to use the term "super predators" to describe violence-prone youths (Dilulio 1995), the complexity of gang members' characters is largely underappreciated. In one context, they will try to intimidate teachers, rob strangers, harass or assault peers, or even participate in lethal acts of violence. In other situations, they are friendly, honest, courteous, and even hardworking. They are not, as some have suggested, immersed in a negativistic normative system that takes pleasure in the pain of law-abiding citizens (see Cohen 1955). The gang members in this study also did not seem to suffer from a psychological deficiency like low self-control or "psychopathology" (see Fleisher 1995; Yablonsky 1967). Instead, they were immersed in a skeptical social system that routinely demanded proof of legitimacy. As a result, their behavior was largely guided by the need to demonstrate a willingness and ability to engage in violent behavior. Detached from that pressure, gang members were unlikely to offend, and their presence in my home was not particularly concerning.

As I drove back to Indianapolis, Shawn and I discussed the possibility of his going to college. The visit had clearly exposed him to an attractive option, and he was aware of the short- and long-term benefits of college. We also talked about the problems that he might deal with at college. He knew that it would be academically challenging. He understood that he would have to live with peers from dramatically different backgrounds. He seemed to understand that disruptive behavior or criminal activities would not be tolerated in class, on campus, or in the city of Bloomington. Our discussion ended as I made a few brief comments. I told him that at college no one would know who he was, and most students probably would not care who he was. His reputation in

Indianapolis would not matter much at school, and he would be sacrificing status in the streets for the peace and quiet of a college environment. If he went to college talking about Haughville or the DFW Boyz, throwing signs up at parties and trying to intimidate peers, he could be kicked out of school or become a social outcast. From the back seat of my car, he responded with a contemplative tone, "I was thinking about that." He then put his head back and eventually fell asleep for the remainder of the trip.

A FINAL CONVERSATION AND THOUGHTS OF CHANGE

Exposing gang members to an attractive alternative to gang life seems to be an important part of intervening in their lives, but it should also be accompanied by a concerted effort to help them gain access to that alternative. Our trip to Bloomington showed the boys that college was one possible option, but they still needed help getting there. Moreover, the expectation that Shawn, Layboy, and TJ would immediately end their gang activities and focus their lives on pursuing a college education was largely unrealistic. College might have been a turning point, but change would likely have been gradual. If the boys went to college, they would still have had close friends and relatives representing the DFW Boyz. At least for a while they would have continued to define themselves as gang members and remained focused on the evaluations and activities of their peers. They would have continued to participate in street life. Time away from the streets could have decreased their visibility and undermined their ability to establish wide reputations. A new wave of ambitious youths might have taken their place in the streets, while they lived in relative anonymity on a college campus. To most readers the choice between street life and college life seems obvious, but for teenage gang members it is not.

Change was inevitable for Shawn and Layboy, but the direction of that change was difficult to predict. Our trip to Bloomington was only a respite from their daily concerns, and the promise of college was soon displaced by the attractions of street life. Over the next few weeks, Layboy and TJ told me that they had no interest in pursuing their education, but Shawn remained interested. The extent of his interest remained unclear, however, and I regretted my inability to help

develop that attraction further. I passed the information about college to Shawn's aunt and hoped that she would help him pursue the opportunity. Despite Shawn's attraction to college, he still remained heavily invested in gang life. More generally, the boys' attentiveness to the intergang environment caused them to reevaluate their standing in the streets of Indianapolis, and they began to discuss new ideas for organizing the gang.

My last conversation with Shawn and Layboy occurred in late July 2008, as they once again escaped boredom by hanging out with a few other DFW Boyz in Aaron's east-side apartment. The conversation began like many others. The boys talked about recent events in the streets, peers, and the gang. As we talked, Shawn appeared uncharacteristically pensive and contributed very little to the conversation. Something, it seemed, was bothering him. The conversation then shifted, as the boys discussed transforming the gang from a well-known clique into one that would be organized and entrepreneurial. Such a change was not what I had in mind, as it seemed to reflect a growing, long-term commitment to gang life. But as the boys talked, their plans for change seemed motivated by a growing disillusionment about petty street beefs and senseless violence.

I said to the boys, "You mentioned earlier that you just started having guys work for the clique, and if they're not bringing in money there are consequences."

Layboy responded, "Yeah. There's consequences, I tell everybody, I was telling people yesterday, 'By Friday if you ain't known and we don't have money we don't need you.' We don't need you sitting here claiming DFW Boyz. What you claiming for if you ain't put in no work?"

Layboy's statement was largely motivated by a crisis of legitimacy. The DFW Boyz, like most gangs, was not formally organized. There was little evidence of a clear leadership structure, formal role differentiation, rules, or a defined system of internal control. The boys seemed content to rely on their loose but widespread connections. Each member seemed to have an understanding of his informal role in the clique, and each enjoyed not having to follow strict rules. Problems accompanied such informality, however. Without clear standards, membership was open to anyone who became a close associate of some, but not all, members of the DFW Boyz. The gang was growing, but only because it lacked

standards for membership. Too many new additions were joining the gang because it had become popular. Some newer members were not really down for whatever, and they could not establish well-known reputations in the streets of Indianapolis. In a sense, they were wannabes, diluting the potency of the DFW Boyz. Being able to make money insulated a member from the “wannabe” label, and it was an acceptable alternative to being known. However, if the group became too diluted, its position in the intergang environment would be weakened. The gang, as a collective body, could lose legitimacy in the streets of Indianapolis, so the boys tried to address the problem.

“You just started that policy, right?” Admittedly, the word “policy” immediately seemed too formal given the gang’s relative lack of organization.

“Yeah, well it done been like that but we been slippin’ [not enforcing it],” replied Layboy. “Now it’s to the point where niggas out here need money, and there’s a lot of money to get. So we like might as well try to get money, stack up on the low, and by next summer we going to be out there. All of us going to be rolling in cars. We ain’t trying to be on that beef stuff right now, trying to get money. About to change our whole swag [approach/appearance] up.”

His newfound focus on money surprised me, as did his statement about ending their street beefs. I asked, “What changed? Before, you were talking about beefs and you haven’t talked much about money.”

Layboy answered my question, “Yeah, we about to change that. We about to change all that beef stuff. We about to change all that up.”

“Squash [end] that shit,” added Shawn. This was the first time he had talked for a while.

“We about to squash everything with everybody, about to start getting money,” clarified Layboy. “We ain’t going to be no clique no more. People still going to know who we are, but we ain’t going to go around saying ‘DFW Boyz.’ We going to get money, stacking our chips up, getting bread, getting out here. Everybody going to have jobs, ’cause we ain’t going to be dumb. Everybody going to be in school, everybody going to have jobs. Do what you do. We trying to get it the positive way and still be out here. Like people get caught out here selling weed, we trying to do it the positive way, getting money. Have our own house or

whatever. You can still sell weed or whatever, but at least have a job so the police stop you [and ask] 'Where you get this money from?'"

This statement surprised me even more. This was the first time I had heard any member of the DFW Boyz express some disillusionment with any aspect of gang life. Their need to change was apparent, but the direction of that change was not. Layboy seemed confused. Money was an important part of his plan, but he was not clearly articulating whether or not the group would pursue money through legal or illegal channels. Gangs can evolve. Although it is rare, some gangs are able to develop into highly sophisticated, well-organized entrepreneurial street organizations (see Venkatesh 1998; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000). At this point, such a transition seemed unlikely for the DFW Boyz. They were, after all, just a loose collection of teenagers who did not understand how to organize or operate an illicit underground enterprise. The idea of owning a house was undoubtedly attractive, but it seemed unrealistic. Layboy's focus on doing things in what he called the positive way was somewhat vague and seemingly inconsistent with prior conversations. Was he implying that the DFW Boyz should quit participating in illicit street activities? I was not sure what Layboy was referring to or why he suddenly wanted to change.

"Yeah, but two weeks ago you weren't talking money, you were talking cliques and fights. What changed in the last two weeks?"

Layboy insightfully and somewhat expectedly, responded, "Ain't nothing change. The other day I was thinking like what we doing this for? It's not necessary. Beefing, it's going to end up getting somebody killed. Then it's going to be somebody else. Then it's going to be a big disaster. 'Cause I know if somebody kill one of my niggas it ain't going to ever stop. It ain't going to ever stop. So I'm saying we going to start doing it, trying to get it the positive way."

"You look like you have something to say," I said to Shawn, who still looked bothered by something.

"It ain't all about the positive," replied Shawn. "Shit, if you get stopped and you got three thousand dollars in your pocket, and they ask you how you get it. What you going to say? They look at your history, and you ain't never had a job. The job ain't nothing but a cover-up."

Shawn had brought this point up before. Anyone trying to make money on the streets also needed to have a legitimate job, which

provided a reasonable excuse for having money. I often thought of this while I helped them try to find jobs. Was I helping them access legitimate avenues for success, or just helping them cover up their illicit activities? Shawn had also talked about how pursuing a college education could be used to help the gang. Would he use college to improve his criminal exploits? Perhaps, but he seemed more like a seventeen-year-old who was attracted to college life yet still committed to the gang. Only time would tell how he negotiated that ambivalence.

“So where do you go from here?”

Shawn replied, “Basically we about to get more organized. Have a couple of meetings, and then have these niggas from the far-east control the far-east niggas. The niggas from the west side control the west-side niggas. Then we going to take over the south and the north. ‘Cause when we was at the Expo we got into it with some far-east side niggas, some of our niggas from the far east side . . .”

Layboy interrupted, “They ain’t doing it.”

The Expo refers to the Indiana Black Expo Summer Celebration. Every summer Indiana Black Expo Inc. organizes a ten-day summer celebration in downtown Indianapolis. The Expo’s general mission is to advance the economic and social development of African Americans (see Indiana Black Expo, Inc. 2010). The summer celebration offers various business conferences, job fairs, entrepreneurship seminars, and sporting and music events. During the weekend of the celebration, downtown Indianapolis is full of teenagers and young adults. Generally this is a time of uneventful social interaction, but gang members do make up a small percentage of the people in the downtown area. With ample opportunities to interact with other gangs, conflicts invariably occur. In 2010, for example, nine people were shot when a gang member started shooting in a crowded area. Members of the DFW Boyz were not immune to the occasional hostile encounter during the Expo, and a street beef reemerged during that event in 2008. Shawn told the story.

“At the Expo we was walking downtown and Aaron was talking to some little chick. Well, before that Michael, the one you interviewed, beat up this guy, AJ, back when we went to Broad Ripple [high school]. AJ never let it go or whatever. So now every time we see him it break out and shit. So they see him at the Expo. My brother came back and got me and my big bro’, and we walked around there. Some little niggas

that's from Brightwood was with him. Niggas from Brightwood kept talking right in front of the police center.

"My brother was like, 'Let's go bitch, take it to the street.'

"Niggas scared. They said, 'Get the pistol, go get the pistol.'

"There's sixteen of them and only three of us, and they still going to go get the pistol. So the police came over there, and we kept on walking. Then we went to AJ, 'Why you bump me or whatever, you trying to bang with me?'

"He like, 'Nah, I ain't trying to bang with you man. We cool it's cool.'

"My brother's like, 'Nah bitch, fuck that cool shit.'

"'No it's cool bro', it's cool bro'."

"We came around the corner and met up with them. First there's just three of us. Then we get with all our niggas, and we see him again.

"I said, 'He cool bro', he cool.'

"From there we went to the crib. The next day we went to church and came back to the crib everybody like, 'Bro' two hundred niggas came over here talking about they going to get you all.'

"I thought about it and saw the spray paint on the door. I'm like, 'Ah, ok, did one of them have dreads?'

"They like, 'Yeah, AJ.'

"Ok, he got ho'd at the Expo by everybody. Everybody seen him get ho'd so, shit, he came back with his little goons. But they already knew there was only two of us there, two boys and the rest of them were females anyways. So they hoes. They hoes for that one. I ain't trippin'. I play it cool though. Then I seen one of the niggas at the Expo. He was like, 'The DFW Boyz, they's some bitches. They scared to do something.'

"I seen that nigga the next day coming out of his cousin's house slipping [being an easy target]. I stopped and hold that nigga. He was all pretending he didn't know shit about shit. So I guess he went and told his little boys, came back, and gathered up the troops to come over there.

"Later, I walked to the front of the apartments by myself where all them niggas be at. There wasn't anybody there, should be taking care of it a little later. We don't retaliate because that's how a lot of shit goes down. Wait till it's died down, everything is good and gravy, go up to their grandma shit and put their shit . . ."

Layboy interrupted with a conclusion. "It's a wrap."

"So it's been a rough week?" I asked.

"It's been a rough week," verified Layboy. "Well, it ain't necessarily been a rough week, it's just tiring, man." This admission was somewhat surprising. Shawn had expressed fatigue with the gang life, but Layboy had not.

"It's been a rough week," agreed Shawn. "My nigga, the one that you interviewed back a few weeks ago, from Post Road. He got robbed. Someone robbed him and took his pistol and shit. He got his shit back."

Killa-Con, a member of the DFW Boyz who was listening to the conversation, added, "I had some motherfucker jump out on me."

One challenge for gang intervention is that the aspects of gang life that can cause disillusionment can also cause members to become more committed to gang life. Conflict, for example, can solidify street gangs by increasing internal cohesion, or it can cause gangs to disintegrate (Thrasher 1967). Until this point in my research, conflict seemed only to fuel the gang's activities and increase the group's solidarity. The boys never seemed tired of their unending street dramas. During this conversation, however, Layboy acknowledged growing weary of fighting with other gangs. For the first time, he seemed to understand the potentially fatal consequences of the gang's activities. Before this, he consistently talked about how he would never stop, and he seemed genuinely energized by the group's conflict with the Naptown Boyz. This internal struggle should be a reason for both hope and concern for anyone trying to intervene in the lives of active and committed gang members. Relative to other gang members, Layboy and Shawn were both heavily committed to gang life and intensely connected to gang peers. Yet Shawn seemed interested in college and, in a candid moment, Layboy admitted to being fatigued with street life. Their ambivalence suggested that the boys were willing to pursue other endeavors, but those pursuits would have been in constant tension with their attraction to gang life. Their conflicts in the street could motivate the boys to seek out other options, or it could increase their commitment to gang life. At the moment of this exchange, the latter seemed more likely.

Shawn clarified the issue by saying, "Now we need to get more organized and shit, I been watching little films and shit."

"Like what?" I asked.

“I watched this Larry Hoover film the other day. See how organized them niggas was. Then I watched this Al Capone film. See how organized they was, how legit they was.”

Larry Hoover was the leader of Chicago's Gangster Disciples and was able to organize the gang into a well-structured entrepreneurial street organization. With all of their connections in the streets of Indianapolis, Shawn and Layboy were still forced to watch documentaries to learn how to organize their gang. Their need to watch documentaries reinforced my earlier observations that Indianapolis gangs were largely unorganized. The boys had connections to the Vice Lords and the Gangster Disciples, but the gangs were not well structured. The boys lacked guidance and were trying to grasp the basic elements of an organizational system.

Layboy offered a description of the gang's new leadership structure. “Like us being the generals of DFW Boyz, people like, ‘You the leaders.’ It ain't necessarily that we the leaders, it's just that when these guys get out there we ain't going to be doing everything. That's what I'm trying to tell these niggas. I'm going to lay low. I'm going to let them niggas control, I'm going to be in the house, I'm going to lay low.”

Shawn agreed and added to his brother's description. “Especially like this, we got the generals then we got the commanders. He [Layboy] got his motherfucking troops. He control his troops. He got his main niggers that he fuck with and they go out there.”

Oddly enough, I had already met multiple so-called gang generals. The term was used so frequently that I began to question its meaning. Traditionally used to distinguish gang elites, it now seemed to be embraced by any informal leader of an Indianapolis clique, gang, or hood. As the boys talked about their organizational structure, a few other DFW Boyz sat quietly, nodding, clearly accepting their subservient role in the gang.

Layboy continued. “Like me, I'm a general and I got my commander, but he ain't here right now. That's my right-hand man. He [Shawn] got his right-hand man. I got my right-hand man. I tell him what to do. ‘Hey tell them niggas.’ He go back and tell them. Something ain't poppin' off right, he come tell me. ‘Hey something ain't going right.’ That's when I go out there. ‘What's going on, what's up?’ He got his right-hand man that he go to, he's got his little commander tell him

what's up. He get back to me, clique up, start talking, something, something. . . . This is what we're going to do. We about to get organized man. These niggas, like lately, we ain't been organized. People been just putting people in—'Ah, you want to be in DFW Boyz? You in.' It ain't going to be like that. I'm about to cut people. If you ain't bringing in money and you ain't putting in work, you about to get out. We don't need you."

"So things just changed recently."

Layboy responded to my question, "Yeah, just changed, it's about to be a whole lot different. DFW Boyz is about to be different, you'll see."⁶

AN UNFORTUNATE END

I left Indianapolis in early August of 2008 and did not hear from the boys until the winter months. During that time, I talked to Sidney, my original contact, a few times, and he kept me updated on the events in Indianapolis. I last talked to him in late October. One winter evening, I received a call on the phone that I used primarily for research. Looking at the number, I recognized the Indianapolis area code, assumed that Sidney was on the other line, and answered, "What's going on, Sidney?" There was a hesitation on the other end of the line. I then heard, "This is Layboy. Sidney's dead."

"What? When and how?"

Layboy impatiently answered, "I don't know, a while ago." That's not why he was calling. "Shawn's been shot."

"Is he okay?" I asked, not really knowing what to say.

"Yeah, I think so."

"How are you doing?" Admittedly, this was a dumb question.

"I'm cool," he said. But I doubted that he would say otherwise.

After a short, awkward conversation, I told him to keep me updated and said good-bye. I then called one of the boys' adult mentors to find out what had happened and if Shawn was going to recover. He had been shot at a party when a fight broke out during a conflict. Shawn had actually left the house when the fight started and then returned to retrieve his brothers. Doctors initially did not know if he would survive, but he was currently doing much better. His prospects looked good. His mentor lamented that before the shooting, Shawn was heading in the right direction. He was on the honor roll, and he was sending out

college applications. His mentor promised to keep in touch as Shawn recovered.

As the phone conversation ended, I experienced an odd combination of fear, concern, and hope. Fear arose as I remembered Layboy's statements that he would retaliate if anyone killed one of his brothers. Would this incident instigate a process of contagious violence that could leave numerous other DFW Boyz injured, dead, or in prison? Or was Layboy merely talking tough in a moment when he did not have to back up his promise? I was naturally concerned for Shawn's health, but the prognosis initially seemed positive. I remained hopeful; Shawn had clearly returned to school with the intention of pursuing a college education. His hospital stay would cause him to miss school, but hopefully it would not distract him from his college aspirations. Perhaps the incident would further motivate him to leave gang life and fully invest in college life. Of course it could also lead him to retaliate.

Although there is no such thing as a representative gang member, Shawn's struggle to negotiate the competing demands of two divergent social worlds provided insight into the dilemmas of intervention. The opportunity to further his education caused him to make changes. Despite his academic activity, his commitment to the DFW Boyz remained strong. He continued to go to parties, challenge peers, and get into fights. The allure of the intergang environment was too strong to be overcome by burgeoning aspirations. As these aspirations grew, and he would be routinely exposed to the college environment, perhaps the influence of the intergang environment would lessen. Or perhaps, he would grow weary of college life and permanently return to the streets of Indianapolis.

I did not hear anything about Shawn's recovery for a few weeks and took comfort in the fact that no news was good news. Then one morning I got to my office, scanned the Indianapolis news online, and learned that Shawn had unexpectedly died from his gunshot wounds. Later that night I again received a phone call from Layboy. What does one say to a sixteen-year-old who just lost his brother and best friend? Years later, I still do not know.

A few days later I drove back to Indianapolis for Shawn's funeral. Arriving an hour early, I had a hard time finding a place to park and had to walk a few blocks to the church. Unmarked police cars were

positioned outside of the church, and sheriff's deputies manned the door. Although the church building was not large or extravagant, it was not a ghetto storefront church or a small building in disrepair. The newer and well-maintained building had enough seating for a few hundred people. When I entered the church, only few seats were still available. During the next hour, the sanctuary filled to the point of standing room only. Hundreds of people, both young and old, showed up for the service.

The mood of the sanctuary was generally somber until the gospel choir began to sing. As the deep, soulful timbre of the gospel music circulated through the sanctuary, the mourning began. These were not people numbly responding to another unfortunate death. They were deeply affected by the loss of Shawn, and the service functioned as a collective display of grief. Attendees wept together without any hint of self-consciousness. Layboy was the catalyst for this grief, as he shouted in pain and sobbed uncontrollably on the floor near his deceased brother. Family members and funeral workers surrounded him in an attempt to provide counsel.

Like all other violent deaths, the murder of Shawn should be understood not just as a statistic but also as an event of tremendous personal loss. This was indescribably painful for those who knew him. His death was not less tragic because he was a gang member. It was not more tragic because he was intelligent and seemed to be taking school more seriously. He was a friend, a brother, a son, a grandson, and, on a less personal level, a trusted research participant almost solely responsible for much of this study. True, he was heavily involved in criminal behavior. He beat people up and admitted to shooting guns at people. Such activities deserved formal, rational retribution, but death at the hands of another teenager with a gun was not justice.

Later, the pastor passionately spoke to the younger attendees and urged them not to retaliate. The anger on the faces of Shawn's family, friends, and clique members was discernable. The pastor's message was clear and powerful, but would it convince all of them not to respond with aggression? The allure of retaliation was indeed strong. As I listened to the service and observed the emotion around me, I understood the temptation. I hope they resisted that temptation.

Unfortunately, Shawn's funeral would not be the last for his family or for members of the DFW Boyz. A year later, Layboy and his younger

brother Dre were standing on a street corner late at night. An unknown male walked by and briefly spoke to the boys, apparently asking who they were. He later returned and without warning, shot Dre from close range. Layboy saw his younger brother fall to the ground, dead, and then ran, only to be shot in the back multiple times. As he lay on the ground pretending to be dead, the assailant stood over him, without any more ammunition. Layboy survived the shooting, but the violence continued. A few months after Dre's death, TJ was also shot during a gang altercation. This shooting occurred in a public setting in front of a large number of witnesses. Fortunately, TJ survived. Over a year later, Layboy and TJ were victims of another shooting. Layboy was again seriously wounded; he sustained debilitating, life altering injuries.

These tragic events are not unique, or even particularly unusual; thousands of adolescents and young adults are murdered in American streets each year.⁷ Each incident has its own explanation, and each victim has his or her own story. Shawn, Dre, Layboy, and TJ constantly pursued a violent reputation in the midst of a skeptical intergang environment, and it probably led to their violent victimization. They paid a severe price to ensure that they were known in Naptown.