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Fenger kids tell why they fight

The Tribune begins an in-depth look at youth violence, examining its complex causes and uncovering possible solutions.



Vashion Bullock, 17, doesn't deny taking part in the massive fight that left a student dead. Bullock's brother was charged with murder. (Tribune photo by Abel Uribe / October 1, 2009)

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Tribune reporters
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His left eye still swollen shut, Vashion Bullock doesn't deny fighting in the massive brawl that killed a **Fenger High School** student two weeks ago.

He's watched the grainy fight video and seen himself standing shirtless in the middle of the frenetic mob. But to him, the footage is a 2-minute-and-26-second clip of his world without context, broadcast endlessly on television and the Web.

Together, their actions are horrific. Individually, they're students who made the honor roll, worked after-school jobs, played sports and planned for college. And they wake up in worlds frayed by poverty and violence.

Bullock and other students bused in from Altgeld Gardens housing complex have fought for years with kids who live closer to the school and see them as outsiders, according to Tribune interviews with dozens of students and parents. The Fenger senior said he often races to the bus stop to avoid

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confrontation. But that Thursday he'd been suspended for a fight. And he'd had enough.

"How many times you want me to walk away?" asked Bullock, whose brother is charged with murder for striking 16-year-old **Derrion Albert** with a wooden plank. Three others were charged in the melee that involved at least 50 teens. "We've been running for so long and I'm tired of running," Bullock said. "Running only leads to more running."

The fight sparked national outrage and prompted the **White House** to dispatch the nation's chief law enforcement official to Chicago later this week to call attention to youth violence across the country.

Chicago Public Schools and police once again are being called upon to provide safe passage for students heading to and from school. But the dramatic violence captured on the video highlights concerns about a much more fundamental safe passage -- the treacherous journey for many city teens from adolescence to adulthood.

Violence in Chicago has already claimed five teens in the last month, three of them public school students. And if previous years are any indication, dozens more will die in the coming school year. Neither Fenger officials nor police, both of whom knew of the rising tension at the school, have been able to stem the tide.

That ever-present violence has taken its toll on how teens view themselves and their futures. Some simply don't believe they have one.

"I don't think a new day is promised to nobody," said Bullock, 17, clutching a bag of ice to his injured eye. "Anything could happen at any time."

Sometimes the violence is race-related such as a brawl last year at Foreman High School on the Northwest Side. Sometimes it's gang-related such as rivalries at Crane High School on the West Side. And sometimes, like Fenger on the Far South Side, it's about neighborhoods -- the area by the school called the "Ville" and Altgeld Gardens several miles to the south.

These are kids navigating a complex landscape of social problems, clinging to whatever sense of identity and esteem they can find. When violence erupts, it's often about them defending what little they have.

Despite their mutual dislike, the two sides involved in the Fenger melee share much in common. Both live in impoverished neighborhoods beset by crime. When challenged physically, they feel they have no choice but to fight. Neither see themselves as the aggressors. Perhaps most tragically, those charged in Albert's fatal beating came from both factions. Neither side said they meant to kill anyone.

"The video is troubling but not extraordinary," said Dewey Cornell, director of a youth violence project at the **University of Virginia**. "I object to the notion that these kids are somehow disturbed or abnormal. Street fights between rival groups are not new to Chicago or any other part of **the United States**. We have had them for centuries."

On Sept. 24 Montrell Truitt left school with his brother and headed for the bus stop at 111th and Wallace streets, half a block north of Fenger. Trouble there was already brewing, so Truitt and his brother headed east on 111th to Michigan Avenue, where they would normally catch a second bus to the Gardens.

The extended walk has become the best of the bad options for the kids, who say they're vulnerable at the stop closer to Fenger and in the heart of the Ville. As the brothers walked, a crowd started to swell behind them.

Truitt, 17, who's ranked near the top of his senior class, called his mother, a daily ritual they have on his walks from school. He and his brother, Eric Parks, 15, finally reached the rusty train tracks past Stewart Avenue, a half-mile from Fenger and the eastern edge of the Ville. It marks the unofficial safe zone for Gardens kids heading home.

"All I was thinking was, 'OK, we're getting close to the tracks, so they're going to turn around,'" Truitt said.

But the kids didn't stop following that day. Some began to strip off their shirts to prepare for a fight. Ville teens say several cars of Gardens kids were there waiting.

Truitt's mother, Toya, heard tension in his voice on the phone. She told him to try to get to her workplace. But as they were talking, his phone went dead. Shortly after crossing the tracks, Truitt said he felt the hard bash of a wood plank across his back.

He stumbled, then turned and fought.

The rest is captured by a camera held by another Fenger student in the video that has transfixed the nation.

On the video, Albert, an honor student who has been portrayed as a bystander, can be seen throwing a punch.

What is clear from the video is how random the melee became. Two teens from the Ville -- at least

one of them Albert's friend -- were charged with delivering the "first strike" and the "knockout blow" to the teen. Kids from the Gardens then allegedly stomped and wielded one final shot with the plank.

Since Albert never claimed loyalty to either side, no one was sure with whom he was fighting, witnesses said.

Altgeld Gardens sits 5 miles southeast of the Ville, separated by massive industrial structures, a matrix of railroad lines and the historic West Pullman community. An isolated public housing complex, Altgeld anchors the city's southernmost tip at 130th Street with low-rise homes. Just one bus route serves the entire 157-acre development, an island of churches, public housing and elementary schools with no commerce for miles.

Less is known about the Ville, a chunk of the **Roseland** neighborhood about a half-square mile in size that encompasses Fenger and is bordered on the south by 115th Street. Several young residents have proclaimed their allegiance by inking forearms with tattoos and even choreographing a Ville dance.

"It's the neighborhood we're from, who we are, how we act, what we do," said Derrick Young, 17, a junior at Fenger.

Young said he wasn't involved in the fight, although he's been suspended from Fenger for 10 days. Though he recently moved with his mother into a spacious apartment just outside the Ville, Young still strongly identifies with the area.

Young and others said the Ville isn't just about violence -- it's also about community. Relaxing in his house, he performed the Ville dance, a soft bounce from side to side, **arms** heaved forward as he drops down low, smiling.

That doesn't mean they're soft though. Young admitted he's swung at Gardens kids and they've swung at him. He thinks the Gardens teens bring violence to Fenger, not the other way around.

But when asked why they don't like the Gardens kids, he struggled to explain it.

"As far as I know, they don't like us," said Young, who dreams of playing professional football even though he's not on the school team, "and the way I feel, we don't like them."

Teens from the Ville feel like their neighborhood, already starved of resources, has been invaded. So do their parents.

"Ain't there a high school out there?" asked Ava Greyer, the mother of Eugene Bailey, 17, one of the Ville teens charged in the killing. "Why would you put them ... here?"

Ville kids and their parents say the violence works both ways -- Gardens kids sneak punches when they can. It is widely believed around the Ville that on the day of the fight, Altgeld kids flooded the neighborhood with cars filled with people ready to fight.

Jamal Harding, 18, a Fenger graduate who traded blows with a Gardens kid in the fight, said walking away isn't an option.

"I'm not gonna run from it," he said. "Why should I have to run from where I live? If I have to run from where I live, where else do I go?"

The conflict escalated between the two neighborhoods after Chicago Public Schools transformed Carver High School, located in the Altgeld community, into a military academy. That put many Altgeld kids at Fenger behind enemy lines, traversing unfamiliar streets in unfriendly territory.

As part of an anti-violence plan, schools chief Ron Huberman has launched an initiative called Safe Passage, which provides extra resources such as security or buses for students who walk through gang boundaries or other dangerous areas.

But the plan hadn't been implemented when the violence erupted among Fenger students. The district is now providing yellow school buses for Altgeld kids to be shuttled to and from Fenger.

Two weeks after the fight, some kids seemed to hold a sense of remorse.

Bullock, for one, is starting to recognize the gravity of what's happened. In his living room, with the lights dimmed to protect his injured eye, he struggled to process what he's feeling. His brother's self-portrait and high school diploma hang from the wall. His mother was away undergoing dialysis treatment, a routine she follows three times a week.

"I apologize that something bad happened," he said. "But I might (never) see out of my left eye ... or see my brother again."

That hardly means the violence between the two sides is likely to stop. Almost no one thinks it's over, leaving Bullock and others facing about eight more months of school.

"You gotta be strong," he says. "Strong and willing to protect yourself from ... anybody. Can't nobody be left out."

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[[HOW DARE YOU POMPOUS SELF RIGHTEOUS individuals who sit on your high horse in your safe neighborhood judge these kids]]

The question more to the point, mom, is how dare these kids impose anarchy and chaos on everyone else around them because of their -- as others said and it certainly fits -- "primitive" responses to false "survival" issues. There is no competition for food, or water, or mates. Just a contrived "turf" for turf's sake and a capricious entitlement to an ill-defined "respect".

The war is of their own making but everyone else, in ever-expanding waves, is caught up in it.

Neighborhood watches do little when you're assigned to watch those better armed than you do what they want. The end result is that still do what they want. And watching it simply makes you lose sleep.

rwilymz (10/06/2009, 4:00 PM)

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It's not the government causing the problem, it is not dealing with the crime issue because we do not want to spend the money. You cannot have armed gangs running the streets and expect putting a father in the home to be a fix. If the father stands up to the gangs, he will be dead. We have a gun ban and the gangs do not follow it. Stop snitchin is a threat, not a creed. You may want to pick a book up on the history of gangs in Chicago, it is not tribal issue.

MTW48 (10/06/2009, 3:59 PM)

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[[What you keep doing expanding the same use of science research to try to justify blaming the family]]

Actually, if you could read for comprehension from the start you'd have seen me trying to assign primary culpability to the government. Laws create incentive. For good or bad. Actually, for good AND bad, both. There are unintended consequences of every policy ever enacted. And one of the most notable consequences of the welfare legislation of the sixties and its "man in the house" provision, is the destruction of stable families among the poverty class.

With the destruction of families comes the social pathologies of destroyed families. And with no economic fallback, you will get tribalization.

[[This is a money issue. The city doesn't want to spend what it will take to fix the schools...]]

It's far more than a "city-issue". It's a centralization of authority issue -- which never works. Crack a history book. All politics is local, and while a central government is beneficial for certain things, it is completely incompetent at most things. And one-size-fits-all solutions -- as is DC's wont to create - - end up being, effectively, a one-size-fits-none.

rwilymz (10/06/2009, 3:45 PM)

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