

One night in the area of Austin

Part of a Series



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The closed-down Nathan Goldblatt elementary school in Austin. Photo by Gretchen Rachel Blickensderfer

It was around 12:30 in the morning of Sept. 13 when I joined social worker Channyn Lynne Parker for a drive through the small radius of Austin and West Garfield Park. There—on March 28, 2012—Eisha Love (then 22) defended herself from an attack by two men and was subsequently charged with attempted murder in the first degree. Within months, the murdered bodies of Paige Clay (23) and Donta “Tiffany” Gooden (19) were found within blocks of each other.

Family and friends of Gooden assert that she had been in the car with Love when she allegedly struck one of her attackers in the leg with her car. They also contend that Gooden and Clay were friends who looked very much alike.

Love's mother said that a group of male bystanders told Love at the time of the accident: "We're going to get you."

Two and a half years had passed since Love was arrested and she was still sitting in 22-hour-per-day protective custody in the maximum security all-male Division 9 of the Cook County Jail awaiting trial. Clay lay buried in a grave donated by Chicago House. Her sister "Toya" told me that it had been months since the family heard from the CPD regarding any progress in the investigation of Clay's death. Mary said the same thing. The last time she had any contact with the CPD was in 2013. She was simply informed that the investigation into Gooden's death had "gone cold." Mary has spent the intervening time trying to save up enough money for her daughter's headstone.

For a number of years now and as a part of her impassioned outreach efforts, Parker has met and talked with many transgender women of color who go to work during Austin's early morning hours. "They live a life of conscious survival," she told me. "We don't think about the threat of being homeless or killed or hungry but these girls do, every single day. Of the entire LGBT spectrum, the trans* identity is the most visible and it is the one that brings the most danger—whether that is the threat of bodily harm, discrimination in employment, housing or the justice system, those are the things that trans* women in particular face."

Parker believes these women have been discarded and forgotten by both the city and their community. That night, we were in search of them, hoping they would tell us their stories. Driving up Madison from the viaduct at Kenton to the corner of Cicero, there was no evidence of Mayor Rahm Emanuel's March 29, 2012 pledge to "build a new Chicago." Between long stretches of barren ground, the more populated areas of the street were lined with liquor stores, small grocery marts or the occasional beauty salon all enclosed by enforced steel grates. In front, groups of individuals were gathered. As our car passed by, some of them peered inside and signaled, with a whistle or yell, that they wanted us to stop.

Along the side streets, both from and adjacent to Madison, there were lines of abandoned homes, their facades completely boarded-up and in varying states of disrepair. In some areas, they were difficult to discern, because the streets lights were out for blocks at a time.

The South Austin Coalition is a community organization that has spent over three decades trying to improve life for people living in the neighborhood. Organizing Director Elce Redmond explained to Windy City Times why certain areas of Austin are dark.

“Social and city services aren’t in those areas,” Redmond said. “So a lot of times guys take out the street lights so they can do business.”

On West Adams, the building that once housed Nathan R. Goldblatt Elementary School loomed over the street. In explaining its closure on July 12, 2013, a CPS transition plan stated “our District faces a significant financial challenge, which threatens everything in our system by making it difficult to provide the robust supports and services that all children deserve.” The windows from the ground to the roof of the massive structure were shuttered. A blue sign read “No school, May 22. Parents enroll for new school by” The rest of the date was missing.

We drove on. Within the shadows, there were intermittent scenes of a person leaning into a parked car and taking a furtive look in our direction as we passed by. On more than one occasion, we were forced to stop behind two cars that were pulled up next to each other while their occupants quickly switched vehicles.

Despite a discernible police presence heralded by passing CPD patrol cars on Madison or those parked side-by-side in an abandoned lot, there seemed little doubt who was actually in control of the neighborhood. On one street corner, we came across some graffiti written in black on a concrete wall. Further research determined that it was a gang sign indicating that we were driving in territory belonging to the “Travelling Vicelords.”

Those territories and the names of the gangs who control them can change in a matter of a few blocks. However, unless you recognize the graffiti, exactly whose boundary you are in is impossible to know.

Tio Hardiman is the executive director of Violence Interrupters, INC.—a group of violence intervention experts that he founded in 2004. Since then, Hardiman and his team have worked to mediate conflicts between Austin’s gangs on the ‘front-end’.”

In an interview with Windy City Times earlier in the week, Hardiman estimated that there are at least 10 umbrella gang organizations in Austin with about 30 factions each. “In mediating conflicts, we establish a real strong understanding between those factions so that people do not disrespect or cross different boundaries that may lead to a deadly encounter,” he told me, adding that his organization has met with some success: “Since January of this year, we have mediated about 25 conflicts that could have turned deadly.”

Hardiman has also tried to negotiate between some gang factions and members of the LGBTQ community. “I was called in to help mediate a conflict between a guy who was gay and some people who wanted to beat him up because he was gay,” Hardiman said. “It was going to take a really serious turn but we got to the core issue and stopped the assault.”

During the course of our investigation, Windy City Times discovered that, in 2012, both the Citgo where Love's incident began, the viaduct where Clay was allegedly last seen by her friends and the abandoned building where Gooden met her death apparently fell under the rule of a faction who called themselves "The Cicero Boys."

Preferring to refer to them as a "crew" or a "clique," Redmond estimated that they have operated in the neighborhood for the past 10 years. "They control the drug market in that one particular area," he said. "It's very interesting because they can't come down Laramie Avenue and the guys from Laramie can't go to Central. So they control only a few blocks and you have these small turf wars for who is going to control the drug trade."

In Redmond's opinion, the majority of the violence in Austin is impulsive, emotional and happens in an instant. "One second could devastate a lot of people's lives for a long period time," he said. "How do you address that? We've had the Interrupters out there talking to folks and they have been successful but even they can't do anything about something that's very sudden, very quick and can be very brutal."

Parker and I drove north up Kilbourn from the Citgo, following Love's escape route. Parker informed me that the events since Love's arrest have forced a lot of transgender sex workers to either migrate north or keep their business strictly confined to websites.

"When I talk to them, I notice this instant fear when anything pertaining to gang-members here is brought up," she said. "There is a reluctance to talk about it. When I would ask about the situation there would be an instant hush. Eye contact would be lost and there would just be a lot of talking around the topic as opposed to talking about the topic. I felt something had happened that is known throughout the community. It has them all scared."

Those few transgender women who did agree to talk to me prior to my visit with Parker would only do so by phone and on condition of complete anonymity. There appears to be a constant terror concerning retaliation, and for good reason.

One of the women who remained working in Austin paid for her decision with a brutal assault. The picture "Grace" sent me of herself before the attack was that of a confident, beautiful woman in her early 30s. On July 29, 2014, she was working the same part of the neighborhood in which the Clay and Gooden murders occurred.

"I went out that Sunday night," Grace recalled. "I had like \$50 in my pocket and this guy came up and said he wanted a date. So we went to the back of this building and I started on him. In the middle of it, he just started

swinging and kicking me and then another guy ran from around the building and went in my pocket and took all my money and he stomped and kicked me too.”

The men battered at Grace’s head and body relentlessly. She suffered a fractured shoulder and collar bone. After the attack was over, she crawled to Madison Street and flagged down the police. She was transported by ambulance to Cook County Hospital. Blacking in and out from a combination of concussion and pain medication, she could not provide the CPD with a detailed description of her attackers. However, she is certain they were gang members.

“One of my friends who worked out there with me called and told me that she thinks the same two guys who did that to me raped another girl and beat her and then they robbed and beat this other girl and she had to run out of the bushes naked,” Grace said.

She was informed that the two women were attacked within a few days of her assault.

Grace texted a picture of herself to me that was taken after the attack. Her neck was supported by a brace. The left side of her swollen face was covered by a scar at least two inches in circumference. She told me she was angry. “I can’t do anything. I can’t work,” she said, adding that, despite her amicable relationship with them, the CPD have since provided her with no information outside of a copy of her police report.

Yet, she blamed herself for the attack that almost killed her. “I usually don’t go out on Sunday because there’s no money,” she said. “There’s no one on the street walking past who can hear you holler. I just got caught. Anything can happen to you over there. Like when they killed that girl Paige. She was way back in the dark where nobody could see her.”

As if looking for her ghost, Parker and I returned to the viaduct where Clay was allegedly last seen. We then traveled south on Kenton adjacent to the rail embankment. The lights on Madison slowly began to disappear into obscurity. “Just imagine having to walk through this,” Parker said. “How petrifying it would be.”

At the corner of Monroe, we noticed a trans* woman standing opposite a narrow bridge. She was tall and dressed head to foot in black. She glanced momentarily at our car and then away. Taking a business card, Parker exited, tentatively walked up to and then talked to her. Eventually, Parker and the woman returned to my car. She had agreed to an interview.

“April,” which is not her real name, is 34. “It’s rough out here,” she said with a matter-of-fact shrug. She then pointed to her left thigh. “I got shot in June. This boy who shot me was trying to rob me. You know, it’s the ghetto. Guys will try to stick you up, rape you.”

April added that she knew Gooden quite well and that, at one point, Gooden told her that she was in the car with Love on March 28, 2012. “Tiffany was doing a lot of stuff,” April said. “But she had no reason to be killed. With Paige it could have been mistaken identity. It could have been, because Tiffany and Paige looked alike.”

“Mistaken identity.” In the four weeks Windy City Times had been talking to people about the circumstances surrounding Love’s arrest and Clay and Gooden’s death, it was a phrase we had heard a lot.

“I think there is a connective tissue between Eisha and the murders in 2012,” Parker told me. “It’s the individuals who have a vendetta against Eisha. I think that violence against these women has always been pervasive, but I believe that the sudden onslaught in 2012 was deeply personal.”

While April was being interviewed, a man drove slowly by and pulled up just past us. He pressed on his horn once— apparently the acknowledged signal by those on the stroll that someone is interested. However, April knew who he was and so was having none of it. “He tried to rape a transsexual,” she said. “He has no money. He was probably trying to grab one of y’all. That’s the bullshit you have to go through.”

I asked her why she stayed with sex work when the danger to her physically was so very great. April replied that she had no choice if she wanted to keep a roof over her head. “I made \$126 yesterday,” she said. “I try to make \$100 a night. My rent is \$100 a week. Sometimes I sleep in my van. I am just trying to pay my rent. That’s it.”

“It’s upsetting,” Parker said as we left April to her work. “It really speaks to a larger issue that happens in our communities that are held hostage by violence. There’s this code of silence whether by fear or loyalty, that you don’t talk. If you do, something bad is going to happen to you. I think it is so etched into the community psyche that it is just automatic.”

However, one question would not leave my mind: If the connection between the events that occurred to Love and the subsequent murders of Clay and Gooden was so clear to the transgender women working the streets, to their advocates and, at least in Gooden’s case, to her family, had the CPD investigated it?

Clay loved her youngest sister “Toya” so fiercely that she had her name tattooed on the right side of her neck. “We’d been through a lot as kids,” Toya explained. “My mother gave us up when we were younger and me, Paige and my older sister got back in touch after my foster mother passed away.”

Toya recalled that Clay taught her how to dance and to fight her own battles. But figuring out what happened to her sister and who it was that had killed her was one battle that Toya couldn’t win. “The police just told me

that the case was under investigation,” she said. “When I told them [my relationship] to Paige, it still didn’t matter. Towards the end of last year, I contacted them and they told me that the case had gone cold. They said they had no information and no leads. After a period of time, I just stopped calling and asking questions.”

Mary was told practically the same thing about Gooden. “Every time I called, it was like ‘it’s going cold,’” she told me. “I said, ‘how can it be going cold? It ain’t even been a year!’ I have to admit, I just gave up. I was upset and didn’t call for a while. So I can’t honestly say that they weren’t doing their jobs.”

However, Redmond has his doubts about the effectiveness of the CPD in Austin. “I think they are playing the role of the invading force,” he said. “Their job is to make sure that people are put in their place and they can’t even do that anymore. They treat everyone with disrespect, they are not interested in quelling violence or building trust between themselves and particularly the young people in the community and when people do call them, they don’t come.”

How many times has Redmond heard about the CPD simply not showing up? “I hear that a lot,” he replied. “Unless someone is shooting or has a weapon. There were several times when there were these really big after-school brawls between one school against another. They always escalated into something much larger. There was one day that I was out there in front of our office trying to break these kids up. There were maybe 100 out there. Senior citizens were calling [the CPD] and they asked if anybody had a gun. They eventually came, but when everything was over.”

Windy City Times made several calls and sent emails to the CPD requesting an interview with any officers working in Austin or, more specifically, those who could speak about the progress of the Love, Clay or Gooden investigations. Those requests went unanswered.

The only member of law enforcement who would talk to Windy City Times was Chief Thomas Weitzel, M.S., C.P.C. of the Riverside police department. In February 2012, he gave an interview in the Chicago Sun-Times in which he discussed gangs that were getting pushed out of the city and into his community. Weitzel is the chair of a multi-police department gang and drug task force called the Western Suburban Directed Gang Enforcement (WEDGE).

“Most of us either border the City of Chicago or are within four to five miles of [it],” he explained to Windy City Times. “Established gangs from Chicago are definitely trying to make inroads in the western suburbs of Cook County and beyond.”

Noting that the CPD has shared intelligence in order to aid his long-term investigations into gang activity in Riverside, Weitzel said that fear of retaliation is a big problem in terms of prosecuting those people he arrests. “We have victims who are afraid to come forward in our own cases involving gang members,” he said. “They

are reluctant to sign complaints and even reluctant to come into the police station and identify offenders in line-ups because there is the fear that retaliation will take place. Even in cases where victims sign criminal complaints, many times when the case comes to court, the victim fails to show up.”

Ultimately, Weitzel views the problem as an endless cycle that continues with each new generation. “We need to get to these kids a lot sooner,” he said. “I don’t see a push by anybody in power to fight violence from a perspective of not locking everybody up and throwing the key away but using preventative services and some kind of job program. All those types of programs need funding. I’ve been a police officer for 30 years and the same thing we were doing when I started in 1984 is not working in 2014. I walked by my booking room the other day and we had a [teenage] juvenile in custody who said he was a gang member. He could not read or write. When it came to signing his bond sheet we had to read it to him word-for-word. This isn’t a third-world country but he could not read.”

Despite the evidence provided by the work of people like Redmond, Turner, Hardiman and so many others who continually demonstrate that there are people in Austin and nearby areas truly invested in turning the community around, why has this part of Chicago seemingly been left to rot and what can be done to keep safe the trans* women and queer youth who are still falling victim to horrific crimes there? Parker shook her head in frustration. “Where are city leaders in this equation?” she asked. “Do they even care? There’s always something that can be done that they’re not doing. It’s easy to say ‘get a job.’ But where am I going to go after that job? Without housing it’s next to impossible.”

Parker and I left Austin at 3 a.m. in the morning. I travelled back to the North Side, past the wondrous lights of the Chicago loop and past the vibrant LGBTQ communities of Lakeview and Andersonville situated just far enough from the Cook County Jail to forget that Love was spending another night locked inside dreaming of her freedom, just far enough from the abandoned portion of the city where the bodies of Clay and Gooden were found and where April, Grace and so many transgender women of color like them face the threat of violence and death each night they spend simply trying to survive.

“Amidst all of this they still have resilience,” Parker said. “They are not willing to just lie down and die.”

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