

THE HILLTOP BOYS

**A TRUE STORY ABOUT
THE HILLTOP CRIPS**



“Why were some of these guys doing what they were doing?” I ask Chastity.

“Some of them...some of them were paying their momma’s mortgage, feeding their kids.”

“Is there any way to stop what the city and the police are doing to the Hilltop?” I ask.

Chastity hesitates for a moment, unsure of what to say.

**THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON
INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED
IN THE HILLTOP**

PEOPLE'S PARK

but it's boring. Spud didn't even recognize Hilltop when he got out. Everything changed."

There were bunches of people who would hang out together on street corners and entire apartment complexes that teemed with illegality, partying, and excitement. But the condos started coming and white kids in tight jeans, who Chastity said would have been jumped before, now "think they own Hilltop." Everyone in the neighborhood is being pushed to the south end of the hill where there is low-income housing waiting to contain the community. "They're trying to push everyone into those fancy looking Section 8 houses just so they can all be crammed together in one place, out of sight. They want everything to look nice."

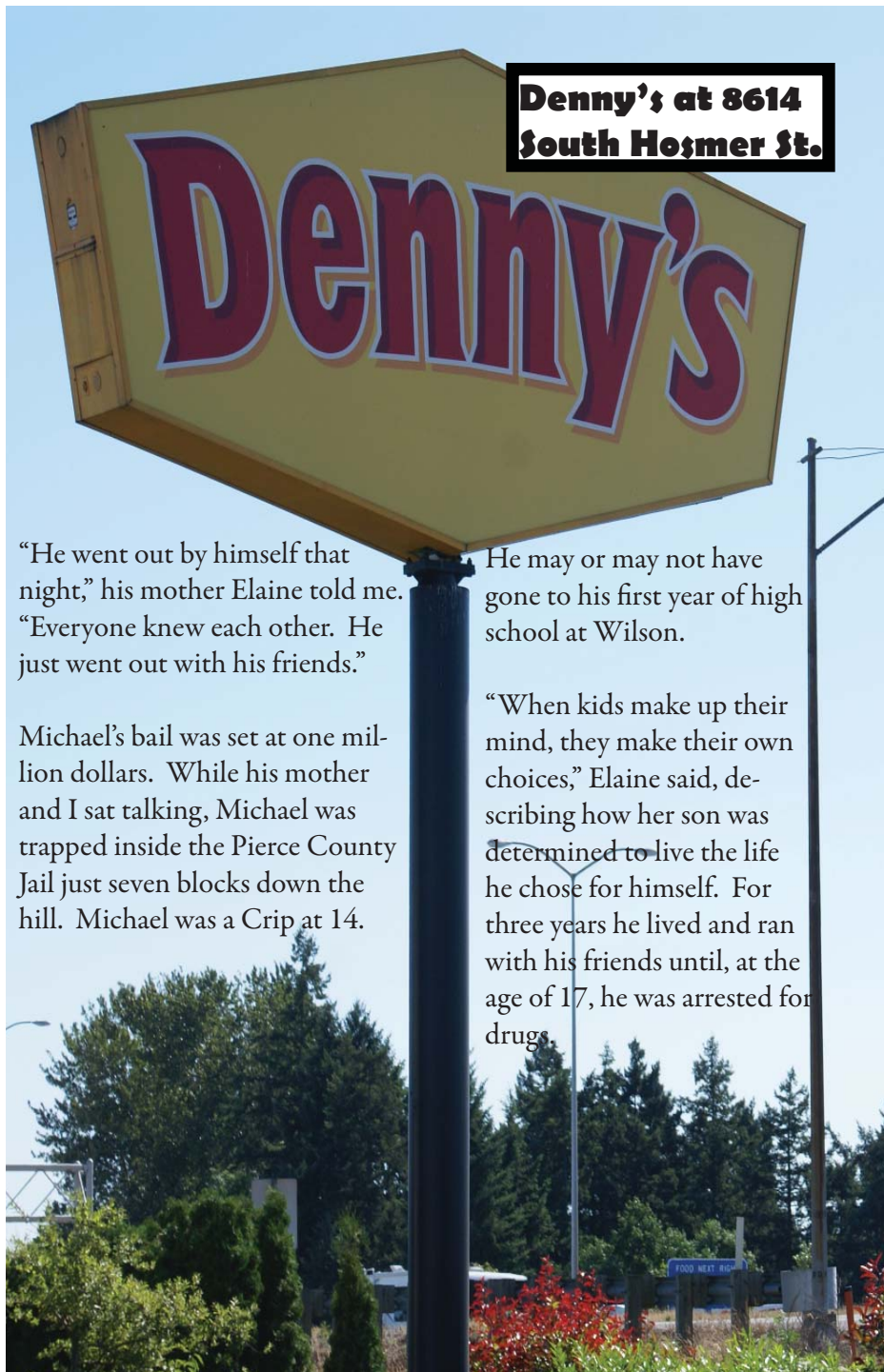
There once used to be dances at the People's Community Center on Martin Luther King Jr. Way. During many of those dances there would be a fight. Sometimes there would be a shooting. The dances stopped when the police substation was built across the street from the Community Center. The substation is surrounded with cameras. There is no more dancing.



It was gray for a week, but on the day of the barbecue the sun had come out and there were no clouds in the sky. Dozens of people all relaxed at People's Park in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma. Chicken and ribs cooked on the grills while people sat in the shade or the sun, talking to each other, smoking cigarettes, watching their children. The barbecue was meant to bring people in the Hilltop community together at a time when many of its young men were being sentenced to prison. At the barbecue were mothers and sisters and friends of the men in jail. Despite the sentences being handed down by the judges, the mood at the barbecue was positive and hopeful.

Before the food was served, I sat down at a bench with a woman named Elaine White. She told me that her son Michael White, 33 at the time of his arrest, was rounded up by the Tacoma Police Department in February along with other supposed Crip members. They came into Elaine's house with a search warrant but he wasn't there. They later found him in another house. He is being charged with criminal conspiracy, first-degree burglary, drive-by shooting, second-degree assault and riot. If he is convicted for any of these offenses, it will be his third strike. All of the charges stem from an incident that took place at a Denny's restaurant in December of 2008.

Denny's is open twenty four hours. At night the parking lot is filled with cars and music and smoke. On this night, different groups of friends, different crews, began to yell at each other. A fight broke out, fueled by blind anger and alcohol. When the fight ended, several people were injured, including a security guard, gunshots were fired into the restaurant parking lot, and people fled in different directions.



**Denny's at 8614
South Homer St.**

“He went out by himself that night,” his mother Elaine told me. “Everyone knew each other. He just went out with his friends.”

Michael’s bail was set at one million dollars. While his mother and I sat talking, Michael was trapped inside the Pierce County Jail just seven blocks down the hill. Michael was a Crip at 14.

He may or may not have gone to his first year of high school at Wilson.

“When kids make up their mind, they make their own choices,” Elaine said, describing how her son was determined to live the life he chose for himself. For three years he lived and ran with his friends until, at the age of 17, he was arrested for drugs.

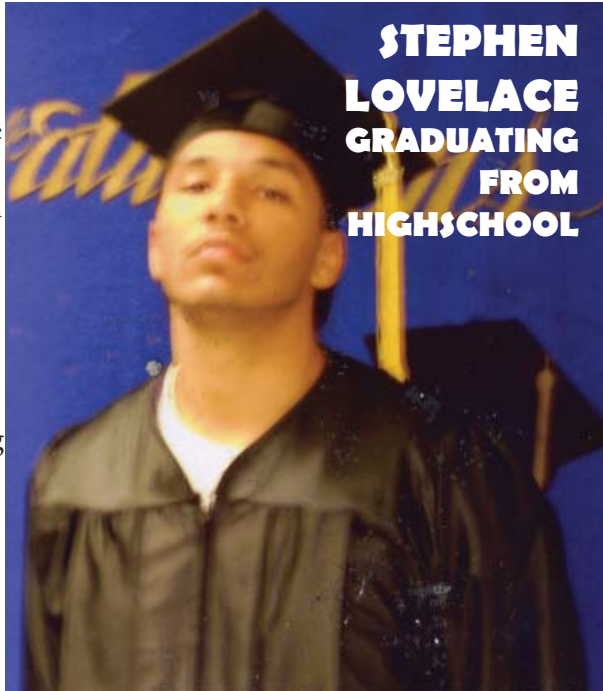
Chastity knows Stephen is not responsible for the shooting at McCabe’s Bar and Grill. The brawl that led to the shooting apparently started when one person stepped on another person’s shoe. In the video of the incident, Stephen can be seen leaving the area of the brawl with two girls. But despite the lack of evidence against him, Chastity said Stephen will probably take a deal. “No one is fighting it,” she said. “Everyone will take a deal. Its security, knowing you’ll only be in jail twelve months, even if you’re innocent.” When I asked why the authorities are going after people who are innocent, she told me they wanted “easy convictions.”

According to Chastity, the people who began to collaborate with the police and helped them build a case are also the ones who were the most reckless and brazen. “They were the ones pistol whipping people and robbing them,” she said. Curtis Hudson, one of the informants, pled guilty to seventeen charges alone. The police put pressure on these people in order to get them to co-create a fictitious criminal conspiracy. They exploited the fact that the Crips are not a cohesive organization in order to make them appear as one. “Different Crips, different cliques, they don’t even like each other,” she said. “They’re all Crips, but they’re not together.”

The police and the media are trying to invoke the turbulent history of the Hilltop Crips in order to strengthen their case against the defendants, but Hilltop has dramatically changed, the frame no longer fits the picture. “Everything is done,” Chastity said. “It’s not going down anymore. It’s totally boring. It’s less violent. I don’t have to worry so much about my daughter,



When he was 17 he was arrested for domestic violence and was put in jail until he was 21. While incarcerated, Stephen was able to pass his GED exam and earn a high school equivalency. After getting out he got his driver's license, started working through STG International and also did landscaping work. In March of 2009, he was arrested for allegedly shooting a man at McCabe's Bar and Grill who is still in a coma. The charges of attempted murder were later dismissed without prejudice, meaning the charges could be brought up in the future.



On February 8th, 2010, Stephen was arrested again. The old charges were brought up along with new charges of criminal conspiracy, first-degree burglary, drive-by shooting, second-degree assault, riot, another charge of attempted first-degree murder, and two counts of first-degree unlawful possession of a firearm. He was the first person to be arrested in the sweep that was described by the authorities as "one hell of a hammer." Stephen was called into to his probation office and when he arrived they arrested him. Chastity began to cry when they related this last detail to me. "If they really thought Spud had shot someone, if they knew he had shot someone, they wouldn't have let him walk around. They don't have any evidence."

McCABE'S

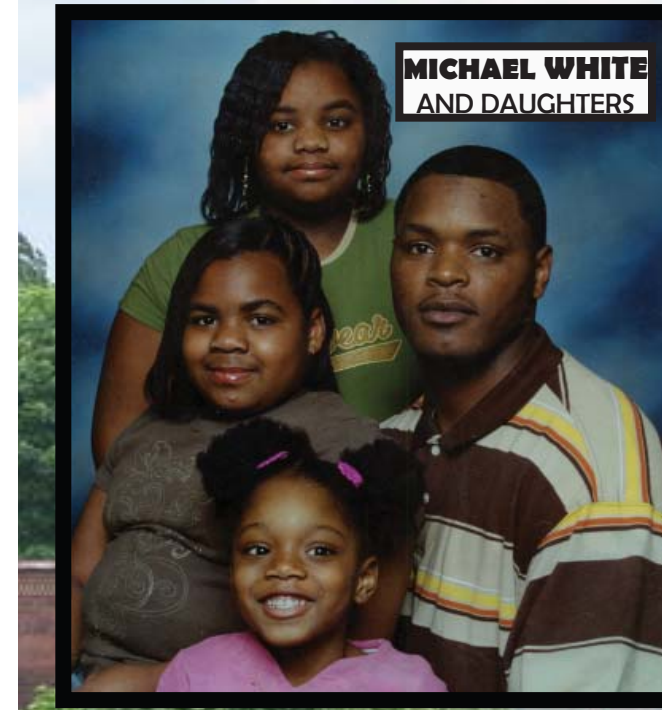


Walla Walla was his new home for the next five years. According to Elaine, when Michael was released he got "sucked back in" to life as a Crip. Two years later he was sent back inside for vehicular homicide. In total, he spent eleven years of his life inside a prison in Walla Walla.

When he was thirty and out of prison, Michael tried to live what his mother called a normal life. He got his driver's license and started working at Albert Lee Furniture where he drove appliances to consumer's houses and installed them. He lived in a house with his girlfriend and three daughters.

Besides his children and his family, Michael also had his friends when he was released. These were the people he had grown up with, who he had known since he was a teenager. And then one night, at liberty and free, Michael decided to go out with those friends. It is impossible to give up ones friends, especially after being in jail for a third of your life. Michael refused to give up his friends.

His mother Elaine does not understand why the authorities are trying to portray the 36 arrested men as being part of a tight-knit, structured conspiracy. "How are they organized?" she asked me. "How? The cops think the older ones are giving orders. How is this organized crime? Where's the money? If they're so organized then where's the money?"



According to her, the younger generations below her son are growing more ignorant and eager to shoot. The Crips are not organized, they all simply grew up together and Elaine has known them since they were children. “They call me mom,” she says. “I cook and they all come over.”

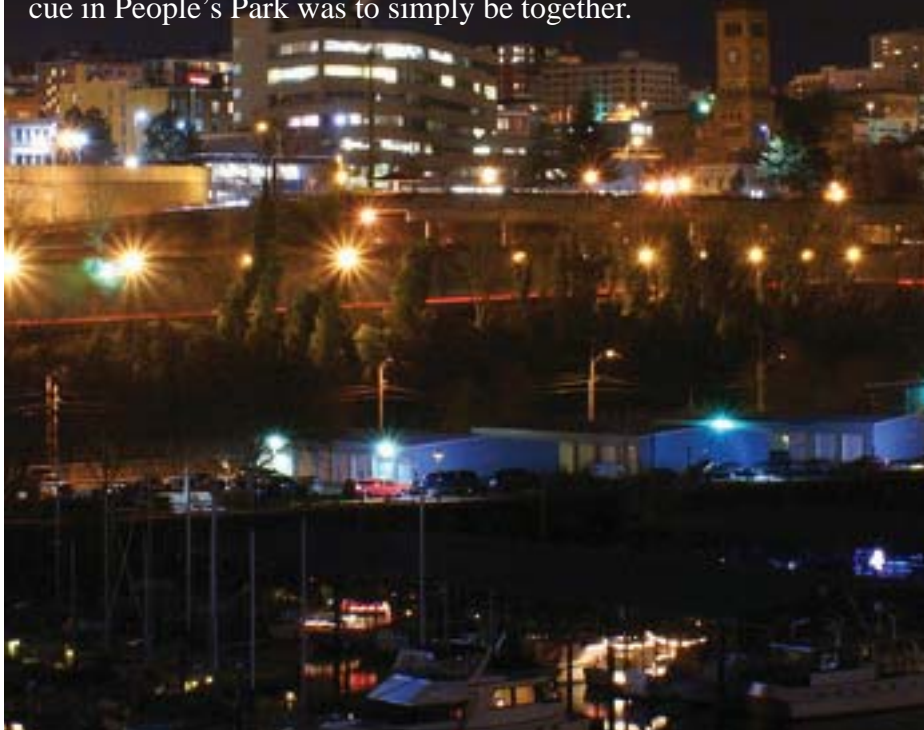
“These guys are just friends, then?” I ask.

“We’ve all known each other forever. Yeah. They were all friends.”

“Is there anyone who is specifically going after all these guys?” I ask.

“Ringer,” she replied. “Detective Ringer. He’s going to retire soon.”

Elaine and I stop talking. She helps with the barbecue, has a cigarette with her friends, and talks with people she has known forever. Kids from the neighborhood stand in line to get food once it is ready. Everyone eats as much as they want. The stated purpose of this barbecue in People’s Park was to simply be together.

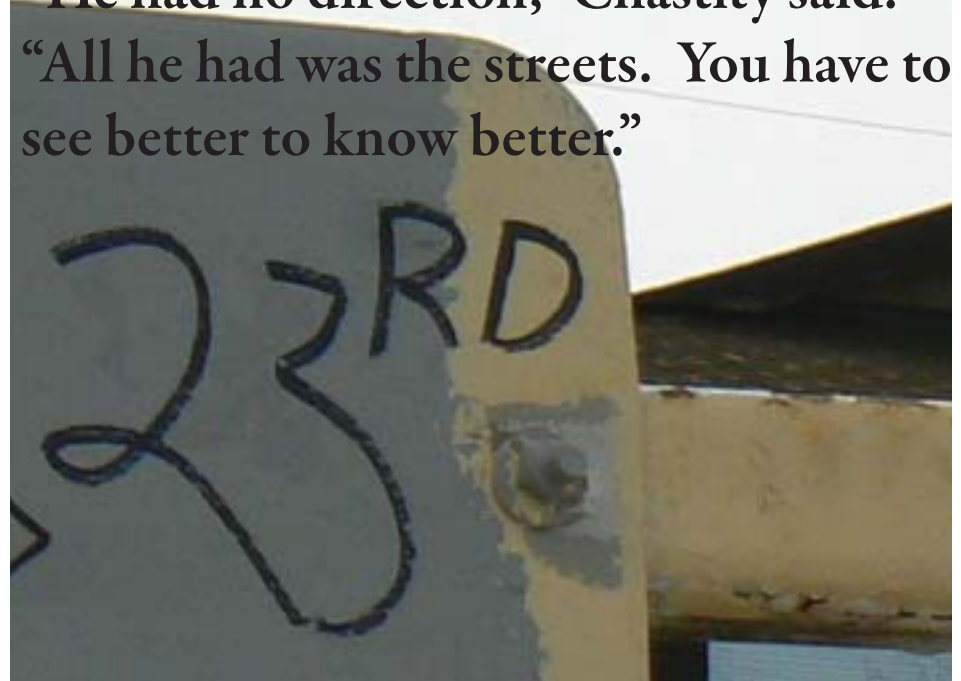


STEPHEN LOVELACE

“They’ve come into my home three times in the last year,” Chastity Bryant told a KOMO 4 reporter. “They were searching for guns and drugs, and every time they haven’t found anything.” She said these last words directly to the camera, tears starting to form in her eyes. Her friend Steven Lovelace is also being implicated with Christopher Simms in the shooting that left a young man paralyzed.

In her house, Chastity Bryant told me about Stephen Lovelace, who she had known since elementary school. Everyone called him Spud, a nickname given to him by his mother. When he was 9 years old, Stephen’s mother died. The only people he had as guardians were the older generation of Crips.

**“He had no direction,” Chastity said.
“All he had was the streets. You have to
see better to know better.”**



When asked how she felt about how her brother and friends were being portrayed, she replied that “after reading the responses in newspapers and on their websites, I couldn’t believe people are so fucked up and racist.” The comments section of the The News Tribune, for example, is filled with applause for the police and there are many comments that encourage the lynching of those arrested.

Now, after the trial and the media spectacle, Ciyanna doesn’t like leaving the house. Her brother has been implicated in being part of a large criminal conspiracy and because of this, Ciyanna has been implicated as well. “I feel uncomfortable,” she said. “It feels like everyone is staring at me, has something to say to me but won’t say it. Everyone thinks Chris is a murderer.”

During an interview with KOMO 4 News about the court cases, Monica Fowler, the mother of Chris and Ciyanna, said that “they’re trying them as a whole, as if they had a leader to the pack, like they’ve all come together to commit crimes, like they all sat down and plotted this. That didn’t happen.”



CHRIS SIMMS AND JOHN RINGER

With the help of various snitches who were manipulated into cooperating, the authorities constructed a cabalistic conspiracy between everyone they rounded up. The prosecution portrayed a cohesive, deliberate structure through which crimes were decided on and executed. The war machine they portrayed in court and through the media was disciplined and rigid. In reality, the young men they targeted were disorganized and erratic, just like everyone else in Tacoma. There was no cohesion within the organization because there was no organization to begin with. The Tacoma Police Department, itself a vast conspiracy, was very eager to portray these young man as conspirators. Those who conspire always believe that others are conspiring against them.

John Ringer was one of the lead detectives conspiring against this circle of friends. He summed it up best when he said, “We were able to establish the conspiracy. When they join the group, they join the conspiracy.” Ringer, 48, a soon to retire detective, went after the targeted young men with a degree of glee and psychosis that is unusual even in a police officer. For 20 years he has jailed and persecuted people he identified as being a Crip. At one point, he even kept a scrapbook filled with pictures of Crips he had known and targeted. With this latest operation, Ringer has come unhinged, hoping to lord this new victory over his victims.

When a young man named Christopher Simms was in court, accused of being a Crip, Ringer started pointing at his sister Ciyanna, telling the guards to watch her, implying that she was dangerous. Ringer did this just before Simms was found guilty of criminal conspiracy, attempted first-degree murder and first-degree unlawful possession of a firearm. When the judge said the word guilty, Ciyanna told her brother everything would be okay. And then his eyes rolled up into his head and he passed out.



The courtroom erupted at that moment. Ciyanna started to yell at Ringer, telling him to stop pointing at her. “Why the fuck are there all these police?” she yelled, waving at the police who were surrounding her. At one point, she yelled, “I can’t breath!” Her brother was taken away, Ciyanna left the courtroom, and John Ringer was congratulated for the conviction.

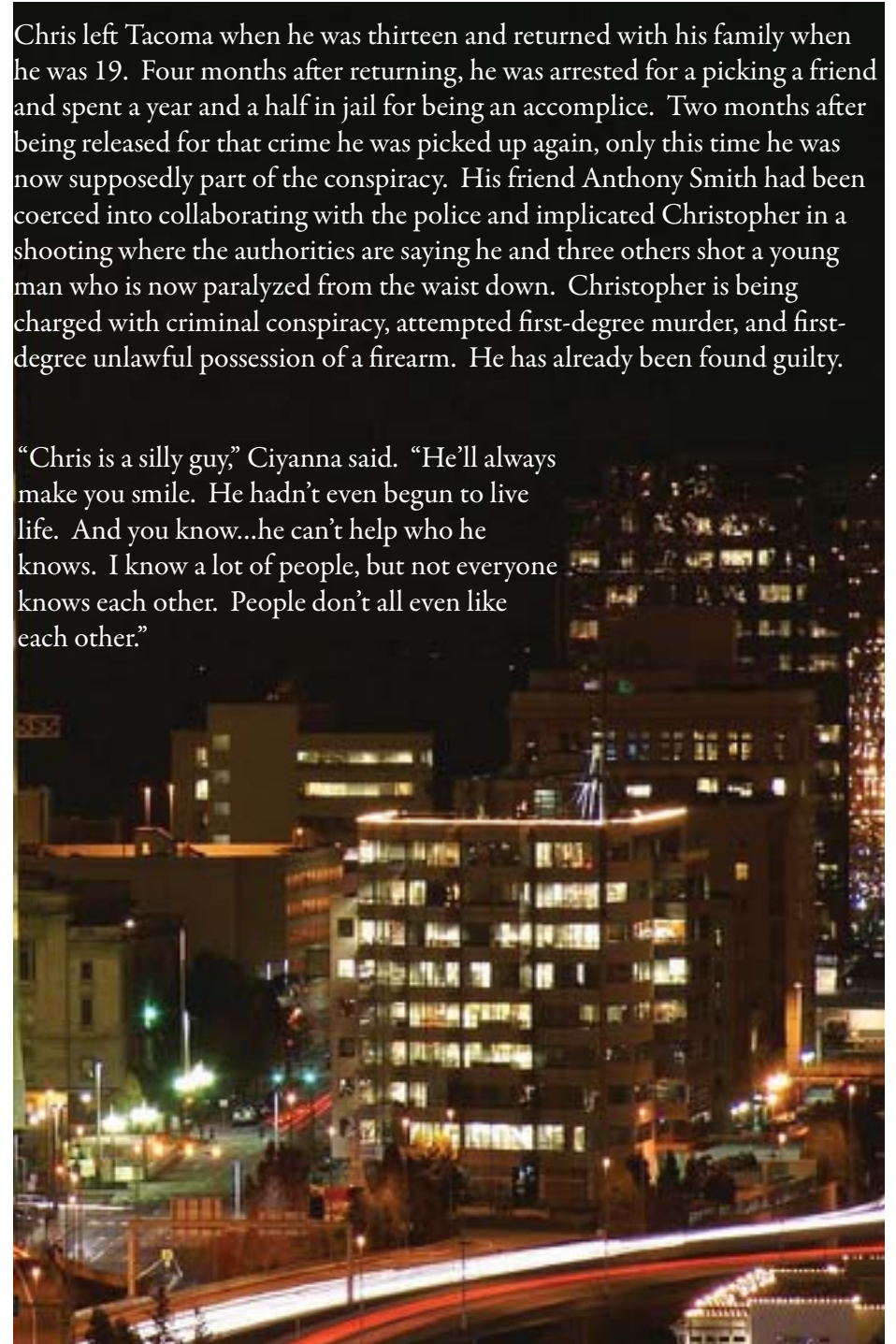
John Ringer was determined to crush the Crips, a gang once prominent in the Hilltop neighborhood. The gang formed in Los Angeles and came to the Hilltop in the 1980’s, with transplants from California operating on the streets. Soon the gang blossomed, its efforts fueled and funded by the sale of crack cocaine. Crips were overt in flying their colors and flashing their signs, proud to belong to their gang. Throughout the 80’s and 90’s, after dozens of crackdowns, the gang began to change. Its founders and old-timers were either locked up or dead, and the younger generations adapted to a changing landscape. Today, in 2010, it is no longer like the old days.

There is no longer the clear distinction between gang member and citizen, criminal and civilian. 20 years ago, when John Ringer patrolled the streets, he could pick out gang members by sight. And now that he can’t, he and his co-conspirators have grown desperate and are targeting young men and their families in order to further cleanse a neighborhood that was once completely out of their control. Just like John Ringer, the TPD is psychotically flexing its muscle to destroy the last traces of something that doesn’t exist.




Chris left Tacoma when he was thirteen and returned with his family when he was 19. Four months after returning, he was arrested for a picking a friend and spent a year and a half in jail for being an accomplice. Two months after being released for that crime he was picked up again, only this time he was now supposedly part of the conspiracy. His friend Anthony Smith had been coerced into collaborating with the police and implicated Christopher in a shooting where the authorities are saying he and three others shot a young man who is now paralyzed from the waist down. Christopher is being charged with criminal conspiracy, attempted first-degree murder, and first-degree unlawful possession of a firearm. He has already been found guilty.

“Chris is a silly guy,” Ciyanna said. “He’ll always make you smile. He hadn’t even begun to live life. And you know...he can’t help who he knows. I know a lot of people, but not everyone knows each other. People don’t all even like each other.”



The originals are all in their thirties. They lived through a time when the neighborhood was at war with itself. In that time period, Ciyanna grew up with some Crips protecting her.

“I had fun with them,” she said. “All the guys protected me. They told me to stay away from the boys, taught me all their tricks. They helped me with anything, watched over me when I was a girl. They’re just people, part of my family. We’ve all know each other forever. If they’re in for conspiracy, we all should be in jail for knowing them. I’ve fed half of them.”



Despite being protected, there was a night in 2001 when several other Crips broke into Ciyanna’s house and kept her family hostage at gunpoint while they searched for guns or drugs. They didn’t find anything, and soon after this Chris and Ciyanna’s mother Monica Fowler moved her family of thirteen women and one boy to Georgia, hoping to get out of Tacoma and keep her children out of gang life. The family stayed there until 2007. Gentrification of the Hilltop neighborhood intensified when they left in 2001. By the time they returned, the neighborhood was less black and something had changed.



MEETING WITH THE CHIEF

SHILOH BAPTIST CHURCH

Everyone waited in a conference room in the basement of Shiloh Baptist Church. Four Tacoma Police officers soon walked in, appearing slightly nervous. They greeted everyone, chatted about basketball, and then bowed their heads before god in prayer with everyone assembled. Among them was Don Ramsdell, the chief of the Tacoma Police Department. The four police officers volunteered to meet with this particular community group in order to improve their relations with the public. The community group, composed of the friends and mothers of the young men in jail, agreed to meet with the police in order to get answers. The police wanted good PR, the group wanted resolution.

When chief Ramsdell was told that his police officers had violated the law, he didn’t flinch. When he was asked how to file a complaint against the Tacoma Police Department, Ramsdell spent five minutes explaining in minute detail the bureaucratic labyrinth of filing a formal complaint. He never acknowledged that his officers had violated the law, sidestepped the accusation, and prattled on like a robot, emotionless and clear. The person who asked the question silenced themselves after this. It was under the shadow of authority that the meeting began.

The police spoke with benevolence, hiding behind their expertise whenever someone posed a difficult question. When asked how they dealt with habitual liars, the police responded by narrating their procedures when dealing with informants. They never responded emotionally. Chief Ramsdell was asked why detectives like John Ringer were allowed to micro-manage the cases from within the courtroom. "I don't think it's very productive to answer questions about this," he said in response. "It doesn't get us anywhere." When he was pressed further, all that Ramsdell could bring himself to say was, "That's our system. I know it's frustrating. I don't know..." Later on, he referred to the operation that robbed some of the women in the room of their loved ones as "the big takedown."

And then Lieutenant Sanford piped up. He told the people in the room that more was coming. The police know how to take out gangs quickly and effectively. There would be more operations targeting the gangs. "You have to go after the group, dismantle the network," he said. Someone asked why it was just the Hilltop that was targeted. Ramsdell responded that the Hilltop community wasn't targeted, only the Crips were. The police only went after the bad guys.

It was clear to some in the room that the latest operation against the young men was not a benevolent act to protect the Hilltop community. It was a final push to get rid of anyone who lived illegally, anyone who would not fit in with a Hilltop covered in condominiums. In response to the police and their feigned benevolence, a woman in the room said, "Hilltop was targeted for gentrification. It's not fair for you all to sit there and pretend that's not what happened." The police had no response to this statement. All of them remained silent.



CIYANNA AND CHRISTOPHER

Ciyanna Fowler watched her brother Christopher Simms pass out in court after he was found guilty. Her entire family had been demonized by Detective John Ringer. For years he had fought people he considered enemies, and in his old age he was pointing them out in court, determined to crush everyone surrounding his victims. When Christopher was taken out of the court room and back to his cell, Ringer stared malevolently at Ciyanna as she screamed:

"I CAN'T BREATHE!"

Ciyanna is being kicked out of her apartment. Because of the recent spotlight cast on her family, her landlord does not want to rent to anyone related to the gangs and the apartment was recently under video surveillance. Her daughter Deja has seen her uncle Chris on the television screen and heard the newscasters calling him dangerous.

Christopher was always there for his sister and her daughter. Ciyanna said that "my kids are Chris's kids." She doesn't want Deja to grow up without her uncle. Despite what is happening to Chris, Ciyanna said her family is "staying as strong as they can."

She has known people who called themselves Crips her whole life. "At one point, the Crips ran Hilltop," she said. "In the last ten years things changed. Everyone's dead, in jail. The young generation only knows the history, the past, they hear about the old days. A lot of them want to be like the OG's. They're little boys who want to prove something."





It is no coincidence that the police substation on Hilltop is across the street from the People's Community Center where they can keep a close eye on everything. The Tacoma Police Department wants to integrate everyone into its plans for the neighborhood. It wants to incorporate everyone, deputize everyone, and render everyone into good citizens. Ramsdell explained his department's plans for the Hilltop neighborhood very simply when he said, "We need to get to these kids when they're young. We need to go these kids right now. How do we get into your community?"



No one in the room had any illusions about what had happened to the Hilltop over the years. It has been slowly blasted apart and reconfigured, making way for new condominiums and apartments. The violence has subsided, but now the streets are empty at night and the police will detain anyone who dares to walk through an alley, sit on a ledge, or wander without a purpose. In order to pacify the streets, the police had to destroy all street life, all illegal life, all rebellious life.

