Chicago's South Side has become a war zone where troubled young men, armed with anger and firearms, take to the streets looking to settle a score. Ameena Matthews is out to set them straight.

Ameena Matthews wanted nothing more than to go home, have something to eat and unwind. She and her family had just returned to Chicago after attending a relative's funeral out of town. But just as her car exited the airport and onto the highway, she got the call. It was her coworker Antonio Thomas telling her to come meet him right away. Matthews knew it had to be serious for Thomas to call on her day off. She rushed home, put down her bags, laced up her sneakers and hit the streets. On the 6000 block of South Maryland Avenue in Chicago’s South Side, near where she was supposed to meet Thomas, she ran into a hectic crime scene. Separating the scores of police and their vehicles from a crowd of anxious onlookers was a line of...
thick red caution tape. “Anytime you see that, you know there’s been a shooting,” Matthews says. She pulled over and exited her car. Neighbors were burning with details: Jonathan Watkins, 29, had been shot in broad daylight while sitting in a minivan. And he hadn’t been alone. On the back seat was his 1-month-old daughter, Joyanly. Bullets had pierced her tiny frame.

It was only the latest in a string of shootings in Chicago, which last year earned the city the country’s murder capital, posting a 16 percent increase in homicides over the previous year. The city—which has a population of 2.7 million, less than a third the size of New York City—experienced 248 deadly shootings in 2016, compared with New York City’s 216.

The new year brought little improvement: In January there were 43 murders, nine of them children, including 15-year-old honor student Hayudra Penfield, whose case made national headlines when she was shot dead just days after performing at President Obama’s inauguration.

Now hearing Joyanly’s shooting, Matthews steadied herself. “As a mother, I was hurt,” she says. But for her, the attack had an added dimension. In Chicago, where street culture puts a premium on settling the score, any assault carries with it the threat of retaliation. And with so young a victim, Matthews knew this could turn into an all-out war. It was her job to stop that from happening.

The daughter of one of the city’s most infamous gang leaders, Matthews is one of a handful of women who work with CeaseFire Illinois, an organization whose mission is to stem the tide of shootings by readjusting the incentives for violence. “We go out to communities, we call them partners, to have to meet certain criteria,” explains Tia Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois. “They’re between 16 and 25 and have recently been released from jail or are parolee or probationer. It’s the perfect time of their lives. And in Chicago, it’s our job to challenge every behavior that they think is okay.

The CeaseFire model, which was developed in Chicago in 2002 by Greg Zanish, director of Violence Interrupter, Inc., has spread far and wide across the country, including Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York. But Chicago has the most active operation, with 92 staff members and 300 violence interrupters, now growing to 180 in 18 communities across the city. CeaseFire outreach workers act as life coaches to their participants, assisting with everything from anger management to job placement. But perhaps the most important role played by these interrupters is to intervene in the life of a child, like Matthews, who insert themselves into volatile situations to quash violence before it erupts. “Matthews is in a mission to help save lives,” says Joseph J. Pollock, director of Violence Interrupter Initiative in 2004. “She’s one of the best messengers we have.”

On the afternoon of the Watkins shooting, Matthews, who declined to give her age because she wants to maintain her connection with the young men she counsels, began canvassing the block, gathering information and gauging emotions. “When people are hurt, they speak the truth of what they want to happen,” she says. “You’re not just listening to any guy. This isn’t over or ‘We want justice.’ “In the midst of the commotion, she took out her cell phone and pulled up the Facebook page for Joyanly, an account she was connected to; the family had recently created him,” she says of Watkins, who survived the shooting. “It was all over Facebook.” She wasn’t surprised. Often, before something goes down in the streets, taunts and threats go up on social media. Hardiman calls it cyber gangbanging, and says it now plays a key role in the escalation of violence. “People are calling one another out on Facebook or Twitter, calling each other bitches and worse,” he says. “No one wants to be punked out where everybody can see it. It’s the public promotion of violence that doesn’t necessarily lead to the apprehension of suspects. According to police, social media is not always a reliable source of information. At press time, no arrests had been made.

SOMETHING TO PROVE

From the block, Matthews made her way to Comer Children’s Hospital, where the infant had been taken. For hours she stayed with Joyanly’s extended family as they waited for updates. Doctors worked on the child through the night.

But at 6 a.m. Tuesday morning, the surgeon came into the waiting room and announced to the family that Joyanly had died.

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“Like any city besieged by violence, Chicago’s chaos is rooted in a tangle of factors, including poverty, racism, unemployment, inadequate schools and proximity to jurisdictions with less strict gun laws,” Zanish wrote in 2007. “The threat of violence is spread throughout the city; many of those weapons were purchased just a few miles outside city limits.”

Chicago’s history as the birthplace of some of the country’s most notorious street gangs, and today police still label as many as 80 percent of recent homicides as gang related. But not everyone, even within this assessment, lane Williams, assistant director of the Carruthers Center for the Inner City Studies Program at Northeastern Illinois University, argues that not only is it inaccurate to attribute the current violence to gang activity, but it also drains 700 million dollars from the pockets of the city’s residents each year.

But just because something is related doesn’t mean it can’t be entirely solved. “For something to be gang-related it needs to be a top-down event in which a chief will say to an undeterred, ‘You will lose your turf, you will die, shoot that person.’ But it doesn’t work like that anymore,” Williams says. Today, Williams says, a teenage boy might claim an affiliation to the gang that once ran his neighborhood, but his deepest fears might be more entertainment than threat, and his friends might be both the Doos and the Black P Stones, founded by Jeff Fort, who is Ameena Matthews’s father.

By the end of the night, Matthews says, she was more “at peace” with what happened. “So we’re talking about a Black male problem with violence. Of course we’re not going to say that, so they say we have a problem with gang.”

But while interpersonal conflicts may ignite the flame, Williams says it’s shielded by a rubriculture that dictates young men pursue themselves by picking up a weapon in a city where an illegal firearm can be bought for as little as $80. He recounts the story of a young man from his neighborhood who had been shot at by another teen. “He was willing to let it go,” recalls Williams. “Only now he’s hugging out with his buddies who tell him, ‘Man, you’re a bitch. You let them pop your ass, and you ain’t did shit about it. They’re harassing him every day and it’s psychologi- cally destroying him. Now he’s got to show his friends he’s a man. So one day he gets in the car and goes looking for someone to aggravate so he can come back to his buddies with a story. He sees a group of kids, talking loud. The boy shoots at them, the kids scatter, and now he can go back to his friends and say, ‘We aired them ni–as out.’ But in the process, he accidentally kills an innocent child. That isn’t gang violence. It’s desperation, hopelessness, despair, cultural confusion.”

Being exposed to violence also begets more violence, adds CeaseFire founder Stokely, who now serves as executive direc- tor to its partner organization, Cure Violence. Not only is it the behavior copied from one person to the next, but the psychologi- cal trauma of constantly witnessing violence rewires how we respond to conflict. “It’s a chronic stress disorder that impacts your limbic system and results in very small amounts of stimuli causing intense emotions,” he explains. “It also produces an effect we call hostile attribution, where one sees threats where in fact, they aren’t even when they aren’t. So if someone accidentally steps on your toe or looks at your girl, it’s considered a threat, as though they are disinfecting you and then you react.”

Williams is convinced that many of the young men he counsels are also clinically depressed. “We have communities with 85 percent youth unemployment and high schools that have 400 incoming students and four years later have only two Black males left in the graduating class,” he says. “These young men know they’ve been written off, so how do you address that? We need a total overhaul of our economic and educational system, but there’s no political will to spend that kind of capital on us.”

Yet Matthews believes the community’s drive through the problems, passing a church, a community center, an aban- doned lot. She points to an apartment building where she used to live, the school she used to attend. Matthews met her, had her at 18, and Matthews was raised mostly by her grandmother. By the time she was a teenager the lure of the streets was too much to resist. The money, the drugs, the drugs, the drugs. Matthews moved out at 15 and got caught. “I understand what these kids are going through because once upon a time, I was high-risk,” she says of her own youth. “I’ve been shot at, I’ve shot, I’ve sold drugs. I’ve done drugs. I was in the street lifestyle and totally addicted to the insanity. I was just gone.”

When she was 22, Matthews had the first of her three sons. “She knew she needed to turn her life around and she began to pray,” journeyed. “I asked God to help me be a better mother and a better person and to remove me from that lifestyle,” she recalls. Those days Matthews—who has a bittersweet laugh and the boundless enthusiasm of a teenager—was a food pantry and a summer math and science academy with her husband of 12 years, Abdul R. Matthews, a retired dentist and Sunni alayh. “I know what it’s like to feel angry,” she says, tears suddenly welling in her eye. “I really miss my dad. And my little brother are both in federal penitentiaries. My other brother was bound, beaten and shot, and I’m not in that story. This is my reality. I decided that these kids. This cycle of violence has to stop and who better to help stop it than someone who’s lived it?”

Matthews began working with CeaseFire seven years ago, after a friend asked her to intervene with a troubled boy from the neighborhood. The teen had loaded a TEC-9 and was planning to confront some students who had teased his brother. Matthews drove around looking for him. When she found him, she sat him down and asked him to share his dreams of his future. “I see so many of these boys talking themselves out of being successful,” she says now. “They’ll tell you, ‘That’s for someone else, not me.’ “ But that day the boy mumbled that he was

GIRL IN THE HOOD

Chicago Police district director Tia Hardiman says that community outreach is critical. “When shooting, what emotions run high and calls for retaliation are most likely to ring off.”
THE VIOLENCE HAS TO STOP AND WHO BETTER TO HELP STOP IT THAN SOME-ONE WHO HAS LIVED IT?

thought about attending a historically Black college. Matthews offered to take him to visit Morehouse College for the weekend if he would return to his young man, she says proudly, is now living in Atlanta, studying law.

PEACE BROKER

It’s been three days since the baby was shot, and the streets are quiet. A local church has offered a reward of $5,000 for information leading to an arrest, and a prayer vigil is planned for dusk, with hundreds of community members, clergy and CeaseFire workers marching slowly through the streets. Later that night, Matthews is patrolling the neighborhood where her phone rings. It’s a teenage girl, telling her that earlier that day some boys had come to her apartment building at one another’s request. Matthews turns her car in the direction of a neighborhood known as Terror Town.

The rap on the door of a two-floor apartment. The boys—some of whom have known Matthews all their lives—tell her in there. There are ten of them in the small apartment, most of them 16 and 17 years old. Two sit on a too-soft sofa; several others lean against the wall. Dressed in skinny jeans and leather sneakers, they look like well-groomed high school kids. Matthews—who at 5 ft 2 barely reaches their shoulders—paces the room, intently listening to the boys’ requests. She hears things and stops and starts of her way. There is an act to the way Matthews puts on this smoldering flame. She is at once compassionate and angry, invoking guilt, shame and, ultimately, a desire to please.

Matthews asks first about the boys’ families: the grand- mother who had a stroke, the cousin who’s a student at Spaul- man. Then she lets them have it. In a profanity-laced tirade she demands to know exactly what they were thinking firing shots on a crowded street in the middle of the day. Thumping through the hours, her voice rising in anger, she says, “There could have been a baby girl down there at all these dead. How do you know if you would’ve caught a murder? You think you can do that time? Because in the pentilinary, it’s Aryan Nation against the Black boys.” She turns to one of the teens, slouched on the sofa, and asks him about his incarcerated father. “How did you feel at your grandmother’s funeral watching her going in the ground without her only son being there?” she demands. “Do you know what your son’s life would’ve been if he was alive? Do you want for your son what she’s going to get?”

On and on she goes, until she feels the boys’ anger begin to give way to relief; they ask Matthews to leave the group to go and speak to their rivals, who she has been told are gathered in the apartment of one boy’s grandmother, a few build- ings away. Matthews goes to see if the boy she’s advising is taking the meeting seriously. “How many of you have come to this door and Nana offered you something to eat?” she asks the second group of boys. “She let you all come in here and play the Xbox because she wants you to be safe, and now you’re bringing dummy d– to her door, shooting outside? And how many times did Nana let you lie on her couch, as beautiful as it is?” She pauses, glancing at the couch, which is covered in plastic. “I know that was hot in the summertime,” she adds. The boys begin to laugh. “Hell, I’ve lain on Nana’s sofa, too.”

Matthews senses the boys are letting down their guard and her moment to call for a truce. She takes out her phone and tells the first group of teens. “Meet me in the middle,” she says, drawing the rivals to neutral ground, the alley that runs behind their build- ings. Minutes later 17 young men and Matthews stand out in the cold night. Matthews gives them more advice, more lessons, the ties that bind them. “You are three days old,” she reminds two boys from opposite sides of the feud. “We had baby shower pic- nics, and both of you ran a wrong one. Let’s make it a wrong one. She orders the boys to face one another. “You owe each other an apol- ogy,” she says. Then Matthews steps back and watches as the boys unarmedly shake hands until they all agree that they wouldn’t retaliate, she says later, “and that is how they sealed it.”

Jemima Adebi (JoSembari) is the senior writer for ESSENCE magazine. Part of our Gum Down series appeared in May 2013.

SUSAN L. TAYLOR, FOUNDER AND CEO OF NATIONAL CARES MENTORING MOVEMENT AND EDITOR EMERITA OF ESSENCE, IS DETERMINED TO SAVE AT- RISK YOUTH FROM THE PERILS OF VIOLENCE. HERE SHE TELLS US HOW WE ALL CAN HELP!

This violence does not come out of nowhere. Our community is in crisis, and we cannot count on the government or corporate foundations or faith institutions alone to be the safety net for our young African American children. We have to lead the way.

There are organizations in your community that need African-American volunteers. Study after study shows that mentoring can bring about major transformations even in the most challenged young person’s life. Children develop higher self-esteem and better relationships with their peers, parents and teachers; risky behaviors decrease and academic performance increases.

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ONE HOUR TO CHANGE A LIFE