

SERIES FINALE  
ESSENCE  
GUNS  
DOWN

PALACE CAFE

Michael Davis is a participant in an innovative New Orleans violence reduction program aimed at keeping young Black men alive.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO

# CHANGE A LIFE?

Faced with one of the highest murder rates in the country, the city of New Orleans is trying to cure gun violence one young man at a time

By Jeannine Amber

Photography by Julie Dermansky

For almost a year Michael Davis had been on his best behavior, staying in the house and keeping out of trouble. Yet here it was the middle of the afternoon and his probation officer was knocking at the front door. Davis, a slight 26-year-old with an eager smile and an almost imperceptible tattoo of a cross between his eyes—a nod to one of his favorite rappers, Soulja Slim—opened the screen door of his grandmother’s home and let the man inside. His probation officer handed him an envelope without saying a word. Inside was a letter instructing

Davis to appear in court the following week. Failure to do so, the letter warned, would result in his arrest. Davis asked his PO what this was all about. The man said he didn’t know.

Davis, who was serving a five-year probation stemming from earlier convictions for drug and weapon possession, thought maybe the cops had dredged up some new offense to pin on him and considered not showing up for the court appearance. But when he turned to his most trusted adviser—his girlfriend, Kourtney Mansion, 27, an irrepressibly cheerful hairstylist at Supercuts—she urged him to go. “Babe, don’t think negative,” she told him. “Just go and find out what they want.”

Still Davis was worried. A high school dropout who had been raised, along with his six brothers and sisters, by his grandmother in New Orleans’ 17th Ward, Davis had spent much of his life on the wrong side of the law. For years he’d been hustling, he says, selling drugs to the scores of addicts who infested his neighborhood.

“This may be the civil rights issue of our time. If I don’t solve this, I will consider myself a failure.” —Mayor Mitch Landrieu

He’d been arrested for possession, resisting arrest, illegally carrying a weapon and first-degree murder (the charge was eventually dropped). Then on a hot summer day a few months before hurricane season in 2009, Davis and his best friend, Bryan, were both shot during a drive-by while standing in Davis’s front yard. Bryan didn’t survive the attack. After that Davis started carrying a gun for protection, a 9-mm Glock he bought on the street for \$50. “It’s not that I didn’t have a gun before,” he says. “But that’s when I started carrying it all the time.”

## A Mayor’s Mission

During the past year the nation has been locked in a fierce debate over how to reduce gun violence. Much of the attention has been paid to the most terrifying crimes: mass murders in which a lone madman opens fire at a navy yard, inside an elementary school, in a crowded theater. The randomness of these attacks, cutting through the everyday routines of our lives, ignites a visceral fear: *That could have been me, my family, my child.* But as politicians lock horns over how best to disarm the potential killers in our midst, there is another gun crisis, with a body count in the thousands, that threatens a generation of young Black men.

In urban communities around the country—from South Philly to North Baltimore, from Oakland to New Orleans—Black men are killing one another at alarming rates. Nationwide, homicide is the leading cause of death among Black men ages 15 to 19, according to the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention, with young Black males eight times as likely as their White counterparts to be killed by a gun. Our boys are dying over disputes about drugs and money, but increasingly the deaths are caused by infractions so slight—*You stepped on my sneaker. You looked at my girl. You owe me \$5*—that experts are convinced something else is at work besides poverty, lack of education and easy access to guns.

To understand the trend and see the possible solutions, look no further than Davis’s hometown, New Orleans. For the better part of two decades, this city of 360,000 residents has suffered a murder rate seven to ten times higher than the national average, and currently has one of the highest per capita homicide rates in the country. Almost 90 percent of the victims of gun violence in New Orleans are male and almost all of those men are Black.

“In this city and across the country, you have African-American kids being killed at catastrophic levels,” says New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu. “And when you talk to people about it their first reaction is, ‘If you took everybody out of poverty and gave them jobs, it would be okay.’ But there are a lot of places where people are poor and out of work and they are not shooting each other. The young Black man

who is killing people and who everybody is calling a thug wasn’t born that way. We need to find out the truth of what is going on.”

Landrieu, a staunch advocate for criminal justice reform, swept into office in 2010, becoming the first White mayor of New Orleans since his father left the post in 1978. “This is something no one wants to talk about,” Landrieu says of the 175 homicides New Orleans recorded the year he took office. “But as Mike Nutter, the mayor of Philadelphia, said, if 200 White boys were getting killed, the world would stop. That can only mean one thing: We don’t value the lives of African-American men, and that’s wrong. This is a moral issue and may be the civil rights issue of our time. I will consider myself a failure if I don’t figure this out.”

A year ago, after more than two years of research and under the advisement of national crime expert David Kennedy, Landrieu implemented NOLA for Life, a comprehensive campaign aimed at reducing gun violence. At its center is the Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS), a far-reaching multidepartment effort that focuses on identifying through police intelligence and arrest records the young men most likely to be involved in gun violence, and calling them

in for a meeting with the most powerful men and women in local, state and federal law enforcement. The young men are told that the violence must stop and offered an array of social services. Then they are given a choice: Either change your behavior or face the consequences. “We call these young men targets,” says the mayor, referring to the 690 young men the city has already identified as high-risk. One of Mayor Landrieu’s first targets was Michael Davis. ▽



Davis in the kitchen: “I take pride in coming to work.”



## Hard-Knock Life

To Davis, being ordered to show up at court without an explanation felt to him like another knot in a string of hard luck, the kind that had marred his life for as long as he could remember. Davis's father had been murdered when Davis was just 4 years old, and his mother had numerous criminal convictions of her own, for possession of drugs and drug paraphernalia and forgery. "Where I grew up wasn't like a regular neighborhood," says Davis of his childhood. "Basically nine out of ten parents of the kids I knew growing up were on crack or heroin."

Davis's earliest memory is a recollection of his father before he passed away. "One of my mother's friends was holding me," he says, looking off as if searching for the image in the distance. "I guess my father didn't like it, because I remember my mama taking me from the guy and trying to ride off on her bike. Then my daddy caught up with us and knocked us down." It's not a happy memory, he concedes, but he says, "It's the only one I got."

Davis's grandmother did what she could to make sure the seven children in her care were clothed and fed, but she could only do so much. "When someone gets tired," Davis reflects, "they get tired." By the time he was a teenager, Davis, like many of his friends, had slid so far behind academically that at 17 he was still in ninth grade. That year, a few weeks after school started, Hurricane Katrina hit.

The day of the storm Davis had been hanging out with some friends on a street corner near his house. "We were young; we didn't watch the news," he says. "We didn't know we were supposed to evacuate." Davis says the cops drove by, told the boys they weren't supposed to be out, then herded them into a patrol car and took them to jail. "The cops in my neighborhood are just like that," he shrugs. Later that night, in what Davis describes as one of the most harrowing moments of his life, the jail flooded. He and the other inmates escaped the facility by breaking a small hole in a wall and sliding down an extension cord, which burned their hands. The group ended up stranded on a bridge, guarded by police. They were eventually transferred to another facility, but with the confusion of the storm, Davis says it was a month before he was released, even though no charges were ever filed.

After that Davis returned home but stopped going to school altogether. "I was so behind," he says. "School just felt like a waste of time." Besides, he says, there were things he wanted—material things, like new sneakers. "I knew I had to provide for myself. It wasn't like anybody was coming to my rescue."

He started selling weed. When that didn't prove profitable,

he turned to crack. He would keep the money he made inside his shoes. The most he ever had at one time was \$12,000. "I'm not going to lie," he says. "It felt good. I used to spend days just sitting inside the house taking pictures with my money. I thought I was Puff Daddy."

Growing up, Davis says there weren't a lot of people he trusted. Bryan, whom Davis had known since pre-K, was his best friend. "He was the closest thing to perfect any man out here could be," Davis says. "He had a job and took care of his child and his mama and if there was anything I needed, he'd be like, 'Come get it.' Half the time I didn't even pay the dude back. And the way he got shot..."

It is this moment, right before the bullets hit, that Davis keeps replaying in his mind. Bryan had come over asking to borrow \$5. Davis had a ten and told Bryan he was going to the store for some change. That's when the car pulled up and someone started shooting. Davis survived a bullet to the abdomen, but Bryan, struck twice in the chest, died on the spot.

"Up until this day I blame myself," says Davis, who insists he doesn't know who the shooter was. "I put that full responsibility on my heart and nobody can tell me different. If I had given him the \$10 I had in my pocket, he would have gone about his business. Instead he lost his life. That hurt me so much." After that Davis just gave up. "I didn't have anything to live for," he says. He was also so shaken he wouldn't leave home without his gun.

With that, Davis, a high school dropout, bereft of parental supervision and longing for his murdered friend, became a frightening statistic: a young man, armed and angry, with nothing left to lose.

## Breaking the Cycle

For decades experts have pointed to a confluence of social and economic circumstances that can predispose a young man to violence. Most lethal, they say, is the generational poverty, unemployment and lack of education that plague our inner cities. But a growing body of research suggests that one of the greatest predictors of violence is having been the victim of violence in the past. "If we see a young man brought to the hospital with a gunshot wound," says Anne Marks, executive director of Youth Alive!, an Oakland-based violence prevention program, "we know there is a 44 percent chance that we will see him again with another gunshot wound within five years and a 20 percent chance he'll be dead."

Marks explains this is due in part to the way violence can rewire the brain, leaving its victims wrestling with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "Studies have shown that



"Seeing Michael succeed brings me so much joy and happiness," says case manager Sidney Monroe, above.

being a victim—and by that I mean anything from getting shot at or having a friend shot in front of you to experiencing childhood abuse or growing up with a parent on drugs—can impact the neurological pathways and affect behavior," says Marks. "Victims of violence can experience hypervigilance, jumpiness, quick reactions without thinking and an inability to access feelings of love, empathy or even fear." Indeed, a study published last year in *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* cited "alarming" rates of PTSD among inner-city residents and found that almost 90 percent of civilian African-American men suffering from trauma had been involved in the criminal justice system; many of their charges had been for violent crimes.

"One of the things we see in people who have experienced trauma is an inability to distinguish between a real and perceived threat," Marks explains. "So someone taps you on the shoulder, and you punch them. Or you start carrying a gun to feel safer. But these attempts to ward off threats can actually put you in harm's way." Marks also points out that people who carry guns are more likely to get shot during an assault than those who don't.

Experts at the forefront of violence reduction say that to break the cycle, communities need comprehensive programs that unite law enforcement, social services, and faith- and community-based institutions in an effort that recognizes that fighting crime requires more than punishment. High-risk young men also need our help.

## Law and Order

The centerpiece of New Orleans' Group Violence Reduction Strategy is the Call-In, a carefully orchestrated event that happens four times a year at the city's Criminal District Court on the corner of Tulane Avenue and Broad Street. One part *Scared Straight*, one part *Intervention*, it's a performance of theatrical proportions, carefully designed for maximum impact. The letter Davis received from his probation officer was his call to attend.

On October 25, 2012, Davis arrived at the courthouse along



Agents of change: Mayor Mitch Landrieu and Deputy Mayor Judy Morse

"Having these young men form healthy relationships with positive adults is the number one thing." —David Muhammad

with approximately two dozen other young men, all of them on probation or parole. When the doors of the courtroom opened, the men were instructed to sit in the jury box on the left side of the room. Across from them, seated in an identical jury box, were a dozen more men, inmates dressed in orange jumpsuits and shackles.

By design, every Call-In follows the same format with a cast of speakers delivering carefully scripted talking points, all send-

ing one clear message—the killing must stop. The judge enters the room and calls the court to order. The men fidget in their seats as the speakers file in. Accompanying the mayor is a group of officials Landrieu describes as The Guns. It includes the U.S. and district attorneys, the superintendent of police, the sheriff and representatives from the FBI, ATF and DEA. Also present are an ER surgeon, a local minister, a mother who's lost her son to gun violence and two representatives from social services agencies.

"Gentlemen," begins the pastor, casting his eyes at the men seated on either side of the room, "we've invited you here today to tell you the new rules of the game and how you will stay out of Orleans Parish Prison. We ask that you listen closely."

"We have come together to put you on notice," adds Landrieu when it's his turn at the podium. "I am telling you, as mayor, that we are invested in you making it to old age. But the violence has to stop. The next time you, or someone you know, is involved in hurting someone else, the full weight of the law is going to come down on you. We are going to arrest not just you but everyone in your group. We know who you are; we know who you hang out with. But you have a choice," he emphasizes. "We have people here who can help you get an education, job training and placement. We have substance abuse and mental health experts. The choice is yours. We hope you choose wisely."

For almost two hours law enforcement officials detail the extraordinary measures they will take to lock up these men if the violence continues. When they finish, the ER doctor describes in graphic detail the bullet wounds that leave young men wheelchair-bound and hooked up to colostomy bags. The grieving mother shares the pain of her son's murder resting on her heart. At strategic moments during the presentation, images flash across two large screens set up in the courtroom: close-ups of gunshot wounds, mug shots and surveillance footage, taken by the police, of the very men sitting in the courtroom. The message is clear: *We are watching you.*

In the year since New Orleans' GVRS went into effect, there has been a 25 percent decrease in murders compared with the same period the year before. Forty-five men have signed up for services after attending their Call-Ins; 15 of those have been connected to job training or placement and one has enrolled in college. "We still have a long way to go," says Deputy Mayor and Chief of Staff Judy Morse. "But this work is about offering a chance

at rehabilitation, one person at a time. So every young man who makes the choice to sign up for services is a victory."

David Muhammad, a national expert on criminal justice, says in order to grasp the strategy's full potential, consider the impact it had when implemented in Boston in the early 1990's. "At the time, Boston was experiencing very high levels of gun violence," says Muhammad, who as CEO of Solutions, Inc., advises local >



governments on violence reduction strategies. “The city instituted a comprehensive program based on David Kennedy’s work, which reduced gun violence so quickly it became known as The Boston Miracle. In the late 1990’s Boston went two and a half years without a single juvenile homicide. It was incredible.”

The strategy is so effective, notes Kennedy, the director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and author of *Don’t Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America* (Bloomsbury), “communities are actively organizing to make sure their city implements it. They know it keeps young men alive and helps law enforcement focus on the people who are causing the problem, and not on everybody else in the neighborhood.”

Versions of Kennedy’s crime reduction strategy, which goes by various names, have been put into effect in dozens of cities across the country from Cincinnati to Los Angeles, with some showing a 50 percent decline in gun homicides. “The cities that have been the least successful have tried a cafeteria

approach of just picking a few ingredients,” explains Muhammad. “But it’s the whole package that makes this initiative effective. We have to hold men accountable while also providing service, support and opportunities. Most beneficial of all is having these young men form healthy relationships with positive adults. That’s the number one thing.”

Davis’s Call-In concluded, as they all do, with an offer for the men to sign up for social services. Counselors were waiting in the jury room in the basement of the building to register all those who were interested. Davis says the Call-In scared the hell out of him. “They had the mayor and all these people you see in the newspaper preaching the same thing: ‘If you don’t straighten up, we’re coming to get you and everybody you associate with,’” he says. “I was like, *Man, they ain’t playing.*” Davis left the courtroom and made his way downstairs.

## Wrapped in Love

Community Service Specialist Sidney Monroe is a lifelong resident of New Orleans with deep-set eyes and a gentle disposition. When she speaks of her work with the high-risk men she’s been serving for the past two decades, she describes it as her call-

“I want to marry my girl. I want to go wherever the future takes us.” —Michael Davis



“Now I feel like I can go through the day without worrying about him,” says Kourtney Mansion, Davis’s girlfriend.

ing. “I enjoy working with people who feel hopeless,” she says. “It does me all the good in the world just to be able to show that I care.”

Still, she admits, she and Davis got off to a rocky start. As the lead case manager for the GVRs initiative, she performed Davis’s intake and became his counselor. She set him up with job interviews and sent him to a job fair with cheerful words of encouragement, “Dress nice, Michael. Tell them you’re a quick learner. Sell yourself!” But Davis was disappointed that a job wasn’t materializing quickly enough. By December, less than two months after signing up for services, he disengaged.

Monroe persisted, calling Davis every few days, leaving messages and dropping by. “When the men from the Call-In sign up, I tell them, ‘You have now become my number one priority,’” she says. She kept calling until finally Davis picked up. Behind the might and force of the mayor’s big guns there

is this: the love of a woman who takes a wayward young man and treats him like a son. It is these gestures of care that experts say may hold the most transformative power of all.

Davis still sounds amazed when he talks about the attention he received from Monroe. “It wouldn’t be like she was in front of a computer with her folders when she called,” he remembers, incredulous. “She would be off the clock! Like literally at the grocery store and she would check in on me. That made me feel so special. I love the ground that lady walks on. That’s what made me finally follow the path she was showing me.”

This past March, with Monroe’s help, Davis landed a job as a pot washer at the Palace Café, an upscale restaurant on Canal Street. He was elated, calling Monroe repeatedly. “He said, ‘Thank you for not giving up on me,’” she recalls. “And I said, ‘Make me proud. You’re on your way!’”

Davis’s supervisor at work, Eric Offray, is also an inspiration to Davis: “He’s been at the restaurant 17 years,” says Davis. “When I got the job, his whole preach to me is that he used to be on pots, but he worked and worked and eventually moved his way up. So the only thing stopping you from moving up is yourself.” Davis is talking about his job while sitting in a small room at Total Community Action, Inc., a New Orleans-based social service provider

where Monroe teaches employment readiness classes. He’s here with his girl, Kourtney Mansion, who is beaming proudly as he talks. “Remember when we got you clothes for the interview?” she says, reminding him of a trip they took to the Salvation Army to get Davis a pair of slacks and some \$15 dress shoes. “Size 11,” Davis says, shaking his head. “I wear a 9.”

Michael Davis loves Kourtney Mansion. He first fell for her way back in high school, but after Katrina she moved to St. Louis with her parents and they lost touch. Still Davis never stopped thinking about her. After years of searching, he tracked down Mansion on Facebook in 2011, and she moved back to New Orleans so the two of them could be together. “Kourtney wasn’t around for any of the high points,” Davis says now. “Like when I had that \$12,000. But even when I was down and out she’s always said, ‘Don’t give up. Don’t turn back to the streets, because what if I lose you?’ Her heart is with me and I love her,” he finishes simply. “I love her hard.”

## In Search of Solutions

Experts weigh in on how to reduce gun violence

“There are middle school children who are exhibiting high delinquency and chronic absenteeism from school. If we could **pair these children with positive, healthy mentors**, we would see a definite reduction in violence in coming years. Contact your local school district; they are always looking for community members to build relationships with their children.”

—David Muhammad, former Alameda County chief probation officer, Oakland

“It is unacceptable that a child or teen dies or is injured from guns every 30 minutes in our country. We all need to urge our members of Congress to **support commonsense gun violence prevention measures** including limits on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines. We also must bring attention to the number of children killed and injured by gun violence in our communities, and offer parents, children and teens the resources, support and tools to survive and work against the culture of violence.”

—Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, Washington, DC

“**Women are critical** in showing young men the pain violence is causing to families. Many times these young men break down in tears when they hear women talking about how they had to bury their son. Women don’t need to be in the background of this strategy, they need to be up front.”

—Pastor Michael McBride, national director of Lifelines to Healing, Berkeley, CA

In July Davis got a promotion from washing pots to food runner. In September he, Mansion and her 8-year-old son moved into their own apartment, a two-bedroom rental that Monroe helped the couple secure. “I want us to one day have a house, with a mortgage, so we can really be together as a family,” he says.

A few years ago Davis’s life sounded like a prelude to a tragedy: He was a gun-toting drug dealer with no sense of future possibilities beyond, as he puts it, “getting killed or going to jail.” Now he has been folded into a community, given guidance and attention and won himself an opportunity to make an honest living. And he’s been wrapped in love. Last night Davis announced to Mansion he was saving up to buy her an engagement ring. “I want to marry my girl,” he says. “I want to go wherever the future takes us.” Mansion put her hand on his shoulder and smiled at her man. “We’re going to go far,” she says. □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for this magazine.

“The more organized a block is, the fewer the problems it has with violence. Criminals prefer areas where people aren’t picking up the phone calling 911 every time there’s a problem. **Organize your community** by holding meetings in a park or neighborhood church, invite a representative from your local precinct to assist you or even solicit the help of your elected officials.”

—Noel Leader, cofounder of 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care, Brooklyn

“Drive-bys tend to be in communities where people are locked out of the system. **We need to create economic opportunities** so that these young men can take care of themselves and their families and don’t have to turn to crime as a way of survival. If you are a small-business person, making an extra effort to hire a young person from the neighborhood can make a difference.”

—Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph.D., coauthor of the American Psychological Association’s 2013 report on gun violence prediction and prevention, Philadelphia

“If you really want sustained success in reducing violence, you have to address the underlying factors that predispose these communities to violence: lack of economic and educational opportunities. But the value that we place on poor communities is very low, which means people don’t make investments in these neighborhoods. **We all have to push our mayors** to look at these areas not only as problems that need to be solved but also as places that merit the same kind of attention, and have the same potential for development, as other communities.”

—Linda Bowen, executive director of the Institute for Community Peace, Washington, DC —J.A.