

# CHICAGO HOPE

**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**

BY JEANNINE AMBER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID W. JOHNSON

A

meena 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 eased out of the airport and onto the turnpike, 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 6500 block of South Maryland Avenue on 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 ▷

Ameena Matthews, CeaseFire Illinois' first female violence interrupter, mediates potentially deadly conflicts, brokering truces to keep the peace.

MAKEUP: MARCUS GEETER/KENBARBOZA.COM

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 buzzing with details: Jonathan Watkins, 29, had been

shot in broad daylight while sitting in a minivan. And he hadn’t been alone. On his lap was his 6-month-old daughter, Jonylah. Bullets had pierced her tiny frame.

It was only the latest in a string of shootings in Chicago, which last year earned the distinction as 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 443 deadly shootings in 2012, compared with New York City’s 236. The new year brought little improvement: In January there were 43 murders, nine of them children, including 15-year-old honor student Hadiya Pendleton, whose case made national headlines when she was shot dead just days after performing at President Obama’s inauguration.

Now, hearing the news of Jonylah’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 Cease-Fire Illinois, an organization whose mission is to stem the tide of shootings by reaching out to high-risk youth. “Our clients, we call them participants, have to meet certain criteria,” explains Tio Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois. “They’re between 16 and 25 and have recently been released from jail or are on parole or probation. These are men with a history of violence, and it’s our job to challenge every behavior that they think is okay.”

The CeaseFire model, which was developed in Chicago in 2000 by epidemiologist Gary Slutkin, M.D., now exists in 17 cities across the country, including Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York. But Chicago has the most active operation, with 92 staff members, most of them ex-offenders, serving 748 participants 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 dangerous work is carried out by violence interrupters like Matthews, who insert themselves into volatile situations to quash violence before it erupts. “Matthews is on a mission to help save lives,” says Hardiman, who created the Violence Interrupter Initiative in 2004. “She’s one of the best messengers we have.”

On the afternoon of the Watkins shooting, Matthews, who declines 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 explains. “So you’re listening for things like, ‘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 of Jonylah’s father. “He knew they were coming for 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 that you got punked out.” But public promises of violence don’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

**F**rom the block, Matthews made her way to Comer Children’s Hospital, where the infant had been taken. For hours she stayed with Jonylah’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 Jonylah had died. Recalling that moment, Matthews sighs heavily. “When a child dies, it raises the stakes all over again,” she says. “Now the whole community is involved and I have to get them to stand down.”

The next day on South Maryland Avenue, mourners visited a makeshift memorial marking Jonylah’s short life. Tied to a tree was a riot of red and pink Mylar balloons. It looked like a birthday party, with oversized stuffed animals and cards with scrawled notes and drawn on hearts. A woman pulled up in a white SUV and gently placed a large arrangement of flowers on the ground. “Maybe this will be a wake-up call,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes.

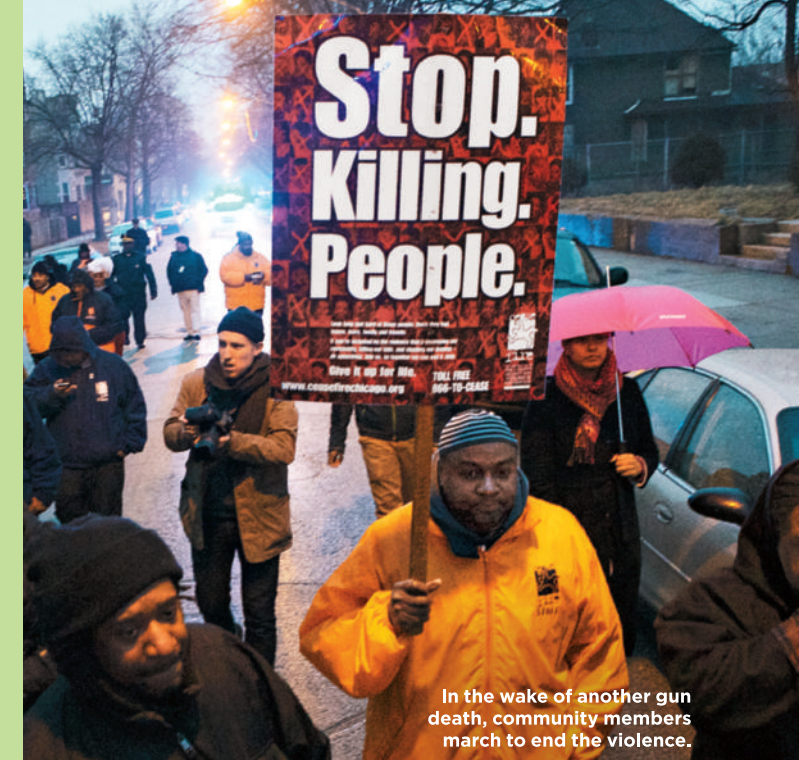
Like any city besieged by violence, Chicago’s chaos is rooted in a tangle of factors, including poverty, racism, unemployment, inadequate schools and proximity to jurisdictions with less strict gun control. Last year more than 7,000 illicit guns were confiscated in the city; many of those weapons were purchased just a few miles outside city limits.

Chicago also has a 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 agrees with this assessment. Lance 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 diverts attention away from the real issue. “Gangs have a hierarchy,” says Williams, coauthor of *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation* (Lawrence Hill Books), which chronicles the rise of one of Chicago’s largest gangs, The Black P Stones, founded by Jeff Fort, who is Aameena Matthews’s father. “For something to be gang-related it needs to be a top-down event in which a chief will say to an underling, ‘Go shoot that person.’ But it doesn’t work like that anymore.”

These days, Williams says, a teenage boy might claim an affiliation to the gang that once ran his neighborhood, but his deepest loyalty will be to his clique. “Shootings now are often conflicts between boys who share the same gang affiliation,” he notes. “So what we’re really talking about is a Black male problem with violence. Of course, politicians can’t come out and say that, so they say we have a problem with gangs.”



CeaseFire Illinois director Tio Hardiman knows that outreach is critical after a shooting, when emotions run high and calls for retaliation are most likely to ring out.



In the wake of another gun death, community members march to end the violence.

But while interpersonal conflicts may ignite the flame, Williams says it’s stoked by a subculture that dictates young men prove themselves by picking up a weapon in a city where an illegal firearm can be borrowed for as little as \$30. 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 hanging out with his buddies who tell him, ‘Man, you’re a bitch. You let them pop your ass, and you ain’t did sh-- about it.’ They’re harassing him every day, and it’s psychologically 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 aggress against 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 Slutkin, who now serves as executive director to its partner organization, Cure Violence. Not only is the behavior copied from one person to the next, but the psychological 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 things as hostile even when they aren’t. So if someone accidentally steps on your toe or looks at your girl, it’s considered hostile, as though they are disrespecting you. And then you react.”

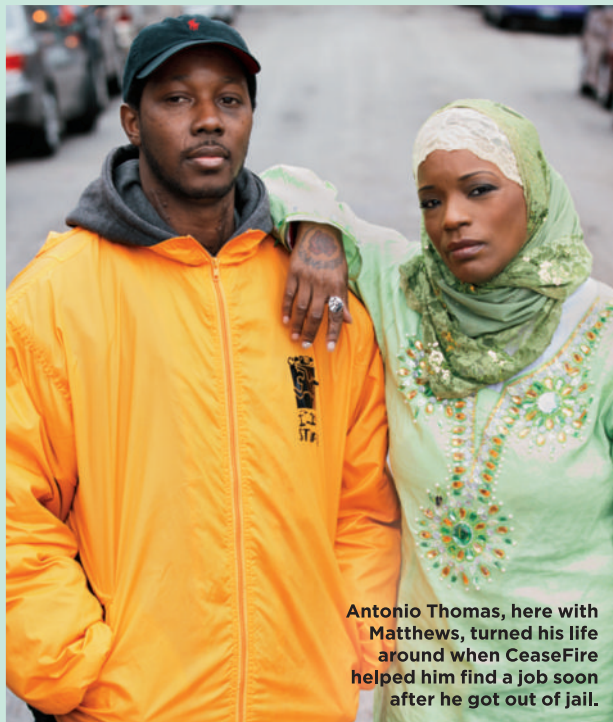
Williams is convinced that many of the young men he counsels are also clinically depressed. “We have communities with 85 percent youth unemployment and high schools that have 400 incoming students and four years later have only two Black males left in the graduating class,” he says. “These young men 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.”

#### GIRL IN THE 'HOOD

**A**ameena Matthews drives through the community, passing a church, a community center, an abandoned lot. She points to an apartment building where she used to live, the school she used to attend. Matthews’s mother 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 chaos. Matthews moved out at 15 and got caught up. “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 sold drugs, I’ve done drugs. I was embedded 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 children, a son. She knew she needed to turn her life around and she began to pray. “I asked God to please help me be a better mother and a better person and to remove me from that lifestyle,” she recalls. These days Matthews—who has a boisterous laugh and the boundless enthusiasm of a teenager—runs a food pantry and a summer math and science academy with her husband of 12 years, Abdur R. Matthews, a retired dentist and Sunni shaykh. “I know what it’s like to feel angry,” she says, tears suddenly welling in her eyes. “I really miss my dad. He and my little brother are both in federal penitentiaries. My other brother was bound, beaten and shot, and I had to identify his body. This is my reality. I don’t want that for 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 a loaded TEC-9 and was planning to confront some students who had teased his brother. Matthews drove around looking for the boy. 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 >



Antonio Thomas, here with Matthew, turned his life around when CeaseFire helped him find a job soon after he got out of jail.

Still, the organization is not without its detractors. Relations with cops have been strained over concerns that CeaseFire workers may not be turning over vital information for fear of losing the trust of their participants, according to a report in the *Chicago Tribune*. Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy declined requests to speak to ESSENCE about CeaseFire, but he commented on a press release issued by his office in April that showed shootings in the first quarter of 2013 were down 27 percent from the same period last year. “It’s not victory,” says McCarthy. “But it is progress. Part of what’s driving it is a return to community policing: having the same officers working the same beat every day and working with communities instead of offending them.”

Others question CeaseFire’s focus on changing individual behavior rather than tackling the larger societal ills that breed violent behavior in the first place. One cannot eradicate violence, these experts say, without also addressing entrenched racism and economic inequality. The connection is starkly evident in Chicago, where 80 percent of the shootings last year happened in predominantly African-American, low-income neighborhoods.

“In these communities, you see great disparities in health, education, employment, safety and access to opportunity,” says Linda Bowen, executive director of the Institute for Community Peace, a national organization that aims to reduce violence. “Because of that, people’s sense of their possibilities diminishes to the point of hopelessness. There is a sense that society doesn’t value them or their community. And since there is no clear reason why, sometimes children take this on and begin to believe they *are* worthless. The frustration they feel can result in violence, both to others and to themselves.” Bowen—who’s studied the impact of community violence for almost two decades—adds, “If you want to reduce violence, you have to change the conditions in which people live.”

But few question the benefit of the one-on-one support CeaseFire provides for the young men who have already fallen through the cracks—the undereducated ex-offenders with meager job prospects and no idea how to access them. Five years ago Antonio Thomas, then 28, was fresh out of the federal penitentiary after serving four years for bank fraud. He knew that unless he made some changes he was likely headed back. A friend’s brother was a CeaseFire outreach worker; Thomas became his participant and was soon cleaning streets as part of an employment program for ex-offenders.

“I was so happy,” he remembers. “I was getting up at two o’clock to shower and dress, even though I didn’t need to be at work till five. My energy bounced off me onto everyone around me, and when everyone sees you happy, they want it too. I started going around the block and helping the guys under me. But you can’t talk to these guys like you just left college. You’ve got to explain to them, ‘Get your ass in this van and fill out this application. You’re too embarrassed to fill it out because you don’t know how? Then I’ll fill it out for you.’ I got one person a job, and then a month later, 15 more people were working on these vans with me. And they’re feeling good, too, like, ‘Tone, you got me a job and I don’t need to worry about the police.’”

In 2010 Thomas became a CeaseFire outreach worker himself. He lights up when he speaks about the difference he’s made in the lives of his participants. “Sometimes all people need is for someone to show them a new way to live,” he reflects. “Most people don’t do that for these young brothers.”

### 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 \$11,000 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. In the distance a siren wails.

Later that night, Matthews is patrolling the neighborhood when her phone rings. It’s a teenage girl, telling her that earlier that day some boys had been shooting at one another across a busy intersection. Matthews turns her car in the direction of a neighborhood known as Terror Town.

She raps on the door of a second-floor apartment. The boys—some of whom have known Matthews all their lives—let her in. There are ten of them in the small apartment, most of them 16 and 17 years old. Two sit low on a beat-up 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 feet 2 barely reaches their shoulders—paces the room, intentionally bumping a standing boy as she passes. He says nothing and steps out of her way. There is an art to the way Matthews puts out 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 grandmother who’s had a stroke, the cousin who’s a student at Spelman. 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 house, her voice rising in anger, she says, “There could have been grandmas and aunties out there! Now what if you would have caught a murder? You think you can do that time? Because in the penitentiary, 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. The boy mumbles that it hurt. “Is that what you want for your son?” she responds.

On and on she goes, until she feels the boys’ anger begin to give way to remorse. Almost two hours pass before Matthews leaves 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 buildings away. Matthews uses this to her advantage. “How many times have you come to this door and Nana offered you something to eat?” she asks the second group of boys. “She lets y’all come up in here and play the Xbox because she wants you to be safe, and now you’re bringing dummy sh-- 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 knows it’s time to call for a truce. She takes out her phone and dials the first group of teens. “Meet me in the middle,” she says, drawing the rivals to neutral ground, the alley that runs behind their buildings. Minutes later 17 young men and Matthews stand out in the cold night. Matthews gives them one more lecture, invoking the ties that bind them. “You are born three days apart,” she reminds two boys from opposite sides of the feud. “We had baby shower picnics in the park for your mothers. What is wrong with you?” She orders the boys to face one another. “You owe each other an apology,” she says. Then Matthews steps back and watches as the boys embrace. “They all swore to me that they wouldn’t retaliate,” she says later, “and this is how they sealed it.” □

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## “THE VIOLENCE HAS TO STOP AND WHO BETTER TO HELP STOP IT THAN SOMEONE 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 agree to stand down. That young man, she says proudly, is now living in Atlanta, studying law.

### BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Last June, after a rash of Memorial Day shootings that claimed the lives of ten residents, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel announced a joint program with CeaseFire, the police department and the department of public health to be funded with a one-year, \$1.5 million grant. The money was used to hire additional CeaseFire staff and open storefront offices in two of the city’s most violent neighborhoods. Before the funding, some CeaseFire staff had been working out of their cars, meeting participants at fast-food establishments just to get out of the cold.

Slutkin maintains the program gets results. “The Department of Justice, the Centers for Disease Control and Johns Hopkins University have all done evaluations and shown us to be effective in making communities safer,” he says. “And studies show we are changing thinking, even among those we don’t work with directly.” Indeed, a 2009 report by the DOJ notes that in seven neighborhoods where CeaseFire operated, shootings and killings declined by as much as 34 percent as a direct result of its efforts.

## ONE HOUR TO CHANGE A LIFE



**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 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 underresourced Black 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.

All it takes is one hour a week to make a difference. CARES Mentoring can connect you to opportunities to do one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring, faith-based mentoring. There are children in group homes and foster care who need our attention. The village is burning and it’s our moral responsibility to step up. We must create a network of support that shows our most vulnerable children they are loved and valued. We are their best hope.

**To find out about mentoring opportunities in your community, go to [caresmentoring.org](http://caresmentoring.org). Also join us on June 10, 2013, for a special ESSENCE Google+ Hangout with Susan L. Taylor and learn more about how you can help save our at-risk youth. For details, visit [ESSENCE.com](http://ESSENCE.com).**



D. DIPASUPLI/GETTY IMAGES FOR BETI