

21 On Dec. 27, 2011, Jawan Ross, 16, was shot and killed at a Church's Chicken on 66th and Halsted in the Englewood neighborhood. Dantril Brown, 17, was also killed in the shooting. Five others were wounded. See Tina Sfondeles, "Charges in Deadly Church's Shooting," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 31, 2011.

22 The second funeral was for Deontae Malone, 15, who was found shot to death just three blocks from his home in Marquette Park on the Southwest Side. See Brian Slodysko, "Boy's Fatal Shooting Called Part of 'Crisis': Student is Second from Same School Killed This Year," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 30, 2011.

23 In 2011, unemployment among African-Americans in Chicago was 21.4 percent. The city's average was 8.6 percent. See Mary Mitchell, "The Making of the 'Other' Chicago," online site of *The American Prospect*, March 18, 2013, <http://prospect.org/article/making-other-chicago>.

24 See Ryan Haggerty and Cynthia Dizikes, "Rooftop Vigil 'a Victory': 3-Month Stay Raises Nearly \$500,000 to Buy Old Motel," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 25, 2012.

DON'T TRUST NOBODY

ORA THOMPSON

Ora Thompson—who requested a pseudonym—is a 17-year-old high school senior from North Lawndale. Once prosperous, North Lawndale boasted over 140,000 residents in the 1960s. Its population drastically declined soon after, however, when its primarily white residents fled from an influx of black newcomers from Southern states and other parts of Chicago. Local industries eventually moved elsewhere, resulting in unemployment and poverty that still haunt the area today.

As Ora talks, her expressive eyes dart around, conspicuous behind thick-framed glasses. A textured bob frames her heart-shaped face. She shares stories with ease, gesturing frequently and fully with her head, hands and long, thin arms. Shifting in her chair often, she speaks quickly and uses emphatic repetition.

Months from graduation from North Lawndale Preparatory Charter School, Ora plans to study dance and theater at Illinois College in the small town of Jacksonville, Illinois.²⁵ In her free time, she participates in the Steppenwolf Theatre Young Adult Council, a selective, yearlong after-school program introducing teens to professional theater. She is the only council member from North Lawndale. Ora lives there with her mother and her three sisters.

North Lawndale. Something good? I've been living over there for 16 years, and I really can't say something good about it. It's mostly apartment buildings. There's not really a lot of houses. Most of the buildings are abandoned. You can tell a lot of people moved out of that area. It's a lot of vacant lots. Three or four buildings on the block just got rebuilt. They tore them down and rebuilt them again; I guess trying to attract new people to the neighborhood. If they're there for long, they're not gonna like it. They're not gonna like it. You don't want to live somewhere where there's drug dealers selling drugs right outside your house.

The route I take to school, there's drug dealers and crackheads on the block. I leave out the back door, and it leads straight to my gate and then the alley. There's garbage dumpsters right there, and I always see poor people—I don't know if they're crackheads or not—but poor people digging in the garbage, looking for food, clothes or whatever. And when I start turning the corner, the same drug dealers are right there, early in the *morning*. Like, I be

going to school at seven, and they be out there, standing there. I just don't understand that. Then there's crackheads and hypes²⁵ walking past, getting the drugs from them. I just look and keep walking. I usually see people I went to grammar school with selling drugs too. I just don't understand that. Half of them were smart as ever. But down the block, it's basically that. Just drug dealers. And when I turn, it's my school right there.

There's a lot of drugs floating around North Lawndale. It's getting *bad*. There's so many crackheads on the block. I don't know if that's the right term I should use, but that's the only term I use when I'm in my community. I *hate* crackheads. I feel so much hatred towards them because I don't feel there's anything in life that can get you as low as starting crack. There's nothing. I mean, people gonna die regardless, you gonna lose your job, your house may go in foreclosure, but nothing can get as low as, "Yeah, I'm gonna start crack because of this. I'm gonna start crack because I'm depressed." Maybe I take that personally and I have anger towards them, 'cause once you start crack, you *end* your life to me. You end your life.

I know they would do anything for money, so I protect myself. When I go to and from school, I always carry a pocketknife because I don't feel *safe* around there. It don't matter where I'm at, but mainly around my area where I live, I'm always on guard. I carry a knife with me, even if I'm just going to the store. It's not sharp or nothing, and it's small enough, so if I pull it out, people wouldn't be like, "Oh my gosh, she got a knife!" They wouldn't see it until it's close up on them. I'm so serious! I carry it in my hand sometimes, and I put it in my sleeve so I'll be ready. If somebody's walking behind me, I reach in my pocket and hold it.

I will never forget the day I started carrying knives. I was still in grammar school. I think I was in eighth grade, and my sister was in fourth. We were walking to the store, and there was this man. He looked like he was in his late 30s. And he looked drunk. You know how people wear old clothes and stink? He looked like he was in that category. Out of nowhere, he just ran up to my little sister, grabbed her and picked her up. Then he was like, "I'm taking you home with me." I was *so* scared. I didn't know what to do. You don't joke with no kids like that, especially kids you don't know. And I just went up to him and started hitting him. I was like, "Put her down! Put her down!" When she got down, she was still shocked. She didn't know what was going on. So we didn't even go to the store; we just ran back to the house. I was scared to come out. For some weeks, I didn't even come out of the house.

Even though I know people in North Lawndale, and my mother knows people, I don't trust nobody in that community. There's been so many times where on the news the people that you're closest to hurt you, and I just don't trust nobody. I might laugh and talk to you, but I don't trust you.

I stay isolated because I don't like violence. It's to the point where people in my neighborhood fight over anything: boys, clothes, a seat, if you look at them a certain way. Our last house was right next to the projects, and there were these ladies—all of them were grown, and they got into it over a piece of gum. They actually fought over a piece of gum.

Certain people, they get excited off of violence. Fighting makes them happy. They fight just 'cause it's like a *game* to them. They fight just for more violence. I don't understand that. I think it's probably about personal problems—problems back at home that can't even be solved or anger that they can't take out on the people they wanna take it out on, so they just do little stuff to get into a fight.

I had a couple fights in my life, but I didn't do it for fun; I did it because I had to. I don't like fighting. I cry every time, every time I fight. I cry every time I fight. Even if I do win, I still cry. I don't know why. I get sensitive when that goes on. Maybe 'cause I'm scared because all through your life you're gonna have to fight people, no matter if it's over something major or something stupid, because people feel like they gotta prove themselves all the time. That pride comes before anything. I hate that. If you gotta prove yourself by fighting, then there's something wrong with you mentally. Really there is.

Recently I broke up a fight at my school between these two girls. I think they were juniors, and the problem wasn't between them. It was their two older sisters' brawls, and they brought the garbage to the school. They actually fought each other just because their big sisters told them to. Like, one sister probably said, "If you don't beat her butt, I'm beating your butt." It's crazy.

It was the quietest fight I ever seen. My locker is there, and I walked right into the fight. I'm so serious. I walked right into it. I didn't even know they were gonna fight 'cause I was switching classes, and people were just walking through the halls. Then it got real quiet. You know how everybody talks, and out of nowhere it just gets quiet for that two seconds? That's how it was. One girl was standing here, and the other one was right here. They

were just staring at each other. All you heard was one girl say, "I'm finna zone-six this bitch"—basically beat her up. Then she just ran up and started hitting the other girl. They were fighting for like three minutes. People's hair got pulled out and everything. Everybody was shouting, "Beat that bitch ass!" Just everybody saying little stuff. That's all it takes to get loud in our school. They pull out their cameras. They be so thirsty to put it on Facebook and YouTube.

The thing is, they were fighting right in front of the counselor's office. That's an automatic three-day suspension. Why would you fight in front of the counselor's office? Crazy. And in the end, when one of the girls' mothers came up to the school, she didn't even say nothing. All she asked the girl was, "Did you win?" That's all she asked her. Wow, your mother condones you fighting, too?

I actually saw my mother fight once. I was *real* young, like 6 or 7. It was summertime, day, and my mama was coming to pick me up from my dad's house. My daddy's girlfriend was there with me. Truthfully, I loved my daddy's girlfriend as much as I loved my mother. I know it was wrong maybe because, I don't know, it seemed wrong to my mother. But I was young, and both of them cared for me and showed me love or whatever. Actually, there was one point where I thought both of them was my mama. I'm so serious. When I was young, I used to call both of them mama. But they didn't get along at all. At all!

So when my mama got there, she and my daddy's girlfriend started arguing. I don't know what the argument was about, but I knew it was over something stupid. Out of nowhere they just started fighting. Then glass was everywhere and I saw a lot of blood. It was on my dad's girlfriend's face and it was on my mother's back. I was just sitting right there watching. I just remember sitting on a little log, crying so hard. I was crying so hard because two people I loved were actually trying to kill each other—over what, though?

My dad came over and he started breaking it up. And I remember my grandma, she was there, too. She wasn't down there; she was at the window. Then she came downstairs. I remember little stuff. Little stuff. Maybe because I was crying. That's the stuff I remember. I remember my mom having glass in her back because there was an ambulance. She went to the hospital.

And when she went home, some days after that, she had this scar on her back. She still got this long scar on her back.

I brought it up a while ago to my mama, and she was like, "I can't believe you still remember that." Whatever, but I hate that day. If I was older, I know I would have tried to jump in and stop it. I was so scared. I was so scared. But now, they cool. They're friends. It's crazy, though, 'cause you go through all that and you could have just resolved it. If you knew in the future that y'all was gonna be friends, then what happened in the past was uncalled for. It really was.

My mother is not my role model. I don't think of her as that. I don't look up to my mother because she has her hand out way too much. It's to the point where she wants other people to do stuff for her, but she knows she wouldn't do it for herself. I don't understand that at all. If you want something, you gotta get it yourself. Don't depend on others. And that's all she does. I hate asking people for money. What's the point of that? You had your whole life to make your *own* money, start a career, do anything you wanted, and instead you just wasted it.

I don't really talk to nobody in my household. My mother turned into nothing, and my one older sister is slowly turning into nothing. I see my sister as a failure. For some reason she just can't get her life on track. She has so many opportunities, but she just don't take them. She just don't take them. She was a straight-A student, like she had good grades, everything, the whole ten. As she got older, she got more interested in boys and less in school, so in high school she continued to get F's. I still remember her coming home with F's on her progress report. I was still in grammar school, so she had me thinking, "When I get in high school, I'm gonna get F's too. The work is gonna be so hard." So, when I first went to high school, I thought the work was gonna be hard, but I saw it was easy. I just don't understand how she got F's. Whatever, she wasn't paying attention. She wasn't doing the work.

She didn't graduate on time, but actually, it wasn't too late for her. This school accepted her. They had a scholarship for her; she even won a laptop. And instead of taking the opportunity, she got pregnant by this dude I really don't like who sells drugs. I was mad. Even though that's my big sister, I was disappointed in her because she had her whole life back on track, and

then she failed again. It's like every time she gets back on track, she finds something to distract her from what she doing. I noticed that. Every once in a while, she sees other people's lives, and she be like, "Oh, that's how I could have been," so she starts back with the little educational route. And then when she gets on it, she gets bored, so she goes back to her regular life. When she was little, all she would talk about was being a lawyer. And now she don't talk about being nothing.

It fascinates me, though, because when people are young, they have a lot of dreams. All I hear is people saying, "I wanna be this. I wanna be that," but they never break it down and say, "Okay, how am I gonna get there to become this?" Maybe 'cause they're young, and they think, "Well, I won't take this opportunity. I'm gonna get another opportunity later in life for the same thing." You gotta start off when you're young. I don't know, maybe it's the way I think.

People my age, their mind-set is way different from mine. I heard so many little girls and dudes my age who say they don't care about college. So they don't care what they do in school or outside of school. They know it's not going to affect them because they don't have a life after they leave high school. I feel sorry for them, actually. I feel sorry for them, because you're failing in high school and you don't wanna go to college? You messing your life up. Then, half of the girls at my school have kids. So, what's really your point? You gonna be living with yo' mama all your life? But when people first get into high school, or when they in grammar school, they don't think, "Yeah, when I get into high school, I'm gonna drop out." I mean who actually does that? Wait to graduate and then fail? They don't think like that. They just probably stop thinking.

For example, there's this girl at my school. She's the same age; she's 17 years old. And she recently had a baby by this dude. *He* looks like he could be my father. No lie. It's terrible. There's girls that actually talk to older dudes, saying, "He buy me stuff." You stupid! You would actually talk to an older dude because he buys you stuff and treats you like he cares about you? These girls don't *think* first.

And there's so many teenagers my age that's out there selling drugs, robbing people, and their siblings do the same thing. There's this 13-year-old boy. He goes to school with my little sister, and he's out there selling drugs. He steals from his mama, and he tried to steal his sister's Xbox game, that

she got for Christmas, and pawn it for some money. Yeah, that little boy got his nerve. His big brother, Darryl,²⁷ sells drugs, and I guess that what got him turned on to it.

Darryl and I have been friends since fifth grade. Through grammar school, it's like I already knew how his life was gonna be by the way he acted. But he's easy to talk to. That's probably why I was friends with him. As he got older, he still acted the same, but it's like he matured just a *little* bit, maybe just a drop. His mother is not his real mother. His real mother is on drugs, and his sister got killed three or four years ago in a car crash right outside their house. He was real messed up by that. He still be talking about her to this day every now and then. He always has this certain look on his face when he talks about his sister 'cause his sister was like a mother figure to him. Probably adds to why he act like that. But I feel he could change for his little brother.

The people around you—family, friends—if all of them bad, and you're around them 24/7, most likely you're going to engage in what they're doing. 'Cause "your chance of success depends on the five people you hang with," my counselor said to all the seniors in the school. So I don't hang with a lot of people. Instead, I just watch people a lot to learn stuff from them. You don't know—seems like I'm listening or watching? I am. 'Cause it's just the little things that people do that tell you a lot about themselves.

I don't do this in school, 'cause people would think I'm crazy, but when I'm in my room alone, I just sit and talk to myself about stuff, like, all the stuff I *know* I *could* be, and then start brainstorming. I always connect it back to school. Right now, I graduate in June, and all I'm really thinking about is leaving. I wanna do all the work I have to do in order to graduate. I *owe* it to myself. I deserve to graduate on time. Not with the rest of them kids. That can't be me. I'm trying to get up outta here.

—Interviewed by Bethany Brownholtz

ENDNOTES

25 In the fall of 2012, we contacted Ora to see how things were going at Illinois College. She reported that small-town life in Southern Illinois had proven to be something of a culture shock. "It's just cows and farms everywhere," she said with a laugh. "To be truthful, I thought I wasn't gonna like it. But I was so wrong. It's like a variety of different ethnicities there. It's like so many Africans, it's a lot of Latinos, whites, blacks. It's just like a mix of everybody and, at that school,

"The crazy part is that, as soon as I got out of Chicago, I stopped carrying that knife. I put it all inside this little red box where I keep my change. I don't carry it with me on campus at all, even when it's nighttime. My sister, she's a freshman at North Lawndale Prep and has to walk to school. She can have my knife. I'm serious."

Ora noted that although she received a large scholarship to attend college, her mother has never said she was proud of her daughter. "I don't like talking about her," she said. "She's the reason why I just want to go so far away from home. She's the main reason."

26 A hype is an addict.

27 Ora asked that we change her friend's name to protect his safety.