

THE LONG WALTZ HOME

Gangs had always existed in my neighborhood when I was a child. The majority of the men and younger boys in my family were affiliated with gangsters and criminals. So were the majority of the people in that neighborhood, actually. I have never understood what it was about gangs that drew people in so much, but then, as I grew older, I learned more about them. I've had these sociology classes about it, and I can see the way gangs have destroyed people with a better vocabulary now. I've talked to people like my cousins and uncles and brothers since I left for college. They say things like, "I got pulled into a gang when I was younger," and, "If I could have gotten out, I would have." But some of them wouldn't have. Like my grandmother says, "You live by it, you die by it."

Growing up, it was terrible. Gangs and violence were all I saw, all I knew. I think that I was scared that I might end up in a gang or something. I look back now, and all I can say is, "I am thankful." I hate the lives that were taken during my childhood, but I just remain thankful for the lives that were changed because they were given a chance to look at the positive and the negative and decided not to get involved. I am thankful for people like my grandmother, who was born and raised in Mississippi, and who taught me that a person could lead a soulful life outside of gunshots.

I grew up living in a house, a two-flat building with a basement, not even a whole block away from a place where they had different social service agencies located

inside a single building. Their main purpose as I understood it was to make a safe environment for kids, so that they didn't have to be out on the streets anymore. My big cousins and my older sister actually went to that building first, but I was too young to go with them. They had their jump-rope teams going. They had their cheerleading. They had their dance groups, and it was like the spark of movement or something true. My cousins and sister would come home bragging about their day, "We this and we did that," and I would mope around the house, sad, because I wanted to do it too.

That's how I became involved with my two cousins and little sister. We were the four young ones who begged and cried and whined inside the agency's door. They opened up the age range for us. I came into the program through an after-school organization. It went from just the basics of getting help with my homework to being involved in everything you could possibly name, just to have something positive to do with my time. I played basketball and volleyball. I wrote poetry. I sang choir and learned to waltz with other girls. You name it, I did it. As soon as I walked into that place, the agency and after-school program felt like home to me, and you don't get that everywhere you go. The people at the social service agency became like my second family, and the different things I learned there, the many friendships I gained there, were remarkable. I give them credit for me sitting here. Their presence has made some of the violence in my old neighborhood invisible, like it never even existed.