

'Why the nice ones?'

Tight-knit neighborhood looks for answers to slaying of boy



By David Jackson
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

No one who lives in the sturdy brick rowhouses that line the former Pullman freight yard condones what Melvin Presswood did, but many understand their neighbor's slow descent into belligerence and fear.

From front porches and behind window shades, they too watched young men gather with the evening, passing handrolled joints and leaning into cars with tinted windows and pumping stereos. They saw the cars, navigated by gang toughs, loop slowly past their homes and through the streets George Pullman laid 110 years ago in his failed quest to build a workingman's utopia.

Most everyone on the 10600 block of South Langley Avenue knew that Presswood stuffed a 9 mm semiautomatic handgun in his belt, even when he walked to Eddie Shweiki's corner grocery, just two blocks from his home of more than a decade. But people accepted this as just another small uptick in the general climate of lawlessness.

"That gun got to be so common it was like looking at a newspaper," said Bernard Vasser, a handyman rehabbing a former Pullman rooming house.

Many approved of the way Presswood hollered at the kids who climbed Ms. Dawson's crabapple tree or sneaked cigarettes between garages in the alley where the 42-year-old security guard kept busy repairing his neighbors' cars.

"If he told the children to get out of the alley, he was telling them that for their own goods," said Earlene Thomas, who lives a few doors north of Presswood.

"It's a lot of drugs going through there and gangs, and in his way, Melvin was like the police," said Presswood's friend Royce Parker. "He was trying to keep the good kids from the bad."

The boy Melvin Presswood killed was not one of the bad.

James Williams, the 32nd of 36 Chicago-area children slain this year and the 13th killed with a handgun, was a model student in his special education class for

mildly mentally handicapped children. The 14-year-old had long, bashful eyelashes and a smile that his friend Ali Clay said "would make even the president laugh."

Ali, James and his cousin Yarnell Allen were strolling through the alley on the evening of July 7, when James ducked into a walkway to urinate.

These facts are not disputed:

Bent over the hood of a 1984 Cadillac, Presswood shouted, "Get out of my alley!"

"James told him it wasn't none of his alley," Ali said.

Presswood held out a gun.

The blast was heard a block and a half away and James crumpled. Ali ran out onto 107th Street, his thin arms waving and his mouth open as if to scream the words he could barely whisper:

"Melvin shot James."

"It was like the whole block went numb," said city street sweeper Reginald Hughes, who has lived at 106th Street and Champlain Avenue for 23 years.

In this hard-nosed, self-reliant neighborhood where James's maternal grandmother settled two decades ago and several of his 12 aunts and six uncles still live, alongside the family of the man charged with his murder, grief has taken many forms.

A few hours after the shooting, a group of neighborhood boys set fire to the Cadillac Presswood had been fixing, then looted his garage and burned it, too, leaving charred wood where the mechanic had proudly painted, "Home of Melvin's toy."

Five days later, at a South Side funeral chapel, hundreds of mourners were bathed in a soulful, blues-tinged rendition of Harold Arlen's 1939 anthem to youth's dreams, "Over the Rainbow."

Cousin LaShann Williams read a poem that began, "Why the nice ones, the ones you love to the bone?"

Members of the Historic North Pullman community organization met with police officials to discuss what organization president Lyn Hughes called "the infestation."

A week before James was shot, Lamont "Snake" Hawkins, 20,

was gunned down a quarter block away by another 20-year-old. That killing followed an argument over a tranquilizer-laced joint, police and neighbors say.

"These are not strangers. They are our children," Hughes said.

There are neighborhoods like North Pullman throughout Chicago, places where the signs of stubborn prosperity are set against a backdrop of inexorable decline. Since 1970, the percentage of North Pullman families headed by a single female has tripled, to 54 percent from 17, and the percentage living below the poverty line quadrupled, to 37 percent from 9 percent. The number of youths age 20 and under has increased 48 percent.

In the last three years, Hughes' organization has won city landmark status for the area in honor of its century-old brick houses; achieved the removal of street corner pay phones from which drug deals were made; and escorted the Streets & Sanitation

commissioner on a personal tour of their alleys.

"We have shown what an African-American community can do with no help," Hughes said.

But the problems are getting worse.

"There is a climate of fear among the adults," Hughes said. "Melvin was feeling that fear."

Completed hastily in the fall of 1884, the rowhouses of South Langley and Champlain were tucked between railroad tracks and a foundry, out of sight from the veranda of the opulent hotel Pullman named for his daughter Florence. But the sleeping car magnate did provide one modern amenity for his lowest-paid workers: cross-ventilation.

Today, screen doors bang open and shut as children cut through kitchens and back yards, streaming from one block to the next. So closely bound are the families who live here that it sometimes seems as if all the doors open onto one long house.

"From the outside looking in, this seems like a rough block, but if you live here, it's just like Bridgeport," said city street sweeper Reginald Hughes. "I'm welcome in most all of these houses. Everybody feels like that."

But when daylight fades, not everyone shares the city worker's confidence.

"I keep in the house," said Harry Freeman, 78, who has lived on Champlain since 1976.

"You know we got drugs all through here. The police pull up but I'll tell you straight, they don't often get out of their cars. They just talk to the boys and the boys walk away and as soon as the police drive off the boys come right back."

"These kids run the block," said James Jones, who owns a quiet tavern on the corner of 107th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, a place that displays no name but has the logo of the Four Corner Hustlers gang carved into the brick.

"They don't even try to disguise what they're doing. They'll sell you anything you want," Jones said. "The majority of the people don't even come out. They go to work and come home."

Such a man was Melvin Louis Presswood. Wiry and businesslike, with gray sideburns gracing his lean jaw, Presswood made a beeline between his \$150-a-week security job guarding fast food restaurants and the garage where he labored for spare cash.

The garage work he did in his off hours connected him to many of his neighbors, including James' relatives.

"He used to fix my car when I owned one," said James's aunt, Charlene Williams, 27. "He fixed all my brothers' cars."

He taught transmissions and brakes to Royce Parker, the father of James's half-brother Royce Parker Jr.

The day he allegedly shot James, Presswood pulled a gun on Parker in jest.

"I just told him, put that thing up, man. You know me."

The son of a retired Robbins police officer, Presswood also kept an unregistered TEC-9 automatic in his home, along with 100-odd rounds of ammunition, according to police records. Neighbors say he told them he served with an Army airborne division in the Vietnam war, but military records show he was a Navy seaman based in Great Lakes Naval Training Center and Norfolk, Va., where he did two months hard labor for larceny.

For all his firepower and his self-anointed role as keeper-of-the-peace in Pullman, Presswood was an object of ridicule among the young, a blustery symbol of the ineffectuality of adults.

Once, he hopped out of his car clutching a walkie-talkie and ordering young men to disperse from a corner on 107th Street—a soldier on patrol against the

enemy in his midst. As one youth put it, "People look at his little radio and say, 'Fact is, who you talking to, man?'"

"He think he boss," said Ali disdainfully. "He think he's the father of everybody, and he can tell them what to do."

"Melvin thinks he own the earth," said Warren Montgomery, 12. "You walk through that alley and look at him and he look at you and go get his gun."

"He just thought he was the man," said Ivan Roberts, 19. "He tried to scare us all the time, and we just got used to it."

In an interview room in Cook County Jail, Presswood wiped his eyes against the short tan sleeves of his prison-issue pullover, a replacement for the matching navy blue work shirts and pants he wore in the alley. He tried to explain the split-second events that led to the death of James Anthony Williams.

"You come home from work and all you see are kids," he said. "The older people are scared to walk around."

He said of James, "He knew he ain't supposed to be in this alley. I told him to get out. . . . These are the good guys, and most of us was trying to separate them from everybody else that's doing bad."

He said, "By some kind of freak of nature, the gun just went off. As far as I know, I was shooting in the air. . . . It happened so quick I didn't even know the boy was hit."

When police arrived seconds later, Presswood gave several accounts of the shooting, all of them blaming others. He is charged with first-degree murder and weapons violations. Obstruction of justice charges were filed against a man who was allegedly in the alley with him, off-duty security guard Brian Foley, 32. A police report says Foley removed a gun from the scene.

"I wish I could trade places with the boy," said Presswood. "I wish I could turn the tables around."

Golden Richardson, 14, was playing basketball on the Poe School courts when he looked down the alley and saw Presswood's garage catch fire.

"I felt like in a way it was good and in a way it was stupid," Goldie said. "I want Melvin to die for what he did, but I know that won't bring James back. James ain't coming back."

He was not the first of Goldie's friends to be gunned down. In September, 14-year-old Jason House was caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting near 102nd Street and St. Lawrence Avenue.

"Jason don't play on my mind," Goldie said. "His killing just happened and went. But James was my close friend."

"I think that he be walking with us," Ali said. "All the dead be walking inside us."

James spent the summer of his 14th year with cousins and

friends, swimming at Corliss school, playing basketball on the Poe School court and winding through the neighborhood on bicycles. Financial pressures had forced his mother, Martha Williams, to move two miles east earlier this summer, but he still spread his days between the homes of relatives and friends, where he left a residue of possessions and memories.

In a folded sheet of gray construction paper in his mother's new home, the boy who could barely read when he started 8th grade kept a sheaf of essays printed in careful, spiderleg-thin script. One celebrated civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. as a great man who led many parades, and another addressed the theme of happiness:

"Some people wish don't come true so they have to be thankful with what they got," he wrote.

He kept his basketball card collection in a blue binder, the first two pages of which contained nothing but Chicago Bulls. "It was third-best on the block," said brother Ronald Jones, 12.

In the dark, quiet garage behind the 115th Street bungalow of his paternal grandfather, Willie Coppage, who works in a frozen food plant, James left a pile of disassembled bicycles.

"James wasn't the type to do a lot of talking," Coppage said. "He was a quiet, determined boy who loved to fix on bikes. If I don't start talking, he just be back there, working."

From the front porch of a neighbor's house at 107th and Cottage Grove, Ali recounted the images that float like snapshots through his dreams and waking moments.

"I remember the way James walk and the noise he made before he talk," Ali said, mimicking the sharp, excited gulp of breath.

"I see the time we was ringing doorbells in the condos then running so that people open their door but don't nobody be there."

"It's a lot of things I don't want to do no more because James used to do them with us," Ali said. "Like play ball and mess with girls and talk about girls."

"And I don't go through alleys no more."

The Saturday night before Melvin Presswood unleashed his rage, James called his sister Tenesha, 20, and asked if he could spend some time with her on the West Side.

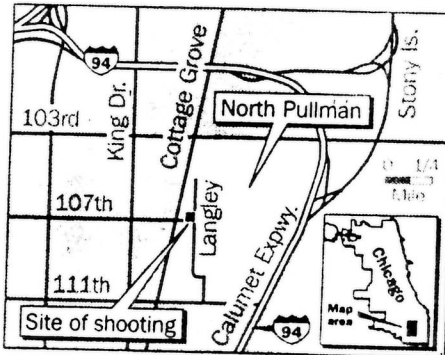
"He felt like he needed a new environment," Tenesha said. When she told James she couldn't take him, he didn't badger or insist. "It was his normal sweet voice."

Together on the telephone, the 14-year-old and his big sister sang SWV's knee-buckling, lovesick ballad, "Weak." Then he told her to be careful.

"He said, 'Just watch yourself. You know how crazy people are.'"

North Pullman: A struggling neighborhood

North Pullman, the neighborhood in which 14-year-old James Williams was shot to death, is an area in economic decline. Since 1970, the percentage of residents living below poverty level has quadrupled to 37 percent from 9 percent.



North Pullman demographics	1970	1980	1990
Total population	2,250	2,457	2,833
Residents living below poverty level	9%	26%	37%
Families headed by single women	17%	45%	54%
Number of youths age 20 and under	821	1,125	1,218

Housing	1970	1980	1990
Median value, owner-occupied units			
City of Chicago	\$21,200	\$47,200	\$78,000
North Pullman	\$14,200	\$24,600	\$44,900

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, news reports