



# Hope Against Hope

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*Three Schools, One City,  
and the Struggle to Educate  
America's Children*

Book by **SARAH CARR**

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*For school children in America's toughest city neighborhoods, gun violence is not a rare, singularly tragic event. It does not cause widespread mourning and outrage, generate front-page headlines or change laws. It does not, in the manner of Sandy Hook or Columbine, end up seared in the national consciousness and memory.*

*But the ongoing, ceaseless violence takes a greater toll — in human lives and human anguish — than either of those tragedies. In New Orleans, where I have written about schools for the last five and a half years, 35 children who had not yet reached their 21st birthdays were murdered in 2012, the youngest victim only two months old. The city routinely posts the nation's highest murder rate.*

*Last year saw the shooting deaths of Brandon Adams, a 15-year-old honors student whose mother rocked her lifeless son and screamed for help after his slaying near an abandoned housing development; of Keian Ester, an 11-year-old who was playing his Xbox inside a godbrother's apartment when a stray bullet ripped through the front wall, taking out his eye; and of Briana Allen, a 5-year-old shot to death while attending the birthday party of a 10-year-old friend.*

*The shootings traumatize not only the victims' families and friends, but entire neighborhoods whose residents bear witness to the gun violence, or must live in constant fear that they could. One study found that close to a third of New Orleans public middle school students had witnessed assaults committed with weapons, while 14 percent had seen murders.*

*The vast majority of these shootings do not occur inside schools. But they shape what happens inside them in countless ways. First, there are the literal effects: When students and teachers miss school to attend the funerals of brothers, parents, students, friends and classmates; when schools go into lockdown mode after a gun is brought on campus; when the lure of fast money and guns draws teenage boys away from school and learning.*

*More intangibly, gun violence can affect the aspirations and mindsets of children growing up in some of the country's most neglected neighborhoods, fostering an unease that can make it difficult for them to focus on schoolwork, an anger that can lead them*

into trouble, and an apathy that can cause some students to give up on education and themselves.

Four years ago, I set out to write *Hope Against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*, which tells the story of the reinvention of New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of families and educators. I did not anticipate initially that gun violence, and its effect on school communities and children, would become such a prominent theme in the book. But it was impossible to avoid.

The schools I followed were not violent places. The children I met in them were not violent people. But, through the failure of a nation and a city, many young New Orleanians live and attend school in the shadow of violence. It affects their education in countless, and unconscionable, ways. ›



# Hope Against Hope

## *Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*

**M**ary Laurie did not understand football. She spent most of O. Perry Walker's football games in a quiet state of agitation, unable to sit still or relax. Even when Walker seemed certain of victory, as it did by halftime of its November 12 playoff game, she paced and averted her eyes at critical moments. Laurie cut an odd figure for a school principal: Lurking behind the bleachers of Walker's neighborhood stadium, covered from head to toe in a knit cap and layers of bulky shawls, with the school's initials — O.P.W. — emblazoned in orange face paint across her cheek. Walker, seeded 15th in the state, played 18th-seeded Minden High School in the first round of the state playoffs that night. The visitors, who drove six hours from a small town in northwestern Louisiana, never held the lead. When Walker was up 28–6 with only a quarter left, Laurie finally ventured out by the sideline to watch a few minutes uninterrupted. But she looked nervous right up until Walker's marching band led a victory parade back to the school. Walker always paraded home, even when the team lost.

1

Laurie's anxiety wasn't entirely unjustified. She had seen Walker's football squad blow large leads in the fourth quarter before. She also hated to watch any kids lose — even Walker's opponents. Walking back to the school after the Minden blowout, Laurie grimaced as she thought of the deflated visiting team driving home across Louisiana in the dead of the night, their season now over. Laurie wasn't a football fan like her husband, a police officer known as Sarge, who came to Walker's games. She sometimes had to attend meetings of the Louisiana High School Athletic Association, where the men who set the rules for football play held forth with the self-importance of those negotiating for world peace. The beauty and thrill of a well-executed play eluded her, as did the names of just about every football player, living or dead, apart from Walker's own. When the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl nine months earlier, she celebrated because of the joy it brought to the city. She appreciated the way

in which the event united New Orleanians of all colors and walks of life. Similarly, she relished Walker's victories for the glory and esprit de corps they brought the school. In a landscape where schools had to compete for everything, fielding a powerhouse football team helped attract new families and students. She pragmatically saw it as a part of rebuilding a strong Walker the community would value.

Laurie also believed that at their best, football teams taught players to hope against hope, even when the odds were stacked against them and even when all effort felt in vain. She knew that as black men from poor families, many of Walker's players would face long odds throughout much of their lives. Football might convince some of them never to stop trying.

\* \* \*

By the start of winter, O. Perry Walker was in a groove, both athletically and academically. Over Thanksgiving weekend, the school secured a spot in the state football semifinals after defeating seventh-seeded Bastrop High School from northern Louisiana in the fourth overtime.

2

That same week, the Algiers Charter Schools Association, which oversaw Walker, scheduled a press conference to announce Walker and several other schools in the association had posted the highest possible “value-added” test score results on a scale of 1 to 5. A rating of 5 meant that Walker had in a year advanced most of its students significantly more than their projected growth compared to similar Louisiana students. Value-added measurements look at the growth schools make with individual students based on where the students start, not their absolute results. So in most cases, a school that moved a ninth grader from a fourth-grade to an eighth-grade reading level would score higher than one that moved a student from an eighth- to a ninth-grade level. A national debate brewed about the use of value-added results to assess individual teachers' job performance at that time. Louisiana and several other states embraced pilot initiatives linking students' value-added test scores to teacher hiring, firing and salary decisions. Race to the Top, a competitive federal education-grant program, gave states points in their application for incorporating student growth in teacher evaluations, prompting some of the surge in support. Proponents of value-added argued that for too long teachers had been paid based largely on longevity, regardless of whether they were “adding value” (business speak that in and of itself rankled some educators because it implicitly likened children to widgets). Critics countered

that myriad in-school factors (multiple teachers, peer behavior, school leadership, per-pupil spending) and out-of-school factors (parental support, stability of home life, presence or absence of physical and emotional trauma) contribute to how well a child learns to read over the course of a given year. No matter how mathematically sophisticated and all-encompassing, they claimed, no formula could ever account for all those variables.

Walker's score of 5 reflected the school's growth as a whole and determined the overall amount of performance-based bonus money to be distributed across the staff. Teachers who taught subjects the state tested, such as English and math, also received their own individual value-added scores based on how far they moved their students over the course of a year. An individual teacher's share of the bonus pot depended partly on the school-wide score, partly on qualitative observations of their teaching and partly on their own value-added score (if they had one). Given the large number of students who arrived below grade level, Laurie preferred value-added metrics to comparisons based on absolute test scores, although she understood why each needed to exist.

3

On December 1, the evening before the press conference about the value-added test score increases, Walker hosted a basketball game. Students, staff and alums milled about the campus well into the evening, cheering on the basketball players and revving themselves up for the football semifinals in two days. Laurie was in the campus's main building finishing up some paperwork while all the activity swirled around her. Just before 8pm, she left her office hoping to catch the end of the game between Walker and nearby Helen Cox High School. As Laurie approached the gym, she heard a series of loud pops that sounded like gunshots coming from the opposite direction. Inside the gym, the roar of the crowd drowned out the sound of the blasts, so the basketball game continued unabated for a few more moments. But Laurie stopped in her tracks.

A few minutes earlier, 19-year-old Torrance Massey, a 2009 graduate of Walker, stood talking and laughing with friends in front of the school. Just after 8pm he climbed into a black Chevy Equinox with a companion, promising to return to cheer on his alma mater in the state football semifinals on Friday. As he pulled away from the school, a volley of bullets rained down, striking Torrance in the torso and his friend in the wrist, elbow and calf.

Torrance, whom everyone called Boogie, had been the team's star quarterback during

his years as a Charger. He led Walker to its only other recent state semifinals in 2007, when the team fell one step short of the championship game. A consummate ladies' man, Boogie always dressed with flair; he had a terrible voice, but liked nothing better than trying to imitate Usher's smooth tones.

Boogie wielded his considerable social capital at Walker with grace, paying particular respect to teachers he admired, never hesitating to lend less popular classmates some of his cool through public approbation. Some mornings his mother would find her living room full of sleeping teenagers because Boogie had brought home classmates and friends who had no other place to stay.

Unlike some families who had a contentious or detached relationship with the public schools, Boogie's family made it clear how much they valued education, Walker and its teachers. Boogie's older brother, Thomas, was Walker's first salutatorian after Hurricane Katrina. That night he came straight from his college finals in Baton Rouge to the scene of the shooting. Boogie's mother, Catina Massey, was the kind of parent who showed up at school in an instant if one of her kids had a problem. Some parents defended their children no matter what they had done, but Catina Massey treated teachers with an old-school deference. In any dispute at the school, she shushed her children until all the teachers or administrators had their say.

At the urging of some of his mentors, Boogie left New Orleans after high school graduation to attend the Apprentice School in Newport News, Va. They worried he was caught up in neighborhood-based rivalries that had the potential to turn violent. In Newport News, everyone called the teen Ace Boogie. He played football, studied shipbuilding and took a photo when he saw his first snow in Virginia to show Walker's staff. He knew they would appreciate the novelty of all the white flakes. Boogie was exceptionally close to his family. Homesick for his mother and siblings in Virginia, he had a neck tattoo made with his little sister's name, Moneisha.

Boogie and his roommate ran into some financial problems, however, and within a year he returned to the city and made plans to enroll at Southern University for the spring semester of 2011. That fall, he found work welding and building Mardi Gras floats and went to every Walker football game he could. As happy as they were to have Boogie home, many of those who cared about the teenager could not help but wish he had stayed away.



As the basketball game ended, the crowd emptied out of the gym and into the parking lot, just a short distance from Boogie's car. Since he had graduated less than two years ago, many of the students knew Boogie personally, as did most of the staff. When they came upon the scene, their excitement turned to despair, their shouts of encouragement to cries of grief. Walker teachers, students and supporters held each other as they sobbed behind the yellow police lines. To many, he had seemed invincible: An exceptional athlete, an honors student beloved by girls and his teachers alike, the support of a strong family behind him.

Just an hour earlier Boogie had parted from his family, begging a few dollars from his mother so he could get into the basketball game. Catina Massey and her daughter went off to buy Christmas decorations, which they planned to put up with Boogie's help after the game. But a little after 8pm they started getting phone calls from family and friends telling them to get to Walker as quickly as possible. There had been a shooting, and it looked bad. They caught a ferry across the Mississippi River and made their way to the school.

5

Catina Massey sensed the truth as soon as she saw all the cars, people and police clustered around Walker. But she pleaded with everyone who came up to her, their faces breaking the news without words: Just tell me that's not my son. Tell me that's not Boogie.

When police informed Catina Massey the victim — the one who wasn't going to make it — had the name Moneisha tattooed on his neck, she finally knew for certain. Her son was dead.

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In 2010, New Orleans had the highest murder rate of any American city, at about 51 murders per 100,000 people (with 175 total confirmed). Unlike many cities, where the vast majority of murders occur in specific quadrants or sections, New Orleans killings are distributed across the crescent, with clusters in a handful of particularly tough neighborhoods. Also unlike other cities, about half of New Orleans murders take place in broad daylight, a brazenness law enforcement officials attribute to the fact that many are executions. Moreover, since so few perpetrators of violent crimes get caught in New Orleans, murderers may be less concerned about concealing their bad actions under the cloak of darkness. As in other cities, the vast majority of New

Orleans killers and victims are young black men. In 2008, for example, 79 percent of the city's murder victims were black men and boys (by contrast, 8 percent were black women, 6 percent white men and 2 percent white women). More than three quarters of the victims were under the age of 40, and a full half of them fell in the 18-to-25 age range, like Boogie.

New Orleans does not have a gang problem like Los Angeles or Chicago. Some have theorized that may give it a worse murder problem, though, since countless neighborhood-based cliques compete for a share of the port city's thriving drug trade without the structure and defined turf imposed by established gangs. A large number of murders are only loosely connected to drugs, however, if at all. The violence on New Orleans streets sometimes calls to mind the bloody family feuding memorialized in the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*: Born of domestic disputes, petty grudges and perceived slights; wrought largely by impetuous adolescent boys and young men; devastating in the collateral damage it leaves behind. But the ancient combatants fought with fists and swords. Today they destroy with guns that can spray dozens of bullets in a matter of seconds.

6

As with many New Orleans murders, rumors circulated on the street about who had killed Boogie. Friends say the gunman was upset at people close to Boogie and shot him in retribution. They whispered of vengeance exacted on the streets. But through some combination of fear, distrust of police and inadequate investigation, the rumors never rose to the level of evidence that could be used to make arrests. The case, it increasingly seemed, would go unsolved, and the motive would never come to light.

Catina Massey did not want street justice, which, she knew, would only break another mother's heart. She hoped to see her son's killer held to account in a court of law. Massey sometimes worried detectives did not take the case seriously, that to them Boogie was just another young black male mixed up with trouble. She ached for news of developments on the case — something to show her Boogie's death mattered so "my heart won't hurt as much." But developments were few and far between; months after the shooting, police had no solid leads.

In the wake of Boogie's murder, Laurie did everything she could to help comfort his family and keep her composure in front of Walker's students. She knew they would be looking for reassurance, for someone to tell them everything would be all right.

For that reason, she did not want them to see her cry. But the murder had unsettled Laurie deeply; she wasn't sure of anything at the moment. The details of the killing — its location so close to the school, its victim so well known and full of promise — were troubling. But the killing of any young person troubled those with a conscience. Laurie had come to believe that until communities reckon with the broader psychological toll exacted by gun violence, they will not see it end. How could students fully commit themselves to school, college and dreams of a brighter future, she wondered, when part of them worried about living to see age 21?

The murder of a young person had the power to kill not only the dreams of the deceased, but those of everyone who hoped or cared for him. When many people hoped and cared, it magnified the destruction. Officials might define and measure school safety through the number of weapons, fights and violent incidents on a given campus. But increasingly Laurie came to understand violence's steep cost through the immeasurable loss of dreams deferred.

7

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Laurie's windowless office at Walker features few adornments and serves primarily as a spot for leaving her coats, bags and half-eaten sandwiches before heading out into the rest of the building. Unlike more modern school buildings, Walker does not have individual thermostats or temperature controls in the rooms. On the rare occasions when Laurie shuts her door for a series of meetings, the office becomes either uncomfortably hot or cold. The room's walls are made of dark wooden panels and a worn-looking principal sign hangs above the door. Laurie keeps a shelf of books behind the desk: A signed copy of Harry Potter (whose popularity she admits she will never understand), a nonfiction book about New Orleans featuring Walker's band director, Wilbert Rawlins, and several books about education. There's also a printout of the old adage: "When you get there, remember where you came from."

She sometimes looks over at the wall immediately to the right when entering the office. Photos from the past five years cover most of the wall: Snapshots of couples posing at homecoming and prom, photos of football stars kneeling on the field, images of Laurie standing smiling beside graduates, clippings from the local newspaper that mention Walker students and their victories. The wall looks like several pages of candid photos from a high school yearbook spliced together.

Walker stayed open the week before Christmas so students who had fallen behind could catch up on credits or coursework. Whenever Walker was open, Laurie tended to be there, her big old boat of a car parked on the grass out in front of the school. She always talked about getting away during vacations — maybe taking the train up to Memphis so she could see some new scenery — but she rarely seemed to travel much farther than her own house down the street. She tried once or twice that week to stay home and rest; it had been an emotionally exhausting month. Yet most mornings found her at the school, working on something.

One morning that week, three days before Christmas and three weeks after Boogie's murder, Laurie seemed preoccupied with the pictures on the wall. Each of them told a story. Three of them haunted her.

She looked over at a photo of a Walker student named Arthur, shot dead in 2007 before he could earn his final high school credits. In the photo, a serious-looking Arthur wore a tie and the blue cap and gown he should have donned again on his graduation day. He had failed to graduate on time with this class. But the summer he died, Arthur had been coming to summer school. So Laurie brought a high school diploma to Arthur's funeral and gave it to his mother. How she wished he had lived to see it through.

8

Laurie could think of a dozen stories like Arthur's, most of them reduced to a few lines in the newspaper — tersely written paragraphs that focused solely on the demise, with nothing on the life lived.

She continued to scan the wall, finally settling on the image of James, who should have graduated the previous spring. James had been a good kid. His only mistake was going to visit his grandmother in the Central City neighborhood on Christmas night three years earlier. That night a bunch of men shot up the place, killing two teenagers, one of them James, and wounding four others.

"James wasn't a part of anything," Laurie said. "Other folk might have been part of it, but James was just going to his grandmother's house."

Searching the wall again, Laurie spotted a small headshot atop a brief obituary cut out of the newspaper. Aaron, the teen pictured in the fuzzy image, wore a necklace, long hair and a sad face. Hot tempered, Aaron had been put out of Walker for some offense

Laurie could not recall.

He had made plans to return just before someone killed him — in a dispute over potato chips.

Laurie's voice grew louder as she made another round of the photos, her expression more pained.

“Right now we should be talking about Arthur going on to be a chef.” She banged the photo quickly, almost as if trying to startle the image back to life.

“Aaron, right now—”

Thwack!

9

“—should be going to school for drama.

“You understand what I’m saying?

“James should have graduated last year. It all gets lost.

“That was the excitement after Katrina. Every time a piece would come back, you thought it was going to be better. You thought, you know what, we going to fix this! We going to fix this. Children going to get their education and go off to college and get the good jobs they are entitled to and this is going to be a wonderful, super city. That’s what we felt after Katrina: We going to fix this. We at Walker. We got this. Now, I think we’ve done a good job. But it was supposed to be fixed!

“I thought all the stories would be good stories. Nothing but good stories to tell.” >



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Sarah Carr** has written about education for the last twelve years, reporting on the growth in online learning in higher education, the battle over vouchers and charter schools in urban districts, and the struggle to educate China's massive population of migrant children. Her work has been honored with numerous national awards and fellowships, most recently a Spencer Education Journalism Fellowship at Columbia University. She lives in New Orleans, where she covered schools for the *Times-Picayune*. *Hope Against Hope* is her first book.

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