

washingtonpost.com

In or Out Of the Game?

A Battle-Scarred Hustler Waits for a Second Act

By Kevin Merida

Sunday, December 31, 2006; A01

The corner is a staple of street life, that rare piece of real estate that can't be purchased. Occupy it, claim it, it's yours. Anthony Marcellus James is a corner celebrity, a paradox of menace and charm. He is leaning against a fence, next to a vacant lot, in the Brentwood neighborhood of Northeast where he once was feared, as he put it, by people who would whisper: "That's A.J. Man, you don't want to [expletive] with him. He kills."

A.J. worked hard to earn his reputation, beating three murder charges in the 1990s and helping to settle numerous scores. "I'm known for having ammo, supplying people with guns and ammunition," he says. He has become, by his own admission, part of the scorned but emulated class of black men who have spent their lives as gangsters, drug dealers, stickup artists, killers. No collection of black men has generated more attention, more anger, more tears. By 2001, nearly 2 million black men nationwide had been to prison. On any given day, four of five D.C. jail inmates are black men. Many operate in a "thug life" world of their own -- with its own codes of conduct, its own language and economics, its own vulnerabilities.

The sun is setting on this warm December day, the chill is rolling in. A.J. zips up his black leather jacket and hollers at a woman in three-inch heels on the other side of Adams Street. "I'm going to hurry up and get myself together so I can marry you!" But together seems a long way off. James is wearing an ankle bracelet containing a GPS tracking device that allows authorities to monitor his movements. "To me, it's degrading -- like on Animal Planet where they tag the animals," he says. His curfew is 8 p.m. He has no job, no car, no place of his own (he lives on this block with his aunt). He is 37 years old. A front tooth is missing, the result of a scuffle with police. His hand is stiff from being shot. His stomach is carved up from being shot. His arm is skin-grafted and mottled from being shot. Shot, shot, shot. Ten times in all.

After serving three years in federal prison for possession with intent to distribute the drug PCP, he was released in the spring. It was not his first tour. Now, he is "on paper," as ex-cons say, meaning for him three years of strict government supervision.

The toll from his lifestyle has him thinking: What else could I be doing? He finds himself between redemption and resignation, believing he can recast his life but not quite sure how to do it. In prison, he wrote a book, "Love and Bullets," a raw, autobiographical tale featuring plenty of girlfriend drama and frequent shootouts. It was so popular among inmates, James said, that he wrote a sequel, "Love of Bullets," which he followed up with a novel, "Bulletproof Love." The more he wrote, the more confident he became. He penned seven books in all and drafted a letter to a publisher hailing himself as the next Donald Goines, the career criminal and heroin addict from Detroit who churned out 16 books in five years and became a street-literature sensation.

On his best, dreamy days, A.J. thinks about being Donald Goines, and then writing thrillers like James

Patterson, and then writing classics such as "The Godfather." On his worst, rebellious days, he thinks about no job, no car, no place of his own, and restrictions on his movements that are tough to abide. "There ain't no forgiveness," he says, and by that he means that the larger society doesn't really believe in rehabilitation or second chances. "If I can't work, I'm going to go out there and sell me some rocks. What else you expect me to do? I got to make me some money some kind of way."

A guy once told him something he still finds profound: The reason the guy smoked drugs, he said, was because he was afraid his life wouldn't turn out well. "You go to Georgetown, and see white people all chipper," James says. "And then you go to the neighborhood and our people are all mad. And the question you have to ask yourself is: Why?"

The sun has faded, giving the darkening sky an orange glow. The foot traffic on Adams Street has collected around James. There's the bearded street philosopher with the piercing eyes; the dancing boozehound they call Don Juan ("I'm a drunk, but I'm still somebody"); the scruffy white electrician who is wiring condo units in the neighborhood; the sassy woman they call Pie, whose sisters are Cookie, Candy and Puddin'. Pie is constantly barking at A.J. "If I was a man, I'd whup your ass." To which A.J. replies: "You better [expletive] with somebody less dangerous."

A big man eating a bag of chips walks up. "What's up?" he calls to A.J.

"The price of gold, the cost of living."

Big man puts his arm around James. "He's a fair man, a fair man." Big man knows A.J. grants favors.

The gatherers talk about how the neighborhood has changed -- the condo conversions, the Home Depot that doesn't hire enough locals.

A.J. has two cellphones, and calls are coming in on both simultaneously.

The conversation turns to prison -- who's in, who's out, how many lives have been wasted going in and out, in and out.

"That's a multibillion-dollar business, locking us up," James says.

The street philosopher, Jerome Jenkins, pipes up. Prison is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it takes incarceration to get your head right. But, he adds: "By the time we get the knowledge and understanding of being a man, a whole 'nother generation has died." Jenkins is 45, unemployed, well traveled, divorced, bitter. "My spirit as a black man growing up in the 'hood was broken long ago."

A.J. gets a cellphone call he doesn't like. It's from his community supervision officer, telling him he has to report to a residential treatment facility for a 28-day stay starting the next morning. He has not complied with the terms of his supervised release, A.J. is told, testing positive for drugs on several occasions, among other things. The Reentry and Sanctions Center, as it's called, is run by the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, the federal entity that oversees adult parole, probation and supervised release for the District. The center, on the grounds of D.C. General Hospital in Southeast, is a kind of last chance for offenders with extensive criminal histories and patterns of drug abuse. It offers an intervention, a comprehensive program of assessment and counseling designed to help offenders change their behavior. If they blow this opportunity, officials say, the next stop is likely a return to prison.

The call numbs James, then angers him. He doesn't like his community supervision officer, who has just told him he will miss Christmas with his family, meaning, most importantly to A.J., his teenage son who doesn't live with him. It is Dec. 11. Why didn't he get any warning? James wants to know. He is on the corner seething now.

"[Expletive] that . . . I might end up on the run, Joe. I ain't doing it." James is churning inside, trying to think fast, and thinking aloud. If he flees with a GPS tracking device on his ankle, they'll find him. If he cuts off the bracelet, he'll be in real trouble. James ponders his options. The neighborhood crew is urging him on, giving him ideas. There is a way to rub your skin red and test positive for the possibility of tuberculosis, someone tells him. A.J. has heard of this. That'll work, he concludes. He'll get up early, rub his skin nearly raw, go down to the medical clinic, get a tuberculosis test, bring the results back to his community supervision officer and buy some time. "Hey, I'm gonna win an Oscar, Joe."

The night is here, curfew is soon. A.J. decides he has been on the corner long enough.

"I'm going to go in here and lay down and put my master mind to work," he says, heading into his aunt's apartment building, trailed by a few of the crew on the corner.

In the end, even his master mind would not outfox authorities on this one. Tuberculosis test? A.J. would just have to do his 28 days.

* * *

Some Notoriety

Aging athletes often keep old news clippings to remind them of their sports triumphs. Anthony James has his own nostalgia file, a soiled, tattered manila folder highlighting his criminal history: grand jury indictments, police reports, bench warrants, even a prison commissary price list from 2004. James's name can be found in court records on at least a dozen cases from 1990 to 2002, most of them involving drugs and weapons. He has been more successful at eluding conviction than authorities have been at locking him up.

This, from a 1996 affidavit supporting an arrest warrant for James on a charge of first-degree murder while armed:

Pig walked across the street towards Wayne, who was on the east side of the street and asked Wayne for a gun. Wayne gave the gun to Pig. As Pig was coming back to where A.J. was at, A.J. stated to Pig, "There's the M.F., right there on the corner. I bet you won't go down there and do him." Pig then walked up to the vehicle at the corner of 5th and S Streets, to the . . . driver's side and shot John Sylvester Fairfax who was seated in the car.

Charge dismissed.

This, from a 1998 grand jury indictment:

Anthony James, also known as "A.J.", within the District of Columbia, while armed with a pistol or firearm, purposely and with deliberate and premeditated malice, killed Gerald Evans, by shooting him with a pistol or firearm on or about March 29, 1995, thereby causing injuries from which Gerald Evans died on or about March 30, 1995.

Charge dismissed.

This, from another 1998 grand jury indictment:

After Rico McLaughlin was convicted and sentenced, Anthony James, also known as "A.J.", a close associate and personal friend of Rico McLaughlin, contacted his longtime friend Tyrone Sanders, also known as "Ty," and solicited him to kill Thomas White because Thomas White had testified for the government.

James was found not guilty.

Donald Bell spent many years chasing James, first as a District police vice-squad officer and then as a homicide detective. "I can put it like this: the people in the Brentwood area, all his peers, they feared him. To them, he was big."

Bell said James controlled what at the time was a drug corridor along Adams and Downing streets NE. "In order for him to survive, he had to establish a reputation," Bell said, and to do that he had to frighten his rivals. Bell, who retired in 2001, spent a lot of time in Brentwood and had good sources in the neighborhood. All he heard was "how wicked" A.J. could be.

Bell investigated the Thomas White killing for which James was acquitted of conspiracy and premeditated-murder charges. The case fit a pattern of homicides in the area that told a lot about the 'hood culture that was developing. "As police got smarter," Bell said, "they got smarter." Witnesses learned they didn't have to say anything, that they could just "wait you out," as Bell put it, even though he and his colleagues would keep them downtown for hours, squeezing them for information and using various forms of leverage. The greater pressure was back in the neighborhood, where the Anthony Jameses were growing larger with each violent crime that went unpunished.

"So now you can't get anybody to cooperate," Bell said. "Each case becomes more and more tougher as you go along."

Bell was never able to nail James on anything but small-time drug charges. "He became very evasive through the years." Reflecting on A.J. now, Bell added: "He was a bright guy. But unfortunately, he was on the other side of the fence. Nobody was keeping him in the game. He was keeping himself in the game. He was where he wanted to be."

Thwarting his pursuers gave A.J. a sense of accomplishment. And maybe even now, he is still thwarting them. Is he still in the game, he was asked, dealing drugs?

"Well, I can take the Fifth, right? That's what I'm going to do because I never know who's reading the paper," he said. "And I never know if it's going to come back to me."

* * *

A Push for Positive Thinking

No one coddles offenders on Taylor Street. Certainly not Curtis Atkinson, who has dealt with 500 convicted criminals over the past two years, including Anthony James. Atkinson is head of the day-reporting unit at this Court Services and Supervision Agency field office in Northwest. He assists offenders with résumé preparation, job searches, financial management, anger management, a whole

range of life skills. The offenders are required to report here as a condition of their parole, probation or supervised release. Many treat the obligation as a chronic annoyance.

"My primary purpose is to change the negative thinking pattern, period," Atkinson explains.

He doesn't play victimization games.

"We can sit here and talk about how the system keeps us down because we're black men," he said. "And that may be partially true. But many of the barriers are internal."

Offenders are full of swagger when they first come to Taylor Street, convinced they can beat the system with street smarts. They forge pay stubs to show they are working, submit computer-generated GEDs to show they have obtained their high school diploma. Some -- four in one month -- have brazenly tried to pass scheduled drug tests by using urine aids (fake penises attached to liquid sacks) that are sold online.

"The thing about our guys -- they would rather make zero dollars an hour than \$6 an hour," said Atkinson, who tells them to view McDonald's, for instance, as a corporation with opportunities beyond bagging fries. Maybe you start in fries, but you don't have to finish there.

The need to pose -- to be tough for their peers, to hide their fears -- keeps many from moving on.

"These guys are conditioned to have this hard exterior, to lash out at their families, their girlfriends, us at CSOSA," said Atkinson. "Once you strip it bare, you find out these are grown men who've experienced a lot of pain in their lives. They don't know how to process it. All they know is how to act out. It's a sad cycle."

On the week after Thanksgiving, Atkinson held one of his regular rap sessions. The black men sitting around the room had been car thieves, armed robbers, drug dealers and drug users. Atkinson wasted no time. "Why are 75 percent of the people in this room not doing anything to search for valid employment?"

The answers: Employers don't return phone calls, most are biased against job candidates with criminal records, "I'm not going to Wendy's. I got three kids." Atkinson was having none of it. He admonished one guy for his inability to utter a sentence without cursing and another for dressing sloppily for an interview.

One young offender challenged Atkinson with a proposal. Why not try to find them jobs that valued skills they learned on the streets? "People steal cars, they could be an engineer," the young offender said. "People used to rob, they could be an accountant because they know money. A lot of us sold drugs, whatever, we might have potentials being a pharmacist."

The room erupted in laughter, though the young offender saw nothing funny in his logic. Maybe there could be apprenticeships in these fields, he reasoned. Atkinson just shook his head.

James had been in the session, too, sitting in the back, as cantankerous as any offender. The terms of his supervision -- "intensive level" because of his history and the risks authorities thought he posed -- required him to report to Taylor Street almost daily, to undergo drug testing twice a week, to be closely monitored by his community supervision officer, eight contacts a month.

"It's like the homeless," said James. "You are free, but you ain't free."

One afternoon after a group counseling session, he and another seasoned offender, Kenneth Williams, got to talking. They had been eyeing each other and finally discovered that they had attended the District's Garnet-Patterson Middle School together. Reminiscing with Williams seemed to unlock some happiness stored inside of James. A smile replaced his scowl. "You remember Miss Brown? Miss Mack?" James proudly mentioned he had been in the gifted-and-talented program as a seventh-grader, the last shining moment of his schooling. He dropped out of high school in 10th grade and continued his education in the streets, and it wasn't long before the conversation drifted toward more familiar territory.

James pulled up his shirt, displaying some of the scars from taking 10 bullets. Williams said he, too, had been shot, seven times by three men as he sat in a car outside of an after-hours liquor house in South Carolina. In fact, that was the second time he had been a shooting victim. A former drug dealer and fugitive on 10 years' parole, Williams, 36, had served time in Lorton and also at the high-security federal prison in Lewisburg, Pa. "That was a vicious joint," he said. James seemed impressed by Williams's credentials.

He was now back in full hustler mode. "Out here in the street, everything come to you," James explained to an onlooker. Money, women, cars, notoriety. "You get the same publicity as being a movie star. . . . Everything but asking for your autograph." And then he thought for a moment, as if to leave no detail of hustlerdom unglorified. "In fact, I had dudes tell me it's an honor to hang with me."

Williams, though, was not about talk for bluster's sake. He wanted to impart knowledge. He remembered once in prison, a young thug from Southeast had asked him: "What's the Smithsonian?" All the other inmates laughed at him, but they didn't know the answer, either. Here was Williams's knowledge for the day: He told James to be on the look out for police cars outfitted with special radar that can detect a gun inside a car.

"You really think they can do that?" James asked, surprised.

Go see the movie, "Deja Vu," Williams urged, to understand the technological reach of law enforcement. "They can see through your house."

James was worried now. "That's got to be an issue with rights."

Williams shook his head. "Nah, man, that's the Patriot Act. You know what they doing to the Hispanics with that immigration thing? They can do that to us. That's all the Patriot Act is, so the government can do what it wants."

James seemed to be absorbing it all as he left. "I can learn a lot from this dude, man."

* * *

"Addiction" to Hustling

In his aunt's Brentwood apartment there is a room in the back where A.J. keeps mementos. He opens a plastic bag -- a DVD player, a blender, surround-sound speakers. A hustler's swag. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, the doors that open. There are a lot of things that make hustling more appealing than a job." He pulls out a photo album, nothing but fine, skimpily clad women. He pops a videotape into the VCR, , a tame, home version of "Girls Gone Wild," featuring A.J. and friends. There's a knock at the back door, which A.J. opens. He is handed a \$20 bill, shuts the door. He returns to the living room. Hustling, he says, "is an addiction."

That addiction has caused a lot of harm. Annually, more than 90 percent of all D.C. homicide victims and suspects are black. In 2005, 67 percent of those slain in the District were black men ages 18 to 34. A.J. contemplates the statistics, briefly. He is asked if he's remorseful for the violence he committed. "Yeah, most definitely. A lot of these dudes were from the same neighborhood, you grew up with them." But his is qualified remorse. "If it was somebody who shot at me or killed somebody I loved, I feel a sense of achievement, to be honest with you. Violence begets violence."

He begins to talk about honor, the code of "the game," as he sees it. "You got some dudes who don't have morals and principles," one of which is: Don't try to be a gangster out in the streets and then go behind the closed doors of an interrogation room and snitch. "I forgave a person who shot me. But I'll never forgive a person who tells on me." That person is trying to put him in jail, as he sees it, intrude on his livelihood, take him from his family. "So that's how I justify killing rats."

During a stint in prison, he drew closer to God, he said, and when he returned home, people said he had gone soft. "I fear God. If I didn't fear God, I would have probably killed 100 men." What would God say about his behavior? "I believe God understands." He did what he had to do, A.J. says, because he was in a game that required it. "To me, it's no difference than the American soldiers fighting over in Iraq. You look up what civil war means. You're in a civil war, it's either you kill him or he kills you."

Someone knocks on the front door. A.J. tells him to come back later. The voice on the other side of the door asks when can he return. A.J. grows more insistent and never opens the door. Just come back later, he shouts from inside the apartment. "Later" means later. It seems clear that a demand for his time is building. Someone in the street is calling for him. He pulls the curtain open, peeks outside the window, sits back down.

"You tell yourself you're going to make \$10,000 and get out. You always think you're going to do it differently," he says. But even if you don't repeat the mistakes of others, you have to worry about "some other dumb ass who's going to [expletive] it up."

As evening descends, the apartment grows darker. The ceiling light is broken, and there is just the shadow on the wall from the television picture. A.J. thinks back to prison and the contradictions of his lifestyle. How do you explain wars between rivals who live one street apart, when those animosities dissipated so quickly after everyone got locked up? "In jail, we're all Brentwood. But out in the streets we can't get together. Ain't that crazy? You think about the mindset of that. It's crazy how we divide ourselves." He took it further. You go to prison in another city, say Atlanta, and all the inmates in D.C. stick together. "Why can't we use this blueprint to squash all the beefs in the street?"

A.J.'s prescriptions for society are difficult for him to apply to his own life. Every time his mind inches toward embracing the legitimate world's notion of fairness and justice, something happens that shakes him up. And then his mind is back in the streets.

On Dec. 2, his half brother, 43-year-old Tracy U. Richardson, was stabbed to death in a fight behind a liquor store in the Eastover Shopping Center on Indian Head Highway near the District line. An Oxon Hill man, 50-year-old Eddie D. Roberson, turned himself in and was charged with first-degree murder.

"I would have rather him stayed on the street -- and get some street justice . . . I'm very upset that I can't do nothing about it," A.J. says. "I'm very upset that this dude took the sucker way out and turned himself in. I'm mad and angry."

* * *

Hoping for a New Start

The wake for Tracy Richardson on Dec. 8 was crammed. Gathering at the Dunn & Sons Funeral Services on Eads Street in Northeast, those who knew him celebrated how he had lived -- singing with the Mighty Stroker Band, playing guitar, remaining a loyal Cowboys fan in a Redskins town. His casket was open. Friends and family moved in close, touched his forehead, kissed him goodbye. After the songs and the prayers, the floor was open for testimonials.

Speaking first, Sean Morgan pleaded for reconciliation. He worked at the liquor store near the stabbing. He loved Richardson, and he saw his death as a cautionary tale. "When you do things in excess, black folks, this is what happens," he said, pointing to the casket. "It ain't about no revenge. Leave the knives and guns at home." He was sobbing now. "It ain't nothing about no revenge thing. It's a wake-up call."

A.J. didn't see it that way. Many had mentioned how close Richardson was to his father, who had married A.J.'s mother, who was no longer living. A.J., when he took the floor, spoke of Richardson's character. Richardson was not in the game. He didn't deserve to go out like this. "What I got to say ain't appropriate at this time," he began. He had decided he would not sully the occasion by talking about retribution. "Thank God for the guy who turned himself in, believe that," he told the assembled. What A.J. was struggling with was how did such a good man get killed. A lot of times at funerals, he noted, people tell flattering lies about the dead. "I'm not a good guy," A.J. said, "I'll tell you that. . . . But I can't imagine anybody would want to kill this guy. Worked every day. Ain't out there. Nobody has to lie about this guy."

He was the kind of guy A.J. was still hoping to become.

Staff writer Henri Cauvin and staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company