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## Drill Team Helps Provide Structure and a Refuge



Photos by José Moré/Chicago News Cooperative

The South Shore Drill Team and Performing Arts Ensemble participates in competitions across the United States.

By **DON TERRY**

As the city was reeling from dozens of shootings last week, a group of teenage boys gathered on a basketball court in a tough South Side neighborhood called the Pocket. Their leader, a stocky 32-year-old wearing baggy sweat pants and a baseball cap, told them to settle down and listen up. They didn't have much time.

Then he barked out a chilling command: "Go get the rifles."

This was Saturday afternoon, April 3, the end of an especially bloody few days in Chicago. Yellow police tape fluttered in the wind from Englewood on the South Side to Austin on the West Side. In just 26 hours, some 41 people had been shot, at least 3 fatally. As one of the boys said, "Everybody in the city is on the warpath."

When the rifles arrived, the leader, Michael Borum, shouted at the boys to take their positions. "It's time to get serious," he said.

And with that began another four-hour practice session of a unique youth violence-prevention group, the South Shore Drill Team and Performing Arts Ensemble.

Since 1980, the drill team has been providing boys and girls, ages 8 to 21, with a highly disciplined, choreographed and increasingly stylized alternative to the street. Team members use wooden mock rifles, hip-hop music and modern dance moves in their performances, which have taken them from Morocco to Walt Disney World to the annual back-to-school Bud Billiken Parade down Chicago's

Martin Luther King Drive. In 2009, the team performed at 130 events in nine states.

On June 5, the team will mark its 30th anniversary with a night of performances at the Chicago Theatre.

Although many on the drill team come from struggling families and from schools where sometimes up to half the pupils drop out before the 12th grade, 99 percent of the members graduate from high school and many go on to college, said Arthur Robertson, the former Chicago public school teacher who founded the team with only four boys, two of whom were his nephews. Now, its membership remains steady at about 350.

"Some of our kids are first-generation high school graduates," Mr. Robertson said.

Two Saturdays ago, at the gym at the Gary Comer Youth Center on South Ingleside Avenue, the team was preparing for the 33rd annual drill team and color guard world championships this weekend — the Winter Guard International — in Dayton, Ohio. More than 300 teams from across the United States and four other countries were entered, said Bart Woodley, the Winter Guard's marketing manager. The South Shore team won the championship in 1992.

"They are one of the fan favorites year in and year out," Mr. Woodley said. "People rush to the gym to see them. People appreciate that they are really making a difference in their community by offering these kids an outlet to perform and

keeping them off the streets. The South Shore kids also do some amazing things with those rifles.”

Indeed, this is not your father’s drill team competition.

“It’s a combination of Olympic sports and the pageantry of the Broadway stage,” Mr. Woodley said. “In the early ’80s, people started looking more to movement and modern dance and incorporating that into their routines. Once they started doing that, it became much more theatrical with more outrageous costumes. It just kind of snowballed.”

The South Shore team is divided into several age groups and units. On April 3, the Cadets, boys 15 to 17, practiced with their coaches, Mr. Borum and Fred Irvin, both members of the 1992 world championship team.

The Cadets worked on a skit called “Why Me?” — a 4-minute-26-second interpretative drill and dance combination about youth violence. Outlined in blue tape on the team’s basketball-court-sized performance tarp were two fallen bodies and the words, “Please Don’t Shoot.”

The 16-member unit includes Reginald Jackson, 17, and David Myers III, 15, who said his parents allowed him out of the house only to attend team practices and events.

“They said they want to keep me as safe as possible,” David said. “I understand, but it makes me feel trapped. You can’t go outside and be a regular kid. Here you can be.”

The team co-captain is Rodney Nelson, 17, who said that before he joined the drill team he was headed down a path of fast-money dreams and jailhouse nightmares. When he was 13, he sometimes held drugs for older, rougher boys because, “I was trying to fit in,” Rodney said. “I was under the influence of the wrong people. I was being disobedient, disrespectful to my mother, to everybody.”

Four years ago, Rodney’s desperate mother yanked him off the corner and dragged him to Mr. Robertson. Now, instead of hanging out on the corner holding a bag of drugs, he spends his days learning how to twirl a mock rifle high into the air, do a back flip and catch the rifle without missing a step as he parades down the street, the cheering crowds making him feel “like a rock star.”

“The drill team saved my life,” Rodney said.



Members practiced an interpretative drill about youth violence.