

A Soldier's Story: Back from the Battlefield, Into the Warzone

Sometimes home becomes the place you dread, a thing you must escape from. Sometimes you think you've escaped, but you haven't.

Jean Eason was not a perfect kid and he did not have a perfect childhood in Oakland. He'll be the first to tell you both. The 23-year-old Oaklander is pretty frank about mistakes he's made, about the people he has alienated. And he can sometimes sound angry about the way he was tossed around as a kid from home to home, even living for a couple of months out of his mother's boyfriend's truck. On the bright side, he tells me one dark evening in late November as we walk at a brisk pace around Lake Merritt, "It was the one time in my life I got to see Lake Tahoe. The actual lake."

Intelligent and expressive, Jean knew for sure school was nevertheless not for him. He had barely graduated from Skyline High. That was in 2008, at the height, or rather the depths, of the Great Recession. Employment opportunities were few and far between.

He saw little action, did not get wounded, left the Army, came home to Oakland, and got shot.

So he enlisted, was shipped off to Fort Benning, Georgia, for boot camp, and eventually found himself an infantryman in Afghanistan. He saw little action, did not get wounded, left the Army, came home to Oakland, and got shot.

It was New Year's Eve, mid-morning, a Saturday in East Oakland. He recalls it vividly. He was sitting in a parked car with, not a friend, an acquaintance, a guy he says he had known for a while but not well. Just a dude he'd hang out with sometimes. They'd play Madden. Drink beer. Today it was beer.

"I finished mine," says Jean.

The other guy is still drinking his when he sees something in their rear view mirror and starts to

ABOUT THE AUTHOR James O'Brien is a writer in Oakland, a long-time contributor to GQ and San Francisco Magazine, and the author of the blog, Ice City Almanac.



Jean Eason in his army uniform

yell, "Hey get outta here, get outta here!"

"And I looked in the mirror," says Jean, "and I saw, I'll never forget this, I saw the guy had a gun pointing in the back of the car. And he had a smile on his face. That made me *hot*, so I jumped out of the car. I jumped through the car window like a dumb ass, instead of just opening the car door and falling out."

His foot got caught in the seat belt, the bullet penetrated his right leg, shattered his tibia. The other guy in the car got shot seven times.

It's a thing that happens in Oakland far too regularly. In 2013, there have been almost 1,000 shootings here, to go with nearly 90 homicides. Far too regularly the victim is not the primary target, but just a man or woman, or sometimes a kid, in the wrong place at the wrong time, maybe hanging out with somebody they

don't know well enough. True, sometimes they are in a place perhaps they shouldn't be. But that doesn't mean they deserve to get shot, to be launched on the difficult and often dark journey a victim of violence must take. The physical pain is profound and lasting. But even as the physical trauma fades, the victim feels lost, alone, bitter about his situation, bitter toward his city and community, angry at the violent side of Oakland.

But there are other sides of Oakland, sides that don't give up on the city or its people, especially when they have been affected by violence.

Soon after the shooting, as he lay depressed and immobilized in a hole-in-the-wall East Oakland apartment not far from where it all went down, Jean got a call from Ray Estrada, of Youth ALIVE!'s Caught in the Crossfire program. For over twenty years now, Intervention Specialists from Caught in the Crossfire have been stepping in to the immediate aftermath of Oakland shootings to help the victims. Usually they meet

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the victim at his or her hospital bedside. Often their first task is to keep the peace, to convince angry victims and their angry family and friends not to retaliate, to help break the cycle of violence.

After that, it's the well-being of the victim they attend to. The emotional and psychological weight of violence can be immense. It brings depression, and fear of everyday life.

"People get jumpy," says Estrada. "They can't walk down the street without looking back, they're paranoid."

Even today, tonight, walking around the lake, some stretches of our path are darker than others, and Jean can seem suddenly nervous, lost in a story he knows well, quiet for a moment. At one point he says, "Man it's dark here" and it sounds like the path he is still on in life, the path all victims of violence find themselves on: struggle, progress, healing, then suddenly the dark, the nervousness and confusion return.

Estrada's task is to help. Everybody is different he says. Each victim's needs are unique. So he

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listens to you, to what you say you need. He helps you get compensation from the Victims of Crime program, funding to pay your medical bills, to re-locate if that will help, funds for therapy. He helps you apply for jobs or get back into school. More than that. He'll take you to get groceries, take you to a game or a movie.

"I tell my clients, and I told Jean, that I would pick him up and take him anywhere, anything that is positive, that is going to benefit him and move him forward, I would be there to help."

For Jean, it sounded good, but promises like that come and go.

"I needed somebody who would do what they said they were gonna do," he says. "I was fragile, man. I've told Ray that. I was dark. I let my hair grow out. I got fat. All I did was sit on my ass in the house, eat food, watch TV. My girl, I think I drug her down with me."

Traumatized people often struggle to do the



Father and son

little things in life. First the pain, then the emotions sap a person of the energy necessary to take care of business. That's where Jean was when he met Ray.

"I didn't have one thing. I didn't have a job. The place I was staying was in a rough spot. I had a full leg cast on. I'd been shot for something I had nothing to do with. It was low. I was low. That was it for me. I was low."

And Ray kept showing up. He took Jean to hospital appointments, helped with job applications, practical things, but crucial to a full recovery.

"One of the things that struck me was Jean's military background," says Ray. "Combined with that, now this shooting, he had a lot of potential trauma." Ray suggested Jean get some therapy. Jean was interested.

Ray made therapy appointments, picked Jean up and took him to them, even sat in on some.

Jean says the therapy helped him deal with the trauma, but also helped to improve his relationship with his family. He began doing his own physical therapy with videos he'd found on YouTube. He had it out with his father, they reconciled and moved in together. He found a job, then a better one, and now has been working at the same place for nearly a year. His leg feels great. Life is again a thing he embraces.

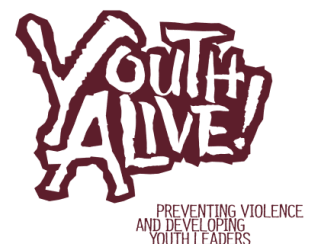
"I had lost that. Now it's back, Ray helped me get the joy in life back."

That night, as we walk around the lake, the holiday season is just underway. Jean tells me that Christmas had always been his favorite time of year. "But I had lost that," he says. "Now it's back, Ray helped me get the joy in life back."

By James O'Brien

Jean is living proof of the impact of Youth ALIVE!. Our programs – Teens on Target anti-violence peer education, Caught in the Crossfire intervention with gunshot victims and probation youth, and Khadafy Washington Project assistance to grieving families after homicides – have been replicated across the U.S.

We rely on individual donations to help other young people like Jean. Visit www.YouthALIVE.org to make a tax-deductible donation, or mail a check payable to Youth ALIVE! to 3300 Elm Street, Oakland, CA 94609.



Celebrating a birthday at his work