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Advocacy Writing Sample: excerpts from an oral history/narrative project for Henry Street Settlement (used for education within the organization and fundraising)

I changed the names of the children and removed a few identifying details. I did not add anything.

WHERE KIDS RULE:

A Campaign For Hearts, Minds, and Lives at the Boys and Girls Republic of New York

Excerpts:

Viewed from above, the housing projects of the Lower East Side form an unbroken wall stretching nearly a mile--from Houston Street to 14th Street. Bordering one side is the FDR Drive and, just beyond, the East River. On the other is Avenue D, or 'The Ave' as residents of the projects like to call it.

More than half the population here lives below the poverty line. Only 35 percent of residents age 25 and above are high school graduates. Four percent are college graduates. The community is troubled by gangs, drugs, and violence to a degree that is hard for anyone West of Avenue D, even just twenty paces over the border in the newly gentrified neighborhood, to fathom.

Located on Sixth Street off 'The Ave' and attached to the Lillian Wald projects is a kind of neutral country that runs by its own laws, a community center that is a hopeful counterpoint to the chaos outside.

"I hereby call The Council Meeting to order," says the mayor of the Boys and Girls Republic. It is October 15, 2009, the beginning of a new season.

The assembled children, age 5 to 15, are predominantly Hispanic and African American, reflecting the demographic of the neighborhood. Most live in three

local housing projects. About a quarter, a transitory population, are from the Urban Family Center, a local shelter run by Henry Street Settlement.

The elected officials of BGR, all children elected by children, are seated at a grand administrative bench in a room called the 'Council Chamber.'

Next door, the Court Room is complete with a judge's bench, a jury box, and tables for the prosecution and defense. Such bureaucratic environments are familiar to the children who come to BGR many of whom have spent days sitting on hard benches while their futures were decided for them by adults. This time, though, the children are making the decisions.

After the Comptroller presents a report, the floor is open for proposals to "make BGR better."

If the order of business in the next twenty minutes might seem trivial to adults--the possibility of a 'game day' and new art classes and fixing a vending machine--it isn't to these children. The staff treat the proceedings with seriousness (except for a question about putting Kool Aid in the water fountain which gets a few eye rolls).

Moderating the proceedings is Luis, the self-government teacher and, as he tells his classes, the only five-time mayor of BGR. Like most of the staffers, he went through BGR back before 1998 when it was only for boys and called the Boys Brotherhood Republic.

Luis is a lanky young man who wears his long hair pulled back in a ponytail. He will teach the children about the constitution and government of BGR and shepherd them through the 2009/2010 campaign for the next administration here.

In the stairwell, Luis has placed flyers:

"BGR, Where Citizens Rule, Become An Elected Official, 2009-2010 A Lot Done, More to Do"

The BGR campaign will take place over the following month, coinciding with and lasting longer than New York City's. The BGR election will also coincide with so-called 'Gang Initiation Week' and the beginning of an effort here to woo young adult 'citizens' (19-24) to the community center. For the older and younger citizens, the priority is first to improve their basic physical security in a community where violence erupts suddenly and without warning.

Beyond this, there is a fight too for hearts and minds, to give young adults and children the tools to cope with family and gang violence and to give them alternatives to involvement in gangs.

Three boys sign up to run for Mayor, each representing a part of the community here.

Danny, who enters the race at Luis's suggestion, is fourteen years old and African American. He has an open face and a sweet, if slightly distracted, air. He lives at Lillian Wald, the adjoining housing project where Luis, the government teacher, also lives with his grandmother.... CUT DETAILS If Danny keeps his grades up, he may have the talent for a high school basketball scholarship.

Marco, the incumbent is a Latino boy of fourteen with a compact athletic build and an agreeable grin.... CUT His father is a former gang member. He attends one of the top five parochial schools in the country. Marco is on the BGR '16 and under' basketball team with Danny and the third candidate.

Ylli is new to BGR and represents a transient population here. He comes from a local shelter for homeless families. He is Albanian American, likely the first Albanian American to pass through these halls let alone run for office. Ylli is on the basketball team with the other candidates, Danny and Marco because of his height. At fifteen, he is a gawky 6'3" with a featherweight frame. Initially, he was going to run for council but Luis urged him to enter the mayoral race....

ANGEL IS TEACHING PERSPECTIVE.

"This is gonna help you when you do your urban art," he says, showing David how to draw an 'A' to give a sense of depth.

Here too, in the Arts & Crafts room, the emphasis is on tools and discipline. One boy finishes the exercise with ease and starts drawing a sun with a frown on it.

"Angel, it's mad cold in here," he says.

On another sheet of paper, with one arm tucked in his shirt for warmth, Lawrence draws a warrior, an anime character.

He stops drawing, appraises his work, sighs.

"You probably were better at my age than I am," he says to Angel.

"You have much more imagination," says Angel.

Lawrence brightens and leans over his paper with renewed focus....

Angel takes me in his office to show me a book by Jack Kirby, the creator of Captain America comics. Kirby famously drew his first cartoons for the BBR newspaper back in the 30s. In Kirby's day, Boys Brotherhood Republic was located on East 3rd Street though its mission was largely the same then: to fight juvenile delinquency.

When Angel was at BBR—he came here at age six--Kirby's daughter sent stacks of comics to the kids. Looking at Kirby's work inspired Angel to draw. The boy's art teacher encouraged his talent.

Angel dabbled in politics too. "I ran for comptroller," he recalls, "My campaign slogan was "I'm Good With Other People's Money."

On the door of the stairwell are this year's mayoral campaign posters, newly printed.

Marco's poster—he is taking an interest in the campaign now--features the slogan "Making BGR a Better Place One Bill At A Time." The boy is photographed in close up looking off into the distance like JFK pondering the future of America. Behind him is an American flag.

Ylli agonized over his. He couldn't decide between the 'thumbs up' photograph and the one where he is pointing to the sky. He asked everyone's opinion. He finally went with the 'thumbs up' photo. On one side of his image is Obama, on the other the White House. Above, the words: "Time For Change 2010."

"DON'T BE SO TENTATIVE, Ylli!" shouts the coach.

Ylli inches forward and, very slowly, raises his arms high. He looks more like he is surrendering to the enemy than blocking a pass.

Coach Derek shakes his head with (gentle) exasperation. He tries to nudge the boy with his own body to get him to react but Ylli just grows limper and more passive.

The 16-and-under basketball team is of wildly varying degrees of experience. It is more about getting them to show up and commit than anything else. The team is open to anyone who wants to join. CUT INFO are also on the team as is Danny, the star player, who is a no show thus far.

The tournaments begin next month. For now, the focus during the 6 to 8 p.m. practice is on drills.

The older team, the 19-and-under, is stronger on the court. Off-court, they have all managed to steer clear of gang involvement but haven't, with one exception, found an alternate path yet.

Only Jamel is applying to college.... CUT

Their mother shows up for every practice. 'Miss C' is a force. The attractive, energetic petite African-American woman is always dressed to the nines in stiletto boots with chunky jewelry coordinated to match her accessories. She alternates between rocking out to the tunes on her iPod, chomping on chocolates, and screaming at the players. She has a voice that carries and uses it to offer encouragement and good-humored jeers from the sidelines ("you could braid that underarm hair!"). "My sons say I'm embarrassing them," she says with a laugh. She worked at BGR years earlier and knows all the boys from the neighborhood....

After practice, the gym and the game room of BGR open to the wider community.

As they enter, the uniform--hooded sweatshirts, baggy pants, baseball caps--is the same. So is the 'don't mess with me' slouched posture and the guarded look on their faces.

After they pass through these doors, the expression softens (a bit). The posture loosens up. The hoods fall away.

"Whatever is outside that door, you leave outside that door," says 'John John,' who grew up in this neighborhood and now handles security for BGR.

Upstairs, in the game room, a brightly lit space painted with child-friendly murals, otherwise tough guys can relax and just be kids hanging out in a 'rec' room.

They play ping pong, a game that can't be played with attitude. (It is impossible to look cool chasing after a runaway ball.) Even pool loses its hard edge under the bright lights.

"You just need to relieve the tension that's building inside you, whatever it is," says John John though he is rarely able to relax himself. BGR's 'security' is a massive, muscular guy—he did 500 push-ups in one night—so he only has to throw back his shoulders and purposefully puff out his chest to intimidate. Most of the time, he is slumped in a chair watching and waiting like a weary gunslinger in the saloon. Off- duty, this 28-year-old African-American father and husband smiles and looks like a sweet kid, maybe the way he did when he first came through these doors as a boy.

John John attended BGR (and BBR) as did 'Little,' who is not-so-little now. The pale, dreadlocked Hispanic man can be friendly but also has a restless, anxious, slightly scary edginess about him. He is friends with RJ, a tall, pale young man of 22 with a troubled expression, who also came here as a child. All three are returning after a long absence. "A lot of the kids we used to see when they were young, now they're like Grown Men!" says Leonor with a laugh.

This is the first year that the game room and basketball court are opening to the community. It is part of an effort to offer refuge to young adults like RJ and Little. Then, building on that trust and that base, staffers are segueing into other services like job training and HIV testing.

The BGR staff are approaching this outreach with some trepidation, aware that allowing a new population entry may bring new challenges. Derek, Greg, and Leonor will have to find a balance between open borders, a crucial part of any free country, and maintaining the safety of the citizens here.

LUIS BEGINS HIS FIRST GOVERNMENT CLASS by detailing his own BGR resume-- with gravity like any accomplished politician describing his career.

"I started coming here in 1993. I started as a council member here when I was 8 years old.... My job was to put [the chosen activities] down on paper and we were to vote on it. That was my job when I was eight and nine years old. Then when I was ten, I was the judge. When I was ten. My job as the judge was to, well, not put someone behind bars but sometimes I had to decide if someone was guilty or not guilty. We had a lot of cases. Then when I was 11 and 12, I was the mayor. I had my own staff. I was in charge of council meetings. We have council meetings a few times a month...."

He always tells them how he is BGR's only five-time mayor. If they learn nothing else, they'll learn this.

Luis was six-years-old when he first came to the Boys Brotherhood Republic. His family situation had deteriorated to the point where he was living with his grandmother.

He was a shy, insecure boy, when his beloved self-government teacher ('Soupy') suggested he run for council member. The experience was transformative.

During adolescence, Luis lost his way again. "He was the most disrespectful boy I have ever seen," recalls Leonor, "He was cursing, throwing chairs...." He was even suspended from electoral office at one point.

Luis was fifteen and at the height of obnoxiousness when Leonor made a deal with him. He could be her teaching assistant in her self-government class (she was the coordinator then) if he completed ten hours of homework a week. This arrangement lasted for three years during which time Luis served several more terms as mayor and became quite close with his mentor.

Now Luis and Leonor have a mother/son relationship.

At 22, Luis is about to graduate from John Jay College with no trace of his earlier restlessness. He has a calm demeanor, a practiced poker face, and, when needed, the bold bravado of a showman. Of all the staffers at BGR, Luis got the loudest cheers when he went up to accept his Lights On Afterschool award.

Luis is an excellent teacher because he is a true believer in self-government.

During his six-week citizenship class, Luis familiarizes all the BGR citizens with the political process here. At the end of that time, he hopes that all the children will at least know the positions of BGR government and what those officials do. He just wants them to have the tools to either run for office or vote for a candidate in the November election at the Boys and Girls Republic.

Luis writes the elected positions on the board during a class for the youngest children here, Unit One.

"What is the job of a council member?" he asks.

"To have a party!" shouts a tiny African American girl with toothpick legs and coiled hair. She wears a Girls Prep uniform like four other girls in the front row. The school is nearby but its after school program is too costly. BGR is free.

"Close," says Luis patiently, "Anyone want to help her out?" "Is to ask questions?" says another boy.

A girl slides out of her chair and onto the floor.

A boy drops something under his chair and fishes for it.

The girl slides out of her chair again, then three more times and finally falls forward and onto her face. "I'm sorry," she says softly.

The girl gets back in her chair then starts sliding out again.

Somehow Luis keeps seventy five percent of the eyes on him even if the bodies are in constant motion. He speaks slowly and with emphasis. He repeats himself often. He will give the children quizzes and create games where the children divide up into teams and compete.

Luis draws a pyramid. "Who is at the top?" he asks.

"The mayor!" shout a dozen children jumping to their feet in unison. (A few weeks later someone in the same class will shout "Obama!")

"Who was the only five-time mayor?" asks Luis, again.

After the class is over, I ask Luis about the current crop of candidates.

He says Marco has the best chance though stops short of saying what all the staffers say. He's a sure thing. "The kids all know him. He grew up here."

Danny has stopped coming to BGR. He may not be running.

Ylli for his part, only became a citizen here a few weeks ago. No one knows him.

Luis adds with a note of surprise: "Ylli is really throwing himself into it; I haven't seen anyone like that in some time."

JAVI WAS THE YOUNGEST MAYOR AT THE BOYS AND GIRLS REPUBLIC, just eight when he was elected to office. Javi is the reason the age limit was imposed. He only wanted parties, usually pizza parties.

Javi is now ten, a tiny boy with a wide-eyed expression of perpetual amazement and spiky dark hair that is often, mysteriously, gleaming with sweat (perhaps because he is always in motion). Most days, he wears an oversized army jacket that makes him look even tinier (and more adorable).

Javi is now a council member and is running again this year.

Luis sits across the prosecution table from Javi in the Court Room, helping the boy prepare his speech. "Just tell me your ideas," he says to Javi.

"Parties every day," begins Javi who is coloring in his campaign poster. Luis starts asking questions and taking notes.

On the other side of the room, the children who are not working on their campaign posters today are reading or talking amongst themselves quietly. One boy has entirely submerged himself into a black puffy vest (or coat with the sleeves pulled in) so that he appears to be headless and armless. He sits like that for a very long time.

I finally point him out to Randy Forest, a Unit Four group leader, who gives a 'kids are weird (and that's okay here)' shrug.

Randy is sitting in the Jury Box, writing notes in a log book. At the end of every day, BGR staffers give points to the children.

"Our goal is to reward good behavior," he says of the Turning Points system, "We tell them that nobody is perfect."

The youngest, those in Unit One, may get points just for sitting still. Fourth and fifth graders, the ones in Randy's Unit, are rewarded for doing their homework and keeping their voices down. Unit Five children, the Leaders in Training, get points from Jenna for doing homework and for participating in activities with enthusiasm.

The children use the points to buy gifts at Christmas in a 'shop' (the closet of the game room) at BGR.

Randy is a tall African-American man with a gentle face and demeanor. Despite his size, there is something deferential about his manner, as if he is trying to fold in on himself to take up less space.

He is shy and looks away as he talks, which is endearing. It is easy to see why the children trust him.

Back at the Prosecution Table, a fellow council member with a good disposition, is patiently helping with Javi's poster so Javi can practice his speech.

Luis points at each word.

"A vote for me is a vote for parties every day and a birthday party once a month...Javi X For Council Member. More Parties and Fun."

YLLI BOUNDS INTO THE COUNCIL CHAMBER.

"Do any of you need help with your homework?" he asks the Unit Three children.

Hands go up amongst the fourth and fifth graders who sit at a long table, textbooks open.

Ylli has been tutoring the youngest kids to win their votes. He is becoming a familiar face to the staffers too.

Givan Lettsome, the Unit Three Group Leader, grins when he sees Xhulio today. He walks over to the dry-erase board and writes the boy's name in blue capital letters.

"Every time you walk in a room write your name on the board so the kids are like 'Who's that? That's Ylli,'" advises Givan, a tall, bearish, baby-faced African-American young man who went through BGR with Luis, "When they see [your name] on the paper [ballot], they'll recognize it."

Three girls are already up at the board, pointing at the name but unsure how to pronounce it.

After helping a fourth grader with a word problem, Ylli goes next door to the Court Room to look for Luis. He has a few questions about the upcoming Mayoral Debate.

Luis is busy so Ylli and I sit at the defense table to talk.

I ask the 15-year-old why he is running for mayor.

He doesn't hesitate.

"I want people to like me," says Ylli, "They don't like me."

"I'm sure that's not true," I say.

"No," he insists, with more intensity, "Kids don't like me... I want kids to treat me in a different way; I've always been treated like a nobody."

Luis returns and runs through the format, how each candidate will walk in to a chosen theme song...

Ylli interrupts.

"Yeah, but what if he walks in and they're like going crazy and then I walk in...?" he says.

"Remember, he was the mayor before," says Luis, "He'll get some cheers."

Ylli decides to leave, immediately, to do yet another round of campaigning with the younger children.

"WHERE KIDS RULE?" asks Angel, "That's what you want it to say?"

A few girls are working with the art teacher to design a new (inclusive) shield. The Boys Brotherhood Republic shield is still part of the design. Due to funding limitations, BGR hasn't been able to make up-to-date changes so Angel has taken it upon himself to do so. He is handy with woodwork.

Colors?

"No pink; Pink is too girly," says one girl, wrinkling her nose....

"INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER" IS BLASTING in the Council Chamber as the children take their seats.

The Airforce Anthem is followed by a medley of other patriotic tunes.

"I'd like to welcome everyone to our first annual mayoral debate," says Luis.

There will be six topics, he explains. Two minutes each.

Ylli and Marco wait by the door.

Ylli will go first.

"So now I'm going to introduce... it's his first year here, he's very motivated. His campaign is 'It's Time For Change 2010. Everybody please clap it up for Ylli."

He gets cheers, the loudest from the youngest here.

The thumping intro of 'Our Time Is Now' pipes in over the loudspeakers. Luis helped Ylli choose the song, which is familiar to all the kids here.

Ylli lingers, unsure when he is supposed to start walking. Staffers motion in his direction. He inches forward, picking up a bit of speed as he nears the stage.

Marco is introduced next--to big applause, the loudest from the LIT section--and ascends the stage to the strains of "God Bless America."

Marco is wearing a suit and tie. Ylli is in jeans and a long-sleeved jersey. His seat is positioned directly under a spotlight giving the boy a ghostly appearance while Marco is lit warmly by an off-center spotlight. He looks healthy and handsome. At least Ylli doesn't have a five o' clock shadow.

"I'd like to thank everybody for coming and for giving up any activities they have planned today," says Marco in honeyed tones. He says his campaign is "to see all of the kids at BGR have fun." He wants "to reward kids" and to make "BGR into something better we can improve on." He wants "to see everyone smile."

Asked to explain his campaign, A Time For Change, Ylli is more specific but speaks haltingly at first.

"There's changes that, um, need to be done at BGR such as uh there's gotta be new activities since I see some kids don't enjoy the activities they are in..."

Ylli gets some clapping and, encouraged, continues more steadily. "So I want to change stuff like maybe buy new equipment like one suggestion was maybe a new puck for the hockey table in the game room or maybe a new air hockey table altogether."

Cheers.

When Marco challenges him as to how he'll raise the money, Ylli suggests fundraisers.

"Good answer, Marco" shouts Jenna.

Overall, the debate continues in this manner. Marco is more practiced and confident, Ylli more prepared. To be fair, I was in Leonor's office the night before when a sleep-deprived Marco told her he didn't have time to get ready for the debate and finish a paper. The kid is not a slacker just overextended this week.

One of the debate questions is truly startling: "How can we prevent gang violence here at BGR?"

Ylli has a few ideas... "For example, at my school we have officers at the door to prevent gang violence...." Why not do this at BGR?

There is a little clapping in the audience, but also stony silence.

Marco counters: "...We did this in the past and it didn't work out very well so how do you plan on doing this?"

Ylli without missing a beat, proposes auxiliary officers, "kids who volunteer in their community as cops."

Some cheers. Some silence.

Marco sticks with one answer: "Having good programming keeps them off the street and out of gangs..."

He gets a little applause.

Luis says the gang violence question was proposed by Coach Derek who wanted input from the citizens. He is grappling with this issue himself.

FORTY FAMILIES attend the BGR Halloween party, the first ever to be held in the evening and open to the whole community. An entire table by the entrance is covered with frosted cupcakes and cakes and cookies while pots of pasta and jerk chicken, also cooked by parents, are served in the Council Chamber.

Downstairs, in the basement, is the Haunted House. Children crawl through a tunnel of plastic bags into a room lit only by a television's static. A 'blood' drenched Jenna jumps out followed by Ylli in a goblin mask waving his arms and then a 'ghost' drops from the rafters. Everyone says it isn't very scary but then returns multiple times.

In the gym, there are games.... Luis spins a blindfolded Avian in a circle so she can pin the nose on the pumpkin. DJ Giovan keeps it moving with a beat and calls everyone out for the Cha-Cha Slide. The children here are dressed up as:

bumblebees, butterflies, a Transformer, a fairy, an evil cheerleader....

It is a typical Halloween party, which isn't so typical around here.

Where would you be if you weren't at BGR?"

"Home!" says Charisse Young.

Charisse, one of the parents involved in planning the party, is an African-American woman with a placid expression. She is dressed as a witch with a tall, sparkly pointy hat. Her son, in Andino's group, is merrily spinning, arms akimbo, in the center of the gym. The stocky 8-year-old boy is wearing a karate uniform.

"No trick-or-treating?"

"It is too dangerous to be outside," says Amparo Mirha, Her two youngest children are playing in the inflatable bowling alley.

Tonight is the culmination of a month of planning, of phone calls and parents meetings overseen by Leonor, who is the silent force behind most everything around here.

The labels on the file cabinet in her office tell a story: Antiseptic Wipes, Band Aids, Eyewash, Gloves, Maxipads.... There is a 'Boo Boo' file in one of the drawers where staffers record any injuries, most of which are treated on the swivel chair in Leonor's office. She is prepared for anything. At one of the staff meetings, she grosses everyone out with a description of 'sucking chest wounds.'

Leonor has been at the Boys and Girls Republic since Henry Street took over in 1998. She started working here the same year she had Kyara-Lynn. Like most of the BGR staffers, Leonor is from the neighborhood. Her mother lived in Jacob Riis, her grandmother in Lillian Wald.

Leonor is in her mid-thirties but can look exceptionally young for her age, almost like a teenager, at times. Other times, she looks older. She often looks a bit anxious, like she is scanning the horizon for trouble, which she is. A few gray hairs are sprouting, probably from stress. Around her neck is a pendant that says BEST MOM.

Tonight, Leonor is everyone's Mom, looking out for the safety of all the children in this neighborhood on a night notorious for violence.

Caretakers of the youngest children here are also grateful to Leonor and the Boys and Girls Republic for meeting a crucial need every day, not just on Halloween.

BGR provides quality, free childcare, a rarity, according to Iris Bailey who particularly appreciates how BGR staff pick up the elementary school children and bring them to the center. The grandmother works full-time for the HRA while raising her granddaughters on her own. Bailey has short graying hair and wears wraparound sunglasses. Her granddaughter is dressed today in a blond wig like Hannah Montana.

Iris once lived in the Jacob Riis projects with her sons. They attended BGR when it was Boys Brotherhood Republic. By some set of sad circumstances I decide not to ask about, she is now raising both their daughters.

later

...In an interview following the first session of tutoring for the basketball teams, the African American young man gives me a primer on staying alive in the projects.

That same day, a boy was stabbed near a local school.

The boy was walking past a Chinese restaurant near the school. Someone thought he was involved in a fight that he wasn't involved in so he was stabbed.

Later, after the other boys have left, I ask Jamel how often this type of violent incident occurs.

"At least once a month," he says. ("More when it is warmer," clarifies Leonor later.)

Is it always random?

Most often there is a 'reason' he says, if not a good reason.

What sets it off?

"People could be jealous, you know. Like jealous of how successful you are or they could be jealous of your image at school. They could be jealous if you get better grades cause you got higher on the test cause you have a better home cause you have better clothes cause you have a better phone, anything. You could be a better person and they could be jealous..."

Jamel shrugs. It isn't a shrug of indifference but of exhaustion.

He says other instigating factors might include looking at someone's girl the wrong way or "you can look at a person a kind of way that just makes them upset" and you don't even mean to do it or you might be walking near another project, say, up the hill without a 'purpose.'

You always need a purpose. Just 'hanging around' is dangerous.

Marco's father reiterates this. Sometimes a gang member wants to jump someone to improve his reputation, "to get points on his name so people know this guy's a fighter," he says. You might just be unlucky if you happen to be there. They're looking for an excuse.

There is also the problem of not knowing if the stranger you are standing next to maybe, say, did something to piss off someone else who is going to come back and retaliate. Then you're there too and in the line of fire.

The biggest gang on the Lower East Side is the Moneyboyz, which is also a musical group producing rap songs. This gang seems to be divided by sects related to the various housing projects. Though it is less organized than the bigger gangs like the Bloods and the Crips, who actually have printed handbooks, there are meetings and rules, rules that may change arbitrarily.

Thus it is the projects that truly are ruled by 'children,' gang members given to whims and vicious bullying.

So how is a decent, intelligent seventeen-year old boy like Jamel going to just live long enough to go to college? What is he to do? Not go out at all?

"Yeah," he says. "I mean if it was up to me I'd play basketball outside every day but my mom is very protective. I understand it now. I didn't see it before. I just saw it as not being fair and me not being able to go outside and play. Now I understand it because I'm older."

Lawrence pokes his head in. He has returned to model his new suit. When he pulls it closed, a button pops off. He laughs good-naturedly.

"I don't have a tie," he says, pointing to his open collar. "Like Obama," says Jamel.

Lawrence smiles and trots off.

Jamel's little brother is here now too so Jamel packs up his Trigonometry homework.

The brothers cross the street to the Jacob Riis projects where they will pick up a change of clothing for practice. Then they'll return to BGR, the one place they can go to where the rules make sense.

ON NOVEMBER 5TH, two days after Mayor Bloomberg wins the New York City mayoral election, the voting is just getting started at the Boys and Girls Republic. It will last for a week, giving all the citizens a chance to get to the polls.

The ballot features the candidates names and, for the young children who can't read yet, their photographs.

Luis has arranged cardboard partitions on long tables in the lobby. The children huddle in them filling out circles on their ballots.

"Stop looking at mine!" shrieks Javi.

Luis tells Javi to fold the ballot in half and then snaps a photograph of the boy dropping the ballot into the box.

Javi skips off down the hall.

Ylli and Emmanuel come up to the booth with a few of the other LITs. Danny is here. He has been drifting through the day program on and off. He asks Jenna if he can vote.

"I don't know; are you still a citizen of BGR?"
Danny shrugs.

David will vote tomorrow. He is in court today.

"If he doesn't beat this case, it may go on his permanent record," says Jenna, "It may stay with him for the rest of his life."

When a child in this neighborhood makes a mistake, it is often a big one and the consequences are sobering.

Part of the reason may be the constant threat of violence here.

Leonor learned from David's mother that the boy brought the knife to school after he was mugged on his way to a local convenience store. David felt powerless

and afraid for himself and his little sister. An otherwise good kid did something foolish.

The police response to David's actions was also alarmingly unmitigated. They handcuffed an eleven-year-old boy and threatened to send him to a high security facility. Such harsh punitive measures reinforce the perception (and, often, reality) that people in the projects not only can't rely on the police for help but must fear them too.

If a teenager like Jamel does venture somewhere without a *purpose*, he is in danger not only of getting stabbed himself but also of being associated with a crime because he is standing next to the hothead who stabbed someone else. The police may not, as they might in other neighborhoods, distinguish a bystander from a participant.

Another issue in this community is that negative behavior is rewarded with social acceptance. David's arrest gets him a 'rep' with the boys in his school. This could push him more in the wrong direction--at least if he starts 'hanging around' with the wrong crowd.

Leonor sees the boy hanging out in the middle of the night at Riis. (She has told their mother several times but it doesn't make a difference.)

Typically, Leonor says, a gang member will ask such a child to complete a small task like delivering a package. "They'll say 'I'll give you ten dollars if you take this over there and the kids will do it because they don't know any better,'" says Leonor, "By the time they figure it out, they don't want to stop because they're making money." Small jobs lead to bigger responsibilities and further entanglements.

RJ was David's age when he started selling drugs. He is 22 now and has been incarcerated twice. During a session with K Bain, the BGR job development specialist, he shares his story....

"I tried to get the hustle game down early," RJ tells K. "Weed?" asks K. "Yeah."

"Why did you do it?" asks K, partly for my benefit.

"Just seeing things. There's nobody to take good care of you but you see what other kids have. Some kid has new Jordans. I wanted things."

"So at age eleven, you were attracted to material things," K repeats. Randy nods. "Did you have food, shelter, and clothing?" RJ shakes his head.

"No. I didn't. Sometimes I had noodles for dinner." K can relate. "Sometimes I had sleep for dinner." Fear is another reason for joining a gang.

"They think if I'm down with this gang, I'll be protected and nobody will bother me," says Marco's father who cautiously agreed to speak with me about his experience.

Love, or an absence of it, can be a motivation too.

K Bain always asks the young men he advises on employment options to tell them their personal stories. Most everyone begins the same way: "My father was never around... "

Gangs prey on this need. "They show them that respect, that love," says John John, but "it is like rattlesnake respect cause if you get in trouble, they drop you... they don't want to go to jail so they'll turn and put the blame on you."

One thread also runs through most every 'success story' in this neighborhood: a strong, tenacious, downright relentless mother. This is yet another reason why BGR has to nurture the girls, and why Henry Street opened its doors to them. It is the women who are going to be in charge in this community. The women run the homes and are often the breadwinners too.

"If my daughter wasn't in a place like this, my daughter would be in a gang," says Leonor. (Girls 'join' gangs by dating boys in gangs.)

As if on cue, her daughter [cut specifics and the section on girls re privacy issue] pokes her head into Leonor's office. She whispers something to her mother who shakes her head 'No.' Her daughter leaves, cooing sweetly "I love you Mommy!"

Then Leonor's son calls to tell her exactly where he is, at some after-school practice, and when he will get to BGR.

Such contact helps ease the stress but it is never a guarantee.

As they're the first to admit, they're living in a war zone.

*"CAME A LONG WAY,
From little to no dough,
Plastic on the sofa,
Hand me down clothes,
Came a long way,
Ducking the police,
Hustling in the streets,
Trying to make ends meet,
...Came a long way,
Never let them break me down,
What I went through then made me what I am now."*

-K. Bain, Rap Artist/BGR Job Development Specialist

“When I get a job, I'm gonna hug you so tight,” says RJ slapping K. Bain on the back.

K. brings out uncharacteristic warmth in the young men who come to see him. Despite K's tough, muscular 'street' appearance, the 32-year-old African American is disarmingly direct.

On one evening, K. preps his proteges for a meeting with a producer.

Flames is a dark-skinned African-American young man in a red baseball cap, a red silk bomber jacket, and dark jeans who leans forward eagerly in his chair.

JC, a towering, light-skinned African American man with a slightly aloof air, stands.

Randy sits nearby. The newly clean shaven (for interviews) African-American man spent the previous hour writing his resume with K. Randy is here today with his pre-school age daughter who sits, playing a computer game behind them. She

turns every so often to reveal a gap-tooth grin.

"Give them less," says K to 'Flames' and JC, "They're not gonna listen to whole songs....Three songs."

K tells them how he was once working with a producer and saw the guy dispose of a submission with alarming speed. He just listened to a few seconds of the first song and tossed the CD into the trash.

"That's someone's whooole life!" says Randy.

K says these kind of rejections bring you closer to success... "These stumbling blocks.... I've been through a lot of them..."

Through mistakes, K would learn. He would learn the hard way what more privileged young men learn from their fathers and their uncles and all the other male role models in their lives. K knows from experience that Flames and RJ can't survive on the other side of 'The Ave' with machismo and a street attitude. He hopes to give them the compass he never had.

So K tells the story of the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

It was the day of the Puerto Rican Day parade and K was going to perform on a float. Frito Lay was the sponsor. It was big, so big that he invited his family, his friends, everyone he knew.

Then, only minutes before he was to go on for his breakthrough performance, the Frito Lay folks pulled K. aside. They said: 'You're not going to perform on the float.'

They said 'You're not gonna perform. You're going to stand on the float.'

So now, he's going to stand on the float but not perform. Not perform!

Then the Frito Lay folks tell K he's not going to even stand on the float. He's going to walk beside the float. He's going to walk beside the float and not perform. Just walk.

"...So I went from performing on it to standing on it and not performing to walking beside the float. Walking with the float!"

His whole crew is there, his brother, his friends, even his son is there and K is supposed to walk beside the float, just walk and not perform. It is humiliating. So now his brother is pissed off too, and telling K they should just get out of there.

"You know what I did?"

K pauses for effect.

"I said I'm gonna walk, and I walked. My feet was hurting but I walked... I took it and I ate it and I walked... and you know what I said. I said 'Thank you for the opportunity.'"

He waits and looks at the guys. They're nodding.

"So you know what, a few weeks later I'm getting ready to shoot a video [and someone is there who saw me walking] and they remembered me. They said 'There's K'...."

"It's not about right or wrong," says K, "It's about knowing that you have to do things."

Flames says: "Yeah, a lot of people don't even get the opportunity to walk beside the float." nods.

K asks them: "What do you think would have happened if I had thrown a fit?"

JC laughs. "That shit would have lasted longer than your career."

K offers a final fatherly bit of advice: "...Sometimes waiting if you can is the best way..... If not, go by the jungle rules."

"That's real," says Flames.

MISS C IS THE ONLY MOTHER at Tournament Night.

The 'under 16' team is warming up.

By 7, the other team still hasn't arrived. It is a forfeit.

Everyone is a little sluggish at first as if walking through stage directions before a performance.

Then Miss C screams: "Play It For Real!"

The effect is electric. Marco and Danny lunge into action. Ylli is working,

actually sweating.

One of the boys from Jenna's LIT group, sits in the stands watching. Andrew now idolizes Ylli. "He's very tall," says with amazement. After the older boys play, the two will walk back to the UFC together.

The older team plays at 7:45 against a Harlem Boys Club.

Jamel, perhaps spurred on by mom's running commentary, is especially focused tonight. He gives good defense, aggressive offense.

BGR wins.

Flames and JC are in the stands, and wave me over.

Flames says they have a show coming up. The meeting with the producer went well.

As we're talking, I notice the tattoos on Flames' forearms, on each a scroll on which Bible quotes and dates are written. One, he says, commemorates his mother's death, the other his father's....

LATER

...The vote count takes place around the prosecution table of the (locked) Court Room. Luis reads off the ballots while 'Lefty' and other staffers tally results on separate sheets of paper (to check each other).

By the next afternoon, the total is in.

Over the loudspeaker, Luis reads the results.

Most of the council members were reelected....

Javi is reelected....

Heather is elected as judge.

Christa is prosecuting attorney.

I am in the Court Room with Unit Two kids when the results are read and don't have time to find the older kids before the mayoral winners are announced.

It turns out I chose the right location.

"Lastly, for mayor.... Can I get a drumroll please?"

A song plays over the loudspeaker. Only the first few chords are audible. The rest is drowned out.

There is a roar, seriously a ROAR of cheers, in the Court Room.

The smallest kids go nuts. They're jumping up. Waving their arms. Wiggling. Shrieking. Whistling.

Chanting the victor's name.

They have no trouble pronouncing it now.

"Ylli, Ylli, Ylli, Ylli!"

It is mayhem. The staffers don't even attempt to get it under control. Anthony Andino is laughing and shaking his head.

I don't have to bother finding Ylli. He's downstairs in no time, leaping through the Court Room, high-fiving his biggest supporters, his base. He has helped them as much as they helped him. They learned that their votes matter, that this is a place where kids rule.

Marco, for his part, handles the loss with impressive grace. He's matured too through this experience. He knows Ylli fought hard for his victory. He tells his Mom that he doesn't have enough time to dedicate to being a good mayor. He has too much school work these days and boxing practice.

The swearing-in ceremony is two weeks away...

ELLY LEFT HIGH SCHOOL in the eleventh grade.

"I was too distracted," he says, "I got caught up in a lot of different things...."

Nino echoes his friend: "I was caught up in the streets basically... with the wrong people."

Nino wears an oversized blue sweatshirt and an anxious, guarded look. By now, I have seen him several times in the game room and at tournament nights, but he is chilly, offering no nod of acknowledgement. Elly is less stand-offish. He is 19 and wears eyeglasses with white frames and a red oversized sweatshirt. Like Nino, Elly was at one time a citizen of BGR. He lives at Lillian Wald. Nino lives at Riis.

Both want a second chance at a degree. Why now?

"I just want to come back and do something positive," says Nino with surprising candor and a note of wistfulness, "to start, to start to better myself." His expression, vulnerable for a moment, hardens again. He looks down.

Mr. Steven Clarke encounters such fear in all his classes. Most of the GED students have suffered countless disappointments and failures. So has Mr. Clarke, an Ivy-League educated wunderkind who found himself with a substance abuse problem at age 40. Part of his sentence was mandated tutoring, an experience that proved transformative. He is 52 now.

Mr. Clarke is African American with a fatherly paunch, gray hair, and a professorial demeanor. He appears in a tan suit and tie with a silver trumpet pin on his collar. He makes no attempt to 'fit in' their world, and, if anything, tries to bring his world to them over the months that follow....

Mr. Clarke learns about their complicated lives, sometimes directly from one-on-one sessions and sometimes slant. "One student is in danger of losing her children I think," he says, "I had to write a letter to family court keeping account of her time." He also gets requests to write to alternative sentencing courts.

As the circle grows tighter, all the students, even Nino, loosen up and start to enjoy themselves. They find their teacher is fun, capable of laughing at himself, particularly at his tendency to steer all conversations back to food. He is warm with them, even paternal at times.

It is reassuring to have a teacher who looks like a teacher, someone they can call "Mr. Clarke." It is a chance for each one of them to go back and have a positive classroom experience, to get a second chance and do it right this time. In January, they will move up to the game room, an even cozier and more reassuring setting.

The GED class is serving a crucial need. "The ones coming back for GED weren't comfortable going outside this area but they will come here," says Leonor, noting that the idea for the class came out of a game room discussion where attendees said their friends needed GEDs and would feel (psychologically) safe at BGR.

“Sometimes they have really good memories of this place,” says Leonor, “They feel like this place was everything to them, they wouldn't be who they are if this place wasn't there to keep them off the streets”

Some, say John John, also have good memories of Leonor “who always takes care of us” and know they can still stop by her office anytime.

Others came here to watch basketball games or, like Luis Checa, first learned of this place when their relatives brought home tournament trophies.

Some just know it by sight.

The Boys and Girls Republic and the Boys Brotherhood Republic before it have anchored this block for over fifty years. This longevity is exceptional in a neighborhood where so little is permanent that tattoos are often the only reminder of past lives and lives lost. BGR is one institution everyone is connected to--through a friend, a brother, a father--and one they can always return to.

On December 4, 2009, a new administration takes over at BGR, a ritual that is as reliable as the seasons when nothing else is.

Luis is wearing a three-piece suit for the occasion.

Javi, Christa, Ylli and all the other elected officials stand before the stage to take the oath of office.

Then the council meeting is underway.

"As Mayor of the Boys and Girls Republic, I hereby call The Council Meeting to order," says Ylli with authority, from the bench.

In the audience are children who may have lifelong ties to this place. Some are on the right track now. Some may get lost and find their way back.

Today, Allie is here though she will be relocated by X in a week's time. Jackie's little brother is here and, for now, seems content.

Lawrence, Johanna, Melanie, here, along with many of the other Leaders in Training.

David is here. His father just got out of prison. Seeing his father struggling and unable to find employment seems to be having an impact David who might have otherwise romanticized the criminal life.

Andrew is here though he will abruptly relocate to another borough in ten days without getting to say goodbye to his friends at BGR. Maybe he'll be back.

Jackie is here and has become close friends with David. She will sadly act out in a few weeks and will be suspended from BGR.

Lila is right outside the building, toying with the idea of playing hooky, but she'll sneak back in later in the day.

Danny will come back to BGR regularly through the rest of the cycle. Luis, who went through BGR with both Danny's brothers, will help the boy work on a music project. The two will spend a lot of time together. Today, Danny is here, in the back row, clapping.