

Delvin Lane was not so different from the other kids in his Cleaborn Homes neighborhood. He was born into poverty. He lived for the moment. He learned to survive. He grew up in a community where each day was someone's last.

By the time Delvin turned 11 years old, he knew how to break down a 9mm to its last spring and put it back together. He knew how to mess with the girls. And instead of earning money selling homemade lemonade for 5 cents per Dixie cup, he sold crack cocaine on street corners.

By the time he was 13, Delvin owned three guns — a .32 automatic, .22 automatic, and a 20-gauge sawed-off shotgun — to protect himself while out selling drugs. The Gangster Disciples arrived in the 'hood straight from Chicago and invited him to join. He told them no. Hell, he didn't need *them*. He was a decent boxer, had his own weapons, and wasn't afraid to fight. At 14, he became a father for the first time.

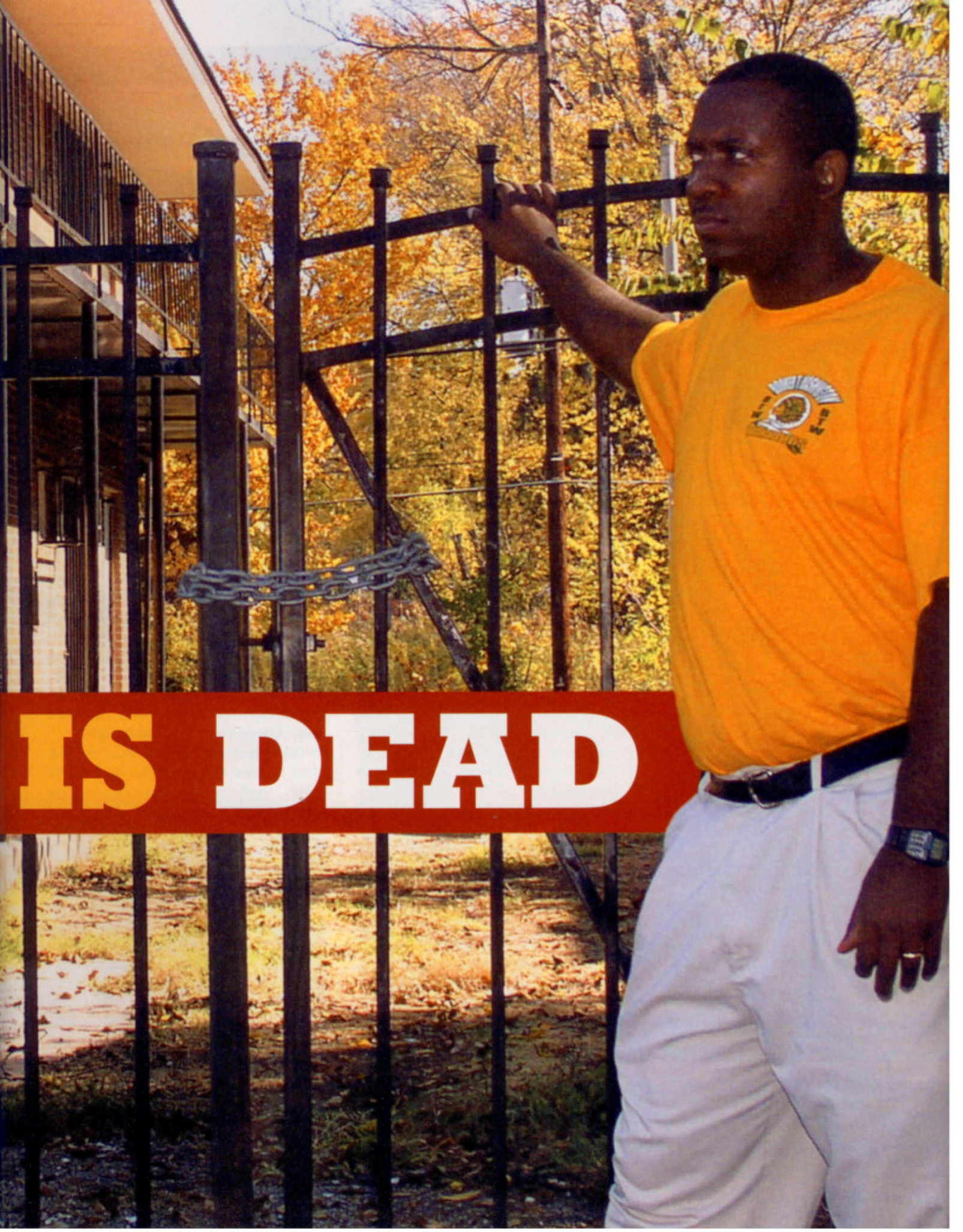
"My older brother and me had different fathers, and both dads ran out a few years into it," he says. "Mom worked a couple of jobs trying to make ends meet. Food stamps. She never did see what was going on or the money I was making, because in the drug game, it comes fast and leaves fast."

OLD DELVIN

Ironically, Delvin was an A-B student — his mom wouldn't allow otherwise. He played sports — quarterback on the football team, basketball, track. He even earned a football scholarship his senior year that would have opened the doors to the University of Wyoming for him — if he hadn't unwittingly walked into trouble that landed him six months in jail and vaporized his future.

Still determined to attend college, Delvin figured out how to apply for financial aid — his mother couldn't help because she'd dropped out in the eighth grade — and after he served his time, he headed to the University of Tennessee in Martin.

**By Terre Gorham
Photos by Shannon Maltby**



IS DEAD

OLD DELVIN IS DEAD

"I came home and sold drugs on the weekends to pay back my school loans and make ends meet," says Delvin. "My brother had joined this Gangster Disciples group — most of the guys in the neighborhood were part of them, in fact. They tried to recruit me again. They said, 'We need a guy like you who is in college and on the right track to come in and be a part of what we've got going on.'"

He again told them no.

While still a freshman, Delvin learned he was going to be a father for the second time. "I made a promise to myself when I was a little kid never to be the father to my kids that my dad was," he says. "I've probably seen my dad five times my whole life, and he died in 1996. I never knew him."

When Delvin transferred to the University of Memphis so he could come home for his children, his life changed dramatically.

On June 10, 1996 — at 18 years of age — Delvin became an active member of the Gangster Disciples, which he refers to as the GDs. Life started moving fast.

"I dropped out of school and opened three dope houses in the neighborhood," says Delvin. "I made a lot of money — fast. I'd make between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per week, and I had all the fancy cars, clothes, jewelry, guns — we were in control of the whole neighborhood."

Because of Delvin's education — he had schooling and could read, after all — he quickly became leader of the GDs, with 125 men directly under his control — not counting women and children. Life's tempo increased.

"Life was moving so fast, I felt like I was heading toward the brick wall, but I was always escaping," says Delvin. "I've been to 201 Poplar 30, 40 times for murder investigations, bank robbery investigations — everything you can think of — but I never was charged. I was always getting away."

Part of that was probably due to Delvin's 6-foot-5, 400-pound chief of security, who went everywhere Delvin went. "He had a security squad, and all those guys had automatic weapons on them," Delvin says. "Because I was the leader, I couldn't tote a weapon any more so that if the cops caught me, they could never pinpoint me to a crime. I had a legit driver's license, and all that. It was organized crime at its best."

But more people started dying and more started landing in jail. Delvin's brother is in the state pen now, as a matter of fact, and three of Delvin's friends are serving life plus 75 years there, too. Delvin remembers holding a 15-year-old boy as he died from a gunshot wound to the chest.

"In all kinds of shoot-outs, I never got shot," Delvin says, shaking his head. "People died all around me. I couldn't figure out why I was the one who never got caught or shot."

But what Delvin could figure out was that he was on the fast track to becoming another homicide statistic.

On May 14, 1999, Delvin — 21 years old and still beating the odds — woke up severely

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tired and depressed. Thoughts of suicide hovered in the murk. Delvin — who was baptized, went to church every Sunday, and accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior — went to the local preacher.

The preacher asked Delvin the Big Question: If you were to die right now, would you go to heaven or hell? Delvin didn't hesitate. He was going to heaven.

The preacher said, "You say you're going to heaven; you say you're a Christian. But if I were to follow you around for about a month, and you didn't know I was watching you, what kinds of things would I see you doing?"

Delvin looked at the preacher, stunned. "That slapped me upside the head!" says Delvin. "I no longer wanted to be a part of this gang, serving the devil. My girlfriend, who I'd just had a baby by, was sitting next to me. We both prayed with sincere hearts, and our lives changed almost in the instant."

Under any other circumstances, this story would stop here with a happy ending. But as Delvin knew all too well, gang members don't opt out of gangs; they die out. But Delvin decided to follow Christ's call with the hope that his Savior had his back.

The Gangster Disciples, puzzled by their leader's sudden change in behavior, watched. Was he going south on them? They waited. And watched.



Eleven-year-old Delvin sold crack cocaine in his Cleaborn Homes neighborhood. He often hid his drugs here — that way, if the police happened by, they'd find that Delvin wasn't "carrying."

The new Delvin works at Streets Ministries, serving as a living lesson of how choices — good and bad — determine the type of future an individual will face.

They saw Delvin orienting seminary students to the neighborhood. They observed a humbled man working two legitimate jobs and sharing God's Word. They watched the fancy cars, clothes, jewelry, and guns vanish. They saw a Disciple who stayed home with his family, went to church, and spread God's teachings. Still, they watched.

Someone else was watching Delvin, too. Ken Bennett, who had founded Streets Ministries in 1987 to serve the needs of Delvin's inner city neighborhood — the third poorest ZIP code in America — knew the gangster, drug-selling Delvin well. He was now watching what appeared to be a changed man, and he hoped Delvin would become part of his ministry.

Yet Delvin knew he was living on borrowed time. He knew the Gangster Disciples wouldn't be content to clock him forever. A confrontation was imminent. It was a matter of when, not if.

After three months, it happened. "A group of GDs cornered me one day," Delvin remembers. "I was terrified. Another guy who had tried to get out of the gang was found in a U-Haul truck with all his limbs cut off, including his head. It's called eradication.

"I didn't know what was about to happen," he continues. "My former chief of security came up to me and said, 'Man. Where you been?' I said, 'Around.' He said, 'We've been watching you, and we want to tell you something.'"



Delvin pauses, apparently reliving the terror he felt on that August day. He remembers the giant security chief looking deep into his eyes and saying, "Go on and do what you're doing, but do us a favor." Delvin told himself that he wouldn't — couldn't — kill a person, even if it meant escaping the gang. The security chief went on in a soft voice, "Don't forget about us, man. Come back and show us how to get right with God, too."

That's when Delvin knew God had a plan — what it was or what role he was to play, he didn't know — but when he heard those words from his security chief — a big, macho nonbeliever surrounded by fellow bad-ass gang members — he knew something crazy was about to happen.

"There's a biblical concept that the GDs do understand," explains Delvin. "It comes out of Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 17: 'Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is dead. The new is born.' Well, you see, the old Delvin was dead."

Delvin told the story to a local preacher. "Man, put your seatbelt on and buckle up," the preacher said, "because God is about to take you on a ride, and if you're not buckled down, you're going to fall off."

So with God riding shotgun, Delvin still patrols his old neighborhood, spreading the Word. Oh, the gangs are still there selling dope and killing people, but if anyone asks about Delvin, a member is always quick to say, "Leave him alone. Delvin is on a mission. He's working for the Lord."

When Delvin pulls up on the dope track, the guys stamp out their weed and hide the dice. Inevitably he hears one say to the others, "Hey, here comes Brother Delvin. Man, you all get right!"

"I can't understand it, I can't explain it," says Delvin. "It's a respect for God I guess they've got. They won't allow me to be around anything that's negative, period. A lot of these guys are in church now trying to do the right thing. These positive things you don't read about in the newspaper or see on TV — they are going on."

Meanwhile, Bennett and Delvin talked about Streets Ministries, about the dead Delvin and the reborn Delvin, and what God's plan may be. In March 2000 — on the day after his one-year probation on a drug charge ended — 22-year-old Delvin joined Streets Ministries as ministry director.

He now lights the darkened paths of poverty with opportunities of hope, education, and, of course, God's vision. He's both role model and mentor, a young man who has walked a mile in their shoes and a lifetime in their 'hood.

Delvin smiles the smile of a man at peace. "What happened with me has never happened to any GD as far as I know," he says. "I've been given a part: to no longer be a part of the GDs. It's funny. Basically, I represent GD with an 'O' in the middle now. God kind of used these guys like guardian angels. How strange is that?"





About Streets Ministries

Founded in 1987 by Ken Bennett in one of the most desperate neighborhoods of Memphis to serve the core needs of people who call the inner city home.

Began with a van, a basketball, and a heart to trust God on a daily basis.

A nonprofit organization with the firm conviction that the only path to true and enduring change for the Cleaborn and Foote Homes communities is through the hope found in Jesus Christ.

A thriving, dynamic outreach to hundreds of kids who deserve the same chance to succeed as those born to more fortunate circumstances.

Located in a new 34,500-square-foot outreach center strategically located in America's third poorest ZIP code, 38126, to provide a safe haven, a place to hang out and meet a friend, an environment of hope and learning, and unconditional love.

Offers hundreds of adolescents the opportunity to participate in activities that include recreational programming, Bible studies, outreach clubs, summer camps, a college prep program, computer lab, mentoring systems, and homework center.

Builds relationships in the community that include youth, their family and friends, neighborhood churches, and schools.

Gives \$10,000 to \$15,000 per year in community outreach money to improve and meet various neighborhood needs.

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