BEATING THE ODDS

Crime, Poverty, and Life in the Inner City

Robert P. McNamara

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Revised Edition

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And to my three older brothers, for always trying to keep your little brother out of harm's way. You did the best you could, under the circumstances, and I will always be grateful.

Preface

I have spent several years contemplating this project. I am a private person by nature and I have always been skeptical of biographies, since they often seemed to me to be efforts at self-aggrandizement. They are usually written by famous people, those who have had interesting lives, or, more recently, those who want to capture their 15 minutes of fame and huge advances from publishers (e.g., O.J. Simpson and Susan Smith).

I have not led what I can honestly call an "interesting" life, and I certainly have no claim to fame in the media. Thus, when I thought about writing this book, I wondered why I should even be engaging in this type of mental gymnastics. Further, my privacy has always been important to me, so why would I want to write about extremely painful and personal events? To be honest, it has taken me a long time to be able to answer those questions.

As a sociologist and university professor, I think there is something to be learned from this story. It transcends what we may broadly call "human interest," although I am sure some will read it for those reasons. Rather, I feel that many of my experiences relate to some of the most important issues of our time, specifically, racism, prejudice and discrimination, poverty, the declining influence of the family, crime and youth gangs, as well as the importance of role models in resolving some of these problems. I have experienced many of these problems in a rather unique way and hope that I can bring a few interesting insights to the discussion.

On a personal level, some might say that this book opens up a number of deep and painful wounds that are best left alone. In some instances that may be true: the scar tissue is still a little tender. I believe that my willingness to write about these experiences has had a healing effect, however. Instead of looking at this as a painful experience, I feel that I am now able to talk candidly about them. Not that I am completely recovered, since I do not think that will ever happen, but I am at a point in my life where I can deal with them in a relatively objective manner. In short, while there may seem to be a number of academic and objective reasons for writing this book, there are also some rather selfish ones as well. It has shown me that I am on the right track and it has helped me to understand more about the human ability to adapt to adversity.

I cannot take full credit for reaching this level of mental health, however. There are several people that have been of immeasurable help to me. First, there are my parents. I use this term in its truest sense because a parent is a social role, not a biological one. Virtually anyone can create a child—what is much more difficult is to raise one. I feel that Dan and Mary Ann Hartmann have captured the meaning of this distinction. Without them, I know I would never be where I am today. While it is true that some of the credit should be given to me for my work ethic and ambition, I needed the chance to grow. This is something I will come back to in the following pages, but for now, recognize that they have been the catalysts to my success.

Another extremely important part of my success has been my wife Kristy. She has been instrumental in getting me to address some of the most painful emotions/memories, and to help me repair my relationships with several family members. Without getting too philosophical, she has allowed me to see another side of who I am and to allow that side to grow. Also of importance are two of my brothers, Brad and Mark, who have been supportive of me in many different ways, especially in graduate school. In a different way, my brother Daryl has also helped. Our dramatic contrasts have always been a source of wonder and motivation to me and his path in life also serves as a good example of one of the most perplexing riddles of

modern times: what influences people's behavior—innate drives or environmental factors? Daryl and I came from the same place with many of the same problems, yet today his whereabouts are unknown and he leaves in his wake a storied and violent past.

On a professional level, Dennis Kenney, Albert J. Reiss, Kai Erikson, Bill Kornblum, and Eugene Fappiano have played important roles in my professional growth. Of this distinguished group, Dennis has been perhaps the most influential. I have known him for approximately 11 years and he has always been there for advice, opportunities, and an encouraging comment or two. While I know he does not prefer the use of the term mentor, in its truest form, it really does best describe our relationship. He has been a good friend and colleague.

There are other people who helped make this project a reality. Maria Tempenis deserves credit for tracking down some of the more obscure pieces of information for this project. She is one of the most talented students I have ever known, and I have come to admire her diligence and work ethic. While still an undergraduate, for those who look for talented students to see how they mature and grow intellectually, she possesses that rare gift of talent and motivation. Thanks also goes to John Fuller of the University of West Georgia, Lloyd Benson, Nelly Hecker, John Hoppey, Lesley Quast, Paul Rasmussen, Steve Richardson, Shirley Ritter, and Stephanie Shute, of Furman University, as well as Lieutenant William White of the New Haven Police Department. A special thanks goes to Nina Anthony, who has been of immeasurable help to me in many different ways and has been a wonderful addition to the sociology department at Furman.

There are also a few people who I would like to thank for not believing in me or my abilities. These people know who they are and I hope they have not done to others what they have done to me. I call special attention to the teachers who said I would never amount to anything. You may actually find yourself in a position to read this account and I would urge you to examine the sociological literature on the labeling perspective, especially the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. I would also encourage you to think carefully about how you treat your students. In some cases, the dam-

age you do is irreversible. My experiences are daily reminders that students are extremely sensitive about their abilities and need frequent reassurance. With the right approach and sufficient attention, they can flourish. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true and this is something I always try to remember in my interactions with them.

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The Blue Collar Scholar: Life in the Ivy League

One day I am lecturing on the issues of race and poverty as it relates to education in my course on social problems. In this discussion one student comments:

> But I don't understand, Dr. McNamara. People like you and me are having more and more problems getting a good education and we have the SAT scores and qualifications to get into the best schools. As you mentioned, people from poor backgrounds have trouble getting even a basic education, let alone one that qualifies them go to the best colleges. So if they can't compete, why should we give them spots in the best schools when more qualified students aren't able to get in? I mean how would you feel if some kid from a poor neighborhood was given your spot at Yale? Would you feel differently about things like poverty, affirmative action, and racism?

To be honest, I was not expecting such a dramatic comment. I smiled, thought a moment, and then responded, "What if I told you that I *was* one of those types of people. What if I told you that I went to public schools in urban areas for most of my life and I never even took my SATs?"

"I'd say you were playing the devil's advocate again," the student said.

"Let me tell you a quick story," I began.

Later that same day, I attempted to explain the labeling perspective to students in my deviance course. In the course of that discussion, several students were adamant concerning the treatment of deviance. They argued that if a person committed a deviant or criminal act, they should forever be outcast from society. When I asked these students if they thought that the offender, such as a former gang member who engaged in a variety of deviant/criminal acts, could ever make a positive contribution to society, they firmly stated that it was impossible. A bit exasperated, I asked them, "What if I told you I was a former gang member who engaged in a variety of criminal acts?" None of the students believed me. I proceeded to create a simple ledger on the board of the positive things people on campus knew about me (my qualifications, publications, teaching awards, etc.) and then included some previously unknown bits of information on the other side of the ledger. A few stated that I could not have come from "that kind of background." Others contended that I was being overly sensational. After pressing them a bit further about the possibility of this scenario occurring, one student commented that he would have a higher level of respect for a person who was able to overcome the negative effects of these experiences and still achieve a measure of success.

As exasperating as they were, having these conversations with my students was the first time I ever thought about this project or even of writing about the events that led up to my experiences at Yale. It caused me to think that I had something important to contribute to the discussions on these topics, and, perhaps more important, that my students could better understand a perspective on these issues that is different from the one to which they have traditionally been exposed. These two classes were my first group of Furman University students and, for many reasons, I owe them an important debt of thanks. For now, allow me to take a step back and describe the circumstances that led me to the Ivy League.

Getting into Yale

To be honest, I never even gave much thought to college, at least not initially. I was not what one might call a model student. In fact, I came close

to being expelled from high school and almost did not graduate because of a restrictive attendance policy. As I will describe in greater detail in another chapter, by the time I reached high school I was suffering from a lot of emotional baggage, as well as a healthy dose of culture shock. I was a street kid in a high school full of affluence and elitism. Add to the fact that I despised arrogance in people and had the verbal and physical skills (and inclination) to make my feelings known, and the results were rather predictable.

My goal was to be a police officer. I read the book *Serpico* by Peter Maas when I was in junior high school and from that point on, I knew what wanted to do. While some of the kids in my high school class talked about going to college, I thought that I would simply sign up for the police academy. The fact that I knew nothing about the selection process made little difference. I did not think I would have the chance to go to college, even if I wanted to.

For two of the three years I spent at Chichester High School, I worked full-time as a cook at a local restaurant. Given that my shift often did not end until two or three in the morning, especially on Fridays, getting up before eight o'clock on a Saturday morning to take the SATs did not seem like a good idea to me. So while my friends and acquaintances crammed, I kept a stack of uncashed paychecks in my sock drawer.

After a period of time, which included a bus trip to California to follow a girl, and a return stint at home, I went to work making sandwiches for a fast food chain. It was a small company, and the two partners owned six franchised stores. I quickly became their regional manager, responsible for three of the six stores. It was during this time that I became fascinated with the law. I had a host of regulations to follow, a dozen inspectors of various sorts to deal with, and a variety of state, federal, and local ordinances with which to comply. I had always been interested in crime, so I started taking classes part-time at a local community college. By then I was tired of the 100-hour work weeks and the daily stress of dealing with approximately 25 employees, most of whom were college students who worked part-time and had little attachment to the job. I had decided to become a lawyer, a

prosecutor. The flame was lit and I decided to quit my job and attend school full-time.

I read everything I could get my hands on. I was fascinated by the Supreme Court, reading as many biographies on the Justices as I could find. I read *The Court Years* [1981] and *Go East Young Man* [1974] by William O. Douglas; G. Edward White's [1982] book entitled *Earl Warren*; Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong's [1979] *The Brethren;* Wallace Mendelson's [1961] *Justice Black and Frankfurter: Conflict in the Court;* Stephen Strickland's 1967 *Hugo Black and the Supreme Court*; and Everette Dennis, Donald Gillmor and David Grey's *[1978] Justice Hugo Black and the First Amendment,* to name a few. Justice Black was perhaps the most interesting Justice about which to read, although I think Justice Douglas impressed me the most intellectually.

I also had the utmost respect for Thurgood Marshall. I had read Richard Kluger's [1975] *Simple Justice*, which captures the events surrounding the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and was moved by Marshall's courage and conviction. In fact, I was so impressed that I wrote to him and described the impact this book, and his work, had on me. It was the first time I had ever done anything like that, but it was a powerful piece of work and I wanted him to know how I felt.

Above all, I was interested in the way the Court shaped social policy, especially as it related to the police. I was particularly interested in the Warren Court and its many landmark decisions concerning the rights of the individual, as well as the restrictions placed on police procedure. As I describe elsewhere in lectures and presentations, I have since come to believe that these restrictions are part of a cyclical effect of our society's need to exert control over the justice process.

While trying to read as much as I could on the Court, as well as the police, I finished the requirements for the Associate's Degree a year later and transferred to a state university for my undergraduate degree. I looked upon my undergraduate days as a rite of passage by which I could gain entry into law school. Everything was focused toward that goal. I used to tell people that the only reason I earned a Bachelor's degree was because,

like the LSAT, it was a requirement for admission. Parenthetically, I even looked for some law schools that did not require a four-year degree.

Western Connecticut State University (WestConn) seemed tailor-made for me: it was a degree in criminal justice (although they called it Justice and Law Administration), it had a strong program for students who wanted to pursue a legal career, it was by far the cheapest of all the four-year schools in the state, and it was relatively small in terms of its overall population. The only problem was that it was located about 60 miles from where I lived at the time.

For two years I made the commute, often five days per week. I made the best of it because I was determined to have an impressive academic record so that I could choose whatever law school I wanted. I think it is ironic that it was at this school that I met the person who would have the most influence on my professional life: Dennis Kenney. After working for him I came to realize that law school was not really what I wanted to do at all. In fact, I owe him an eternal debt of gratitude for exposing me to a field of study that I have made into a career.

Initially however, he and I did not exactly hit it off. In fact, he was responsible for many hours of frustration and anxiety. We laugh about it now, but I actually expanded my vocabulary of profanity in describing his courses. I thought him to be overly demanding and a major pain in the neck. When I looked back on each semester, however, I found it was in his courses that I gained the most knowledge and insight. I worked harder for my grade than at any other time, but I was also rewarded for my efforts.

It was also during this time that I decided I was going to reward the faculty member who had, in my opinion, done the most outstanding job in terms of teaching for that year. I had started this during my last semester at Mattatuck Community College. I gave the Chair of the Criminal Justice program a gift, because I felt he had given me the foundation I needed from which to continue my studies. After my first year with Dennis, where I took courses with him during both semesters, I felt he had done the same thing.

I know this may sound obsequious and underhanded, but I was not looking for a better grade. I had already earned the highest marks in the

class, so I felt it would not be perceived as a bribe. I merely wanted to let him know that I really appreciated what he had done for me. (Upon reflection, this is something I have always done to people who have helped me. I am genuinely surprised when people give me things or do things for me. And when that occurs, I have this need to repay them in some way. In this instance, I was doing the same thing.)

With each passing lecture, I knew I had made the right decision to focus on issues relating to criminal justice rather than on legal research. Dennis taught me how to think like a scholar, to see the unintended consequences of events and phenomena, and I could not get enough of it. During my senior year I had the opportunity to become his research assistant, the first in the department. It was during this time that I really began to question whether or not law school was where I wanted to spend my time. This went beyond the typical case of apprehension that many undergraduates go through in their senior year. For me, I had worked diligently toward a single goal: to get into law school. Now that goal was in question. I found the research on crime more fascinating than anything else I had done. For six agonizing weeks I debated whether to apply to graduate school or law school. Some programs offered dual degree programs, but I thought that would not suffice for me. I had to make a decision and I knew hedging my bet like that would only prolong the inevitable.

The problem was that there were no graduate programs that offered a Ph.D. in criminal justice. I decided to try Rutgers University, largely because of its reputation and because it was relatively close, an hour's drive from WestConn. The graduate school is located in Newark, New Jersey. To most people, a three-hour commute does not fall into the category of "nearby." I thought it was worth a try, but soon realized that the demands of the program, as well as the cumulative effect of driving, especially in New Jersey, where aggressiveness does not begin to describe commuters' approach to driving, simply wore me out.

I was stuck. Where was I going to go to get at least a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice, and, ultimately a Ph.D.? One day I was looking through Rutger's graduate catalog and saw the names of faculty members and their

academic credentials. I noticed that most were either in sociology or psychology. Suddenly an idea began to emerge. I would become a sociologist who studied crime. After all, if some of the greatest minds in criminal justice had sociological backgrounds, I could get similar training. As an additional benefit, I had read many sociological accounts of crime and criminals and became interested in the Chicago School and qualitative research.

With this in mind, I decided that I needed some background in sociology, preferably a Master's Degree, before I pursued the Ph.D. I found a school near my home that not only offered a Master's Degree in Sociology, but also had an emphasis in Criminal Justice. An added bonus was that it was relatively inexpensive. As a part of the University of Connecticut system, Southern Connecticut State University does not have the reputation of Rutgers or Yale, but it gave me the chance to try my hand at being a sociologist. Still smarting from what I perceived as my failure at Rutgers, I had something to prove to myself. I felt that I would give Southern my best effort and if that did not work, I would pursue another career.

In my first two courses at Southern, I met Eugene Fappiano, one of the truly great people of our society. A man of vast knowledge and a dedication to his students, Gene inspired me to become better. He encouraged me, would spend hours talking to me about topics of interest, and would mention text after text that would be helpful. I tracked down those books, read them, and came back for more. Before I knew it, I was turning into a sociologist.

It did not take long to complete the requirements for the degree. Then the problems of finding a school with a Ph.D. program began. I learned that one of the most respected scholars in the field, Albert Cohen, was a professor at the University of Connecticut. The main campus is located in Storrs, Connecticut, about an hour's drive from where I was living at the time. Moreover, I would not have to attend classes five days per week. I also applied to the John Jay School of Criminal Justice in New York City. This program offered the types of courses that I really wanted to immerse myself in. It was two hours away, but by then my financial situation had improved and I thought that I could take the train into the city.

Finally, on a whim, I applied to Yale. I learned that one of the leading scholars in criminal justice, Albert J. Reiss Jr., was a professor there (he too is a sociologist by training). I had read one of his books in high school and thought it was worth the gamble. To my surprise, Yale was the first school to accept me. John Jay was uncertain about my credentials and wanted to interview me, and to this day the University of Connecticut still has not made a decision on my candidacy. For a while I kept calling to see what had happened, but one of the secretaries kept insisting that the Admission's Office had not quite made up their minds about me. At one point the secretary used words to the effect that officials simply were uncertain if I would make a valuable contribution to their program. After completing the requirements for the Ph.D. at Yale, a friend of mine suggested that I send them a copy of my diploma and ask them if it would help them in making their decision about letting me into their program. Who knows? Maybe it would help.

The odd thing about this situation was that I did not want to go to Yale. I thought I would spend far too much time in courses that meant little to me. I wanted courses on crime, deviance, field research, and criminal justice. While Yale advertised courses like that, I found that few were offered. I was, however, able to take courses in deviance and field research with Albert Reiss, as well as a seminar in qualitative methods with Kai Erikson, and these were perhaps the most interesting of all the courses I selected. Initially, though, I had some concerns about how I would fit in at a place like Yale.

Unknowingly, one of my brothers helped me make this decision. When I called him about being accepted and, more importantly, that I had second thoughts about going, he wondered aloud if I was mentally ill. In his own way, he told me that I was crazy to turn down an opportunity like this one. His words of advice caused me to reconsider my decision. After all, I could hang out with Reiss and use the Yale name when I finished to obtain the best possible job. Besides, I was to receive a scholarship that paid my tuition... how could I lose? As it turned out, I benefited greatly from this decision. I met some interesting people, largely because of my affiliation