



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT KNOTH



From left: Elisa Carillo, 15, and Maria Parra, 16, students at Carver; Altgeld Gardens, a troubled housing project next to the school; officer cadets practising basic drill in the gym

## The school that joined the Army

Shootings, gang warfare, even rape were all part of the school day for those pupils who bothered to turn up to Chicago's notorious Carver High. Now, in a controversial scheme, the Army has taken control. Helena de Bertodano reports

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t 5.30 each morning, 15-year-old William Pearson wakes up in his home in Chicago's blighted Far South Side and puts on the green military uniform which he has carefully laid out the night before. A tall thin boy with a trace of a moustache, he is a cadet at Carver Military Academy, a high school which was so ridden with gang warfare four years ago that it faced closure. In a desperate experiment, the school turned to the Army for help in controlling its students.

Pearson leaves home, a clapboard house with peeling yellow paint, to catch the 6.20 bus which drops him right beside the school. It is only a half hour walk away but not one that he would like to risk – even though he is 6ft 6in. Two months ago the school football team and their two coaches were beaten up by a gang of local thugs. Several of them were hospitalised. The police were called nine times but no one came. This is so unexceptional that not even the local paper reported it.

'Lately it hasn't been that bad because everyone is in jail,' says Pearson, who lives with his father and sister. 'Now everybody is starting to get out. Usually there are drive-bys, walk-up shootings, gang wars.' Pearson arrives at the academy at 6.40. Although school does not officially begin until eight o'clock, many of the students are so dedicated they opt to do early morning military drills. Pearson passes through a metal detector, has his pass scanned and heads towards the gym for rifle drill. His drill sergeant is 16-year-old Fernando Fuentes, another student. Fuentes may be a foot smaller than Pearson and sucking a pink lollipop, but there is no doubt that he is in charge. When the M1 Carbine rifle Pearson is twirling falls to the ground, Fuentes bawls, 'Drop!' Pearson drops to the ground and does five push-ups before getting back in line.

'I've got to act real mean,' says Fuentes, who has signed up to join the National Guard and is shipping off to boot camp this summer. 'The more they hate us, the more they

learn from us.' As Pearson leaves the drill the latecomers slouch towards the building, heads down against the bitter cold and snow. Several arrive in street clothes and change into uniform once at school. The girls wear furry jackets and tight jeans, the boys outsize jackets and jeans that are slung so low the crotch is between their knees. 'You'd better get your butts here,' shouts a security man. 'It's 8.06. Same people late. Every day.'

A police car with two officers is permanently stationed at the school entrance and five security men patrol the building. One of the men, Johnelle Evans, grew up in the neighbourhood and came to school here in the 1970s. I ask him what the school was like before the military arrived. 'Oooh, man!' he says, laughing and shaking his head. 'Five years ago we couldn't have no five security men. Kids got robbed or beat up. Out there at the bus-stop, they'd jump kids. We're real blessed now.'

Nine retired Army officers work alongside the teachers to maintain order among the 860 students. A commandant, Major Tommie L Hayes – who arrived here in 1999 to teach the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps – now runs the school with the principal. Inevitably there are frictions: some teachers resent the Army's involvement but most agree the experiment has proved a success. Instead of being a school of last resort, it is flooded with applications from all over Chicago.

Carver Military Academy is not a pretty place. A sprawling redbrick and metal building, it sits in a desolate landscape overshadowed by two sanitary landfills. The nearest housing is Altgeld Gardens, a public project that most Chicagoans would not dream of setting foot in. I ask Major Hayes what would happen if I took a walk there. 'The worst,' he replies grimly.

Instead he takes me for a drive through the neighbourhood. Built as a military housing area in the 1940s, it is now semi-derelict. So many windows have been smashed that half of the small redbrick houses are boarded up. It is early, about 7.30am, and hardly anyone is on the streets. A hooded youth loiters by a bin. The wind blows rubbish around. A filthy sofa spills its stuffing on to the pavement. The local shop is a windowless warehouse with no obvious entrance. A peeling fluorescent orange poster advertises chicken legs for a dollar. 'Personally, I'm afraid to go in there,' says Major Hayes grimly.

We drive past a forest reserve on one side of Altgeld Gardens. Instead of leaves, shredded black bin bags hang from the branches of the trees. A single trainer, tied to a branch, swings forlornly in the wind. You wonder at the fate of its owner. Rumour has it that 40 per cent of males in the area are dead by the age of 21. I ask if this is true. 'I wouldn't doubt it,' replies Major Hayes. 'Either dead or in jail. A lot of our students come from Altgeld Gardens and I can think of three who have been killed through gang violence.'

Most of the houses look deserted. 'People live there,' says Major Hayes. 'They're roach- and rat-infested dens. I was shocked when I first saw these houses – I've lived in underground bunkers that are better

than some of the homes that these kids come from. Before the Academy, a lot of students didn't come to school to learn, they came because it was a nice warm building with clean restrooms, and they got two meals a day and could sleep in class. That's what I was up against. You could get killed here five years ago. I had a student pull a gun. I'm a 21-year

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These days the children are not allowed to sleep in class. The Army appoints students to help maintain discipline. This is clearly explained to

every incoming cadet and if they do not like the idea, they are not accepted. I sit in on an interview with 13-year-old Laura Aguila. 'Do you understand the military model and how we work?' asks Major Hayes.

'No,' says Aguila, a pretty Mexican girl who is wearing a green glittery baseball jacket, beige trousers and black trainers.

'In every class we have a chain of command – some privates, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, maybe even a colonel, so there is a student in charge of the classroom when there is no adult in the room.' Major Hayes hands Aguila a piece of paper. 'Read the last bullet.'

She reads haltingly. Major Hayes helps her. 'I agree to fully support functions held by the JROTC and Cadet Corps when the Corps has reached consensus, although I may not personally be in favour of the function.'

'Do you understand what that means?'

'No,' says Aguila.

'The word consensus means "in agreement". When the corps cadets vote that we're going to march in a parade, I am going to be outside with ten buses at six o'clock in the morning.



William Pearson, left, plans to become a basketball player; right, students in the canteen at lunchtime

I'm marching, my instructors are marching, and every student is going to march "although I may not personally be in favour". You're joining a corps just like the marine corps. So what do you think?'

'I like it,' says Aguila. Major Hayes turns to her mother, sitting nervously next to her daughter. 'I think she'd be an excellent candidate here.' He asks Laura to sign an agreement, promising to attend school on time and to do her best.

Later he explains to me, 'The goal at Carver is to include the average student who would otherwise fail. I gutcheck them. Occasionally we get fooled.' He shows me files on six students who have been 'transferred' in the last year. 'Mr Kmiec [a teacher] alleged a student threatened him with a knife,' reads the file. '[The student] told Mr Kmiec, "I'll cut the f— out of you, I'll beat your motherf—in' arse."' >



But on the whole the academy gives these children the chance to learn in a peaceful environment and to make something of their lives, whether or not they opt for a military career. This year 80 of 137 graduating students have been accepted for further education; 11 of those 80 are joining the military. You have to look at past yearbooks to find out the fate of previous students, summed up in a single word written next to their photograph. 'Army, baby, baby, baby, dead,' read entries next to five faces in the 2002 yearbook.

Major Hayes argues that there is no pressure on students to pursue a military career – 'There's no military obligation. A lot of people think we're recruiting for the military and that's just the opposite of what we do' – but it is made abundantly clear that the military is an attractive option, not least because of the money. If a student decides to join up, even as a reserve, all his college education is paid, as well as food and lodging. Some of the classroom doors are painted camouflage and all around the school are recruitment posters. Those who go to boot

camp for the summer, like Fuentes, are paid \$2,000. 'He'll come back with a pocketful of money, get a car, and that will convince a whole bunch more to join,' says Major Hayes.

I spent three days at Carver and most of the students I spoke to seemed to like the military presence. Some admitted to doubts. 'At first some of the stuff seemed kinda bogus,' says 16-year-old Kyle Klein, who wants to be a bicycle mechanic. 'After a while it was OK. I'm still here because if I was at my area high school, I'd probably be going off track.'

Michael Harlan, 17, has decided to join the Marines – but only if he doesn't make it as a baseball player first. He lives in Altgeld Gardens with his grandmother and has a six-month old baby with another Carver student. 'I had a bad attitude,' he says. 'I was always getting in trouble. Now I like school. The military academy gives me some discipline.' He flicks open his cell phone to show me a picture of his smiling son. 'I've got a baby, I've got to set an example, try to do something with my life.'

Maria Parra, a vivacious 16-year-old, says it would not occur to her to join the Army. 'That's not me. I want to be a teacher. I came here because I liked the uniform.'

I sit in on an English class. The students are rowdy but co-operative. The teacher, Miss Lysaught, is showing them how to write a persuasive essay. One girl with dyed crimson hair reads out an essay title: "Should schools have daycare centres?" Yes, they should.' 'Would you like your baby to be here?' asks Miss Lysaught gently. 'No, I'm not saying that. But we should have the choice.' Twenty girls at the school have babies. 'I never throw a girl out just because she got pregnant,' says Major Hayes. 'It happens; we have to face it. We have got girls who've had babies before they come here.' However, he, like everyone else at the school, tries to discourage girls having children so young.

As I walk round the school with Major Hayes, he checks over each student who passes us. 'Where's your uniform?' he asks a young boy. 'The pocket's torn: it's being fixed.' 'Show me the dry-cleaning ticket,' commands Major Hayes. The boy explains that his aunt is mending the uniform. 'What's her number?' Haltingly, the boy gives it to him and scurries off. 'Ladies, square yourselves away,' he tells a group of girls

whose shirts are hanging out. He puts his head round a classroom door. 'Detention,' he shouts to another boy without his uniform.

'Can I go and put it on?' pleads the boy.

'No,' says Major Hayes. 'Detention.'

They may be fierce but these officers look out for the students, ferrying them back to their homes if they miss the bus, making themselves available at weekends. Three-quarters of the children come from broken homes and they look up to these men. 'We have to be like father figures,' says Sergeant Louis Smith. 'Some of them have been on their own for so long, they act like they're grown, but they're not, we have to get them to go back to being children.'

Lucian Evans, 19, one of last year's graduates, has returned



Members of the school football team, left, training after hours, and, right, a maths class at Carver

to pay a visit to Carver. 'The military [at Carver] were like role models to me,' says Evans, an affable and confident soldier dressed in combats. 'I see how they talk to each other and how they live their lives. So I was, like, "OK, I'm going to go into the service."'

'He comes from a broken home and was shot in his freshman year,' Major Hayes tells me later. 'This programme turned his life around.'

There are at least half a dozen other military academies in the States, and several more are planned. This year Carver became the largest, and the first intake of cadets from 2000 will graduate this summer. Although academic scores are rising, the school is on probation as it is failing to meet federal and state standards. 'You've gotta play the cards you're dealt,' sighs Major Hayes. 'If this school was in another area, it would be the best.'

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And the school is improving. In 1999 only 11 per cent of students in tenth grade (aged 15 to 16) were getting results at or above the national norms. By 2002 the figure had climbed to 25 per cent. Before it became a military academy, the truancy rate stood at 18 per cent. Now it is less than ten per cent. 'Misconduct is down, academic achievement is up,' says Dr William Johnson, the charismatic 36-year-old headmaster. 'The attitude has changed. Students see paper on the ground and they actually pick it up. They're proud to be here. Beforehand on any given day something could break out. There was gang presence here, and there might still be, but it's not overt now.'

At the back of the school is a bleak stairwell with graffiti on the walls and broken concrete on the stairs. 'This is where all the crime took place,' says Major Hayes, 'everything from rape to robbery.' Now the stairwell is a forbidden area and the silence here is ghostly. In the distance you can hear the sound of the school's military band and students laughing as they hurry from one class to the next. 'It's like night and day,' says Major Hayes. ●