

# THE INTERRUPTERS

*The Interrupters* tells the moving and surprising stories of three Violence Interrupters who try to protect their Chicago communities from the violence they once employed. Shot over the course of a year, the film captures a period in Chicago when it became a national symbol for the violence in US cities. The film's main subjects, "The Interrupters", work for an innovative organization, CeaseFire; they have credibility on the streets because of their own personal histories and intervene in conflicts before they erupt into violence.

## WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

"*The Interrupters* is one of the great movies of the Obama era, the best and most painful so far" *Boston Globe*

"Superb... every member of the U.S. House, the U.S. Senate, the White House and the tea party, let alone anybody simply interested in meeting some complicated and remarkable Chicagoans, should see the film" *Chicago Tribune*

"For ordinary moviegoers in search of an enthralling experience, that work and this film are heroically life-affirming" *TIME*

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THE CINEMA"**

PEER REVIEW COMMITTEE

THE IMPACT

FIELD GUIDE

& TOOLKIT

## WHO SAW IT

“I WAS THERE. IT MADE ME LAUGH; IT MADE ME CRY; IT MADE ME WANT TO BECOME MORE ACTIVE IN MY OWN COMMUNITY/ PROVIDE MENTORSHIP. POWERFUL, POWERFUL FILM. HUGE THANKS AND BLESSINGS TO AMEENA, COBE, EDDIE AND EVERYONE OUT THERE ON THE FRONT LINES MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES.”  
**PHOEBE KING, CHICAGO**

### **44** FESTIVALS

in 15 countries  
Premiere Sundance 2011

### **16K** VIEWERS AT COMMUNITY SCREENINGS

in 44 out of 50 states (including over 100 in Chicago)  
200 via Cinema Guild  
100 via Youth PROMISE Act party screenings  
Internationally screened in over 25 countries including Mexico, Brazil, Columbia, South Africa, South Korea, Iran, Montenegro and Australia.

### **41K** ESTIMATED CINEMA AUDIENCE

Film shown in 105 cinemas in the US  
Across 23 cities in the UK and 6 cities in Canada

### **2.9M** TELEVISION VIEWERS

across 9 territories including PBS Frontline in USA  
Sweden SVT – 175,000  
United Kingdom– BBC4 – 245,000  
Denmark– DRTV – 96,000  
Norway – NRK – 49,000  
France - Canal Plus France – 50, 000

### **20K** DVD

18,700 sold in the US  
2,000 in the UK

### **14** AWARDS AND PRIZES

including 5 Best Documentary Awards

### **540K** ONLINE TRAILER

548,512 views

### **160K** WEBSITE

102,450 unique visitors to [www.TheInterrupters.com](http://www.TheInterrupters.com)

### **1.5K** EMAIL LIST

Mainly organisations

### **12K** SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

7250 Facebook Likes  
5450 Twitter followers @TheInterrupters



## THE CAMPAIGN

### THE CAMPAIGNERS

Kartemquin Films, the production outfit behind *The Interrupters*, is a known Chicagoan nonprofit of 40 years standing, which specialises in independent media and engagement with untold stories of social importance. Kartemquin bolstered their internal team with external hires of outreach and online consultants in order to run the campaign around *The Interrupters* and the associated interactive project, [InterruptViolence.com](http://InterruptViolence.com)

### CAMPAIGN AIMS

The filmmakers' aim was to use *The Interrupters* as a tool to start a conversation around the complexities and roots of violence, and for

## **THE FILMMAKERS' AIM WAS TO START A CONVERSATION AROUND THE COMPLEXITIES AND ROOTS OF VIOLENCE**

the film to be seen by the communities most affected by these issues. The filmmakers also believe the film is an invaluable tool in helping to redress media driven perceptions of innercity

violence; its causes and solutions, often held by populations with no personal experience of it.

The campaign wanted to address both behavioural and policy issues including:

- Urban violence
- Conflict prevention & transformation
- Anger management
- The importance of mentors & programs aiding youth
  - Rehabilitation & re-entry programs
  - Life transformation
  - Poverty (e.g. unemployment and under resourced communities)
  - Racial disparities (e.g. lack of opportunities)
  - Culture of punishment over prevention & early intervention

A larger goal was to work with local, state and federal government to expand social services and other agencies that promote and address many of these social issues.

### HOW THE CAMPAIGN WORKED

The campaign was launched at the Youth Media Summit in Chicago in 2011, where

# THE CAMPAIGN



nearly 100 Chicago area high school students from different neighbourhoods, races and communities watched the film and met the filmmakers. This gave young people an opportunity to tell adults about their own experiences. The most repeated phrase that day was “We need to show *The Interrupters* in my school.”

This was a campaign that put huge focus on community screenings as the film continued past the theatrical stage. Violence prevention organisations initially partnered with the film for theatrical events were called upon to lend context and advocacy to a wide programme of community engagement events.

At nearly 50 different theatrical bookings held from July 2011 to January 2012, local theatres allowed local violence prevention groups to talk directly to moviegoers at post-screening Q&As. If there were difficulties coordinating a panel with a violence prevention organisation, the outreach team would even include a city's

## **VIOLENCE IS A SYMPTOM OF OTHER SYSTEMS THAT HAVE BROKEN APART**

police gang unit, as was the case with a December 2011 screening in Dallas. These theatrical Q&As put the energy of a community screening into movie theatres as local violence prevention groups were able to speak to moviegoers and tell them how they too could take action. Some of these relationships created local partners in these select cities to help roll out and

publicise the film, while the attention given to the film brought headlines to under-publicised violence prevention organisations.

S.O.S. (Save Our Streets) Crown Heights was one such organisation, a community based violence intervention effort in New York which is modelled on Ceasefire.

The organisation attended the film's theatrical premiere at the IFC Center in Manhattan and has subsequently been part of dozens of New York based events coordinated by *The Interrupters* Outreach Team:

whether it was a Snag Films live online Snag The

Vote screening, a local New York City school screening or gathering a New York perspective for InterruptViolence.

com, the S.O.S. Crown Heights team and their local partners have been a large part of delivering the film's message.

Amy Ellenbogen, Project Director for S.O.S. Crown Heights noted “Violence is a symptom of other systems that have broken apart: the education system, the policing system, so it's really a whole circle of problems.”

*The Interrupters* has been shown at more than 400 community organised screenings around the country where it's been used as a tool to spur discussion about urban violence and ways to combat it. A few examples include:

**THE MOST REPEATED PHRASE THAT DAY WAS “WE NEED TO SHOW THE INTERRUPTERS IN MY SCHOOL.”**

- **Educators** from middle school to university level in cities including Chicago, Oakland and Toronto have developed lesson plans based around the film's themes and morals
  - Showings in **adult prisons** such as The Danville Correctional Center and **youth correction facilities** such as The Chicago Illinois Youth Center, where the film is used as a rehabilitation tool
  - Colleges and **medical schools** from Harvard Law to Northwestern Medical have used the film to begin a conversation about the deeply entrenched poverty in US cities
  - **Church groups** from Oakland to Houston to Newark have used the film in their communities
  - Diverse organisations have screened the film at their **national conferences**, including the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, the American Bar Association and the American Civil Liberties Union
  - **The American Film Showcase**, an international film series that "illustrates diverse viewpoints, and reflects contemporary American society and culture" for overseas audiences, continued to screen the film in 2013 with engagements at US Embassies and other community screenings in Moscow; Medellin, Columbia; Bosnia & Herzegovina and Algeria
  - The film was also shown to around 50 **health professionals** during the 2012 Annual Meeting of the National Association of County and City Health Officials in Los Angeles
  - 700 **high school students** attended a summit in Columbus, Ohio where they brainstormed solutions to violence in their communities post-screening
  - The film has also been screened to **faith based organisations** including Jewish, Muslim and Christian organisations and Quakers
  - **Google's Chicago HQ** hosted a screening for their employees and the public. The event was promoted by Google Places as a way for Chicago residents to get to know what was going on locally in their adjacent neighbourhoods
  - The **City of Milwaukee** sponsored two screenings through support from Harley-Davidson Motor Company. Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett attended one of the screenings and explained, "Screening *The Interrupters* in Milwaukee has provided an opportunity for some blunt discussions about violence, the consequences of violence, and violence prevention. It also shares some very human messages about hope in some seemingly hopeless situations"
  - A free screening of *The Interrupters* was sponsored by **Philadelphia's Mayor**, Michael Nutter, and the **Mayor's Commission on African American Males**. This screening brought together a myriad of the city's organisations from the Philadelphia CeaseFire to youth-led dance troupe The Dollar Boyz
  - The outreach team's partners at CeaseFire coordinated a screening at the **United States Conference of Mayors**, an annual conference bringing together hundreds of mayors from across the United States. The screening and discussion resulted in the conference adopting a resolution that "affirm[ed] its support for public health approaches to violence prevention as pioneered by the CeaseFire health approach"
- These screenings were all supported by a Community Resource Guide to help facilitate discussion and lesson plans structured around film clips aligned to curriculum standards have been made available for schools
- July 2013 saw a new phase of the campaign launched with [interruptviolence.com](http://interruptviolence.com), a transmedia community engagement campaign comprising educational outreach tools aimed at reducing the corrosive effects of violence in American cities. The website allows users to share their experiences of coping with violence while finding resources, strategies, and inspiration for positive change.

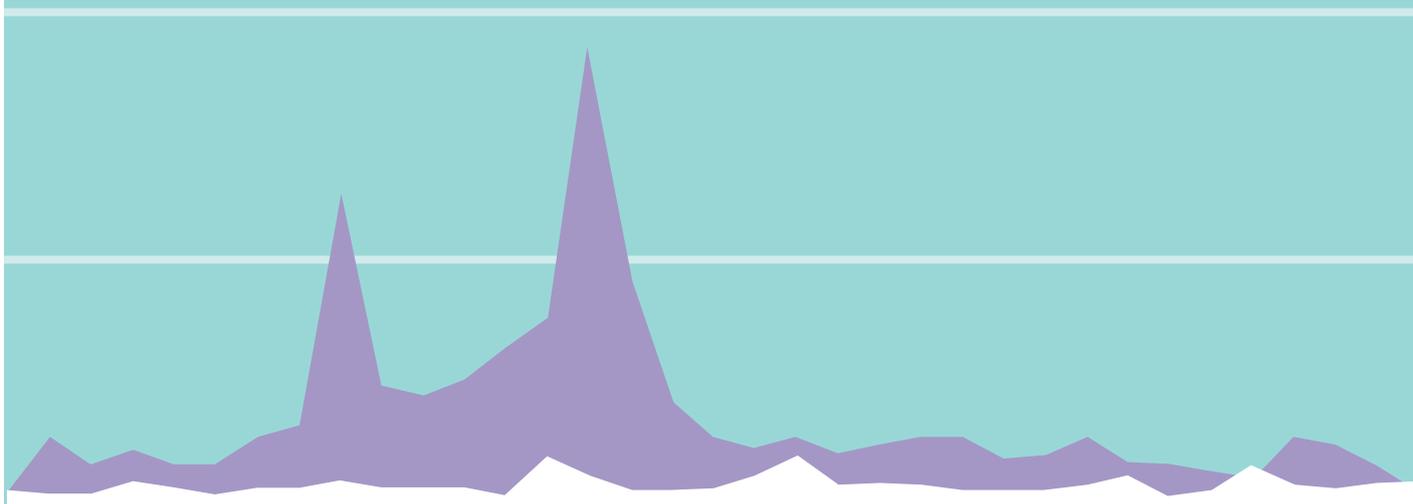
**ONLINE TRENDS**

On the evening February 14th 2012, *The Interrupters*' US broadcast premiere, activity levels on *The Interrupters*' Frontline page were higher than of any film in the previous year. The activity on the Frontline site was

so heavy that their site eventually crashed. Two days following the broadcast premiere approximately 125,000 had already visited the Frontline page - home of additional content and the on-line streaming version of the film.

**KEYWORD MENTIONS ONLINE  
( TWITTER )**

5K  
2.5K



**JAN 11  
SUNDANCE  
PREMIERE**

**JUL11  
COMMUNITY  
SCREENINGS  
BEGIN**

**FEB 12  
PBS  
FRONTLINE**

**JULY 12  
CHICAGO FUNDS  
CEASEFIRE**

**KEY**

- "THE INTERRUPTERS" (TWITTER)
- "CEASEFIRE CHICAGO" (TWITTER)





## **CAMPAIGN IMPACT & ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **EDUCATION AND YOUTH**

The film has become such an integral message for the Chicago Public Schools and other community groups that screenings and events happen daily without the knowledge of *The Interrupters* Outreach Team. With the film readily available online and for rent at Redbox kiosks, teachers have been adapting their lesson plans and showing the film in their classrooms.

Through conversations with teachers and CPS faculty, of the 114,000 Chicago high school students, estimates are that anywhere between 25% and 50% of students have seen *The Interrupters* throughout the Chicago Public Schools system.

Innovative educational partnerships include a Spring 2012 event where interrupter Aameena Matthews gave the keynote address at Chicago's Carver Military Academy, following a series of student created TedTalk-style presentations focusing on the views of violence in their communities. One student, Sevon Bivens, who featured clips of *The Interrupters* in his presentation, now does community outreach in Altgeld Gardens, a neighborhood

featured in *The Interrupters*. Sevon aspires to become a Chicago Public School Principal.

Christina O'Leary, the teacher who organized the screening and TedX event, added,

The Oakland (California) Unified School

**I DON'T HAVE ANY HARD DATA, BUT OFF THE TOP OF MY HEAD, THE CLASS OF STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE TED EVENT AND THE SCREENING, WE HAVE HAD A PRETTY CONSISTENT TREND OF STUDENTS BEING SAFE IN AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL.**

District also saw a drop in student homicides following a multi-school *Interrupters* event in the Spring 2012.

New Tech high schools in Gary, Indiana and Danville, Illinois have created civic engagement projects where students take to the streets to interview neighbours about finding solutions to violence.

Schools 150 miles apart have collaborated to see how students from different neighbourhoods and cities are thinking about the problems of violence.

*The Interrupters* has become a staple of university screenings throughout North America. Starting with an August 2011 screening at the University of Miami through May 2013, over 150 different universities (on record) have screened the film.

In early February 2013, the outreach team collaborated with React To Film to screen *The Interrupters* at 25 universities from coast to coast – from Princeton to Berkeley. React To Film, an educational program in high schools and universities that features social issue documentaries linked to real world actions, asked students to pledge to become a mentor for high risk youth and also to contact their local congressional representative in support of the Youth PROMISE Act, a breakthrough piece of legislation that will implement and fund evidence based practices related to juvenile justice and criminal gang activity.

The team also partnered with Peace Alliance, a major supporter of the Youth PROMISE Act campaign, on a youth screening program with follow up asks. The collaboration between React To Film and Peace Alliance was initially introduced through *The Interrupters* outreach team. The networking between the outreach team and Peace Alliance has resulted in a number of new relationships with violence prevention organisations.

At a federal level, the Outreach Team collaborated with Peace Alliance as mentioned above to encourage audiences to write to their local congressman after screenings of the film to urge them to pass the Youth PROMISE Act; a bipartisan piece of legislation that earmarks funds for youth oriented violence prevention programs.

The former Executive Director of Student Peace Alliance, Aaron Voldman, said in a letter to the Outreach Team:

**THE INTERRUPTERS WAS A GAME CHANGING CONTRIBUTION TO THE URBAN PEACEBUILDING MOVEMENT AND HAS ALREADY INSPIRED IMPORTANT LEGISLATIVE PROGRESS. KARTEMQUIN'S COMMUNITY OUTREACH WORK IN PARTICULAR HAS BEEN A MAJOR REASON FOR THE FILM'S SUCCESS**

To date there are 81 cosponsors in the House and 2 co-sponsors in the Senate to the Youth PROMISE Act.

In response to seeing *The Interrupters* in September 2012, Chicago Bull's star Joakim Noah partnered with Chicago's St. Sabina's Church, Cobe Williams and his NBA colleagues to create The Peace Basketball Tournament, an event aimed at mentoring gang affiliated youth. Noah has expanded the work through his foundation, The Noah's Arc Foundation, inviting troubled youth to spend time with him and the *Interrupters* at Bulls games and other functions.

## **BUILDING CAPACITY**

The Chicago Sun-Times noted Mayor Emanuel's screening of *The Interrupters* (he hosted a private discussion with public health and city officials in February 2012) as key in making him aware of the program's potential impact on quelling homicides in Chicago. In Summer 2012, his office began funding CeaseFire, committing \$1 million to the project through 2013. Although at the time of writing the decision has been made not to renew this contract for 2014. Sun-Times reporter Frank Main noted: "*The Interrupters*...caught Mayor Rahm Emanuel's attention. Worried about the city's rising tide of bloodshed, Emanuel was impressed with CeaseFire's strategy of sending ex-felons into the streets to mediate gang conflicts and stop shootings. The mayor decided to put his police superintendent, Garry McCarthy, and CeaseFire founder Gary Slutkin in the same room a few months ago to discuss a possible partnership."

The opening of further CeaseFire offices in other locations is attributed to the film, including one in New Orleans and plans for an international office in Bermuda. Other affiliated CeaseFire offices such as SNUG Albany have used the film for fundraisers and informational community screenings. "The screening is important because it educates in a way that we can't," said SNUG program director Jamel Muhammad. "The people get to see some of the real live scenarios that we have to deal with."

**MANY GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS WERE ALSO DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY THE FILM:**

Growing Home, a Chicago urban farm, partnered with *The Interrupters* in May 2012 for their Spring Open House. Sonya Harper, outreach manager for Growing Home, was recently featured in the Chicago Sun-Times saying their sales “skyrocketed — from \$889 in 2011 to \$3,000 last year [the year *The Interrupters* partnered for the Open House] and probably double that this year”. But Harper was even more proud of how Growing Home was bringing her community together: “We’ve become a safe space in a community with a reputation for being very violent and not so nice. It’s a totally different atmosphere when you come to the farm stand on Wednesday. Not only are we making a dent in food access, we’re improving the overall communication between neighbours.”

In July of 2012, violence interrupter and art mentor Eddie Bocanegra coordinated a screening of the film at Chicago’s National Museum of Mexican Art that played alongside a youth art exhibit themed around community violence. The screening and exhibit were followed by an in depth conversation about violence and the role of art in processing post-traumatic stress as a result of neighbourhood violence. With more than 200 people in attendance, many youth had the opportunity to see how art mentorships could not only be therapeutic but a pathway to college. Yollocalli Arts Reach, a partner organisation for the event, has continued to work with CeaseFire and other organisations to examine Chicago’s violence through art. As a member of the Hive Chicago Learning Network, Yollocalli and other arts programs will benefit from a \$2.2 million grant from the Burberry & MacArthur Foundation to help expand a violence prevention curriculum through the arts.

## **CHICAGO**

Due to Mayor Emanuel’s investment in comprehensive anti-violence strategies incorporating law enforcement and public health, there has been a 100% reduction in violence in the specific areas of Woodlawn - one of the communities hit hardest by violence last year - where CeaseFire operates.

Based on data from the Chicago Police Department from January to April 2013, there has been a 40 percent reduction in shootings



and killings across the 14 communities where combined law enforcement and public health strategies are being used. Other media sources have also acknowledged Chicago's reduction in homicides, with July statistics putting the city's murder rate at its lowest since 1965.

One Juvenile Court judge in the Chicago area has made the film mandatory viewing for youth on probation for any kind of gun case or one involving violence. He offers the offenders 5 hours 'credit' off their community service if they watch the film and 10 if they bring a parent. He estimates that at least 100 young offenders have watched the film so far. Unfortunately there have not been the resources to conduct a research study involving the offenders and probation officers to measure further outcomes but this is a concrete example of an individual using the film in an innovative way to further violence prevention above a culture of punitive law enforcement.

The judge's innovative use of the film has led to others including Cook County Assistant State's

Attorney Sonia Antolec to use *The Interrupters* in her DePaul University Juvenile Justice class.

## **CAMPAIGN PARTNERS**

CeaseFire, Peace Alliance, City of Chicago, City of Philadelphia, City of Oakland, City of Minneapolis, City of Toronto, City of Milwaukee, ITVS, WGBH, Cinema Guild, DogWoof, Operation SNUG, New Jersey Community Development Corporation, Wexner Center, Kings of Kings Foundation, L.A. Violence Prevention Coalition, The Nonviolent Peaceforce, San Francisco Community Response Network, YouthAlive!, Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, Health Resources In Action, Aim4Peace, One Vision One Life, The National Museum of Mexican Art, Yollocalli Arts Reach, LuchArte, Enlace Chicago, American Civil Liberties Union, Oakland Unified School District, American Film Showcase (U.S. State Department), React To Film, River Phoenix Center For Peacebuilding, Noah's Arc Foundation, et al.



# CONCLUSION



This campaign has worked with an impressive range of partners to bring meaningful and considered conversation to the roots of urban violence and offer some possible solutions. Working with organisations

with few resources about a subject often misunderstood by the “mainstream,” this has been a true grassroots effort which has grown impressively through the efforts of the outreach team.

**“VERY IMPRESSIVE WORK AT THE MUNICIPAL AND EVEN GLOBAL LEVEL VIA UN SCREENING. BUT CONCRETE CHANGE EVIDENCE IN CHICAGO - FUNDING FOR CEASEFIRE - ALREADY PRETTY TERRIFIC OUTCOME”**

**PEER REVIEW COMMITTEE**

# TEAM BIOGRAPHY



## DIRECTOR

STEVE JAMES is the award-winning director, producer, and coeditor of Kartemquin's *Hoop Dreams*, which won every major critics award as well as a Peabody and Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award in 1995. The film earned James the Directors Guild of America Award and the MTV Movie Award's "Best New Filmmaker." Recently, *Hoop Dreams* was selected for the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, signifying the film's enduring importance to American film history, and hailed by critic Roger Ebert as "the great American documentary."

James' next documentary, *Stevie*, also with Kartemquin, won major festival awards at Sundance, Amsterdam, Yamagata and Philadelphia, and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. The acclaimed feature landed on a dozen "Top Ten Films of the Year" lists for 2003.

With Kartemquin, James was also an executive producer, story director, and coeditor of the PBS series, *The New Americans*, which won two Chicago International Television Festival Golden Hugos, and the prestigious 2004 International Documentary Association Award for Best Limited Series for Television.

In 2005, James completed the documentary *Reel Paradise*, his fourth film to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. James served as producer and editor of *The War Tapes*, a documentary comprised of video footage shot by American soldiers in Iraq. The film won the top prize at both the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival, and the inaugural 2006 BRITDOC Film Festival.

In 2008, he coproduced and codirected with Peter Gilbert the acclaimed *At the Death House Door* for Kartemquin, which won the top prize at the Atlanta Film Festival, the Inspiration Award at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, and aired on IFC-TV. *At the Death House Door* is James' fourth film to be officially short-listed for the Academy Award.

James' 2010 Kartemquin documentary *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson* had its world premiere at the SXSW Film Festival and aired as part of ESPN Films' 2010 International Documentary Association award-winning series 30 for 30. The film was selected for the IDOCS International Documentary Forum in Beijing, and also played at the Cleveland, Full Frame, Dallas, Nashville and Atlanta film festivals, among others, as well as earning James the Best Director award at the Midwest Film Awards. In 2011, *No Crossover* was selected by the U.S. Department of State for the American Documentary Showcase.

James' dramatic films include the theatrical feature *Prefontaine* (1997), which premiered at Sundance, and cable movies *Passing Glory* (1999) and *Joe and Max* (2002), which was nominated for an ESPN Espy Award.

# TEAM BIOGRAPHY



## PRODUCER

ALEX KOTLOWITZ is perhaps best known for the bestselling *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. The book, which was published in 1991 and has since sold over half a million copies, was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Helen B. Bernstein Award for Excellence in Journalism, the Carl Sandburg Award and a Christopher Award. The New York Public Library selected *There Are No Children Here* as one of the 150 most important books of the century. In the fall of 1993, it was adapted for television as an ABC Movie of the Week starring Oprah Winfrey.

His second book, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death and America's Dilemma* received The Chicago Tribune's Heartland Prize for Non-Fiction and the Great Lakes Booksellers Award for Non-Fiction.

Kotlowitz's most recent book, *Never a City So Real*, is a bit of a departure, a collection of contemporary stories from Chicago, his adopted hometown.

Between books, Kotlowitz has contributed to The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker and public radio's *This American Life*. Over the past three years, he has produced three collections of personal narratives for Chicago Public Radio: *Stories of Home*, *Love Stories* and *Stories of Money*. *Stories of Home* was awarded a Peabody. He has served as a correspondent and writer for a Frontline documentary, *Let's Get Married*, as well as correspondent and writer for two pieces for PBS's Media Matters. His articles have also appeared in The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, Rolling Stone, The Atlantic and The New Republic. He is a writer in residence at Northwestern University where he teaches two courses every winter, and a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame as the Welch Chair in American Studies where he teaches one course every fall. He has also been a writer in residence at the University of Chicago. Kotlowitz regularly gives public lectures.

His journalism honors include the George Foster Peabody Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and the George Polk Award. He is the recipient of three honorary degrees and the John LaFarge Memorial Award for Interracial Justice given by New York's Catholic Interracial Council.

He currently lives with his family just outside Chicago.

# AWARDS & PRIZES

Winner, Outstanding Informational Programming – **LONG FORM, NEWS & DOCUMENTARY EMMY AWARDS 2013**

Winner, Alfred I DuPont-Columbia School of Journalism Award, **SILVER BATON 2013**

Winner, Outstanding Achievement Nonfiction Filmmaking & Best Direction, **CINEMA EYE HONORS 2012**

Winner, Best Documentary, **INDEPENDENT SPIRIT AWARDS 2012**

Winner, Jury Award, **FULL FRAME DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL**

Winner, Best Documentary, **PHILADELPHIA CINEFEST 2011**

Winner, Audience Award, **PHILADELPHIA CINEFEST 2011**

Winner, Best Documentary, **CHICAGO FILM CRITICS ASSOCIATION AWARDS 2011**

Winner, Best Documentary, **MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2011**

Winner, Audience Award, **LITTLE ROCK FILM FESTIVAL 2011**

Winner, Special Jury Award, **SHEFFIELD DOC/FEST 2011**

Winner, Film of the Year, **COMMON FOLK AWARD 2011**

Winner, Best Documentary, **MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL FILM FESTIVAL 2011**

Winner, Outstanding Informational Programming - Long Form, **NEWS & DOCUMENTARY EMMY AWARDS 2013**

Nominated, Best Documentary, **GOTHAM INDEPENDENT FILM AWARDS 2011**

# CREDITS

**STEVE JAMES:** Producer/Director

**ALEX KOTLOWITZ:** Producer

**ZAK PIPER:** Co-producer

**R. PATRICK LILE:** Outreach Coordinator

**TIM HORSBURGH:** Director of Communications & Programs, Kartemquin Films

**L. ANTON SEALS JR.:** Outreach Specialist

**SONYA CHILDRESS:** Outreach Media Consultant

**ANDREW SUPRENANT:** Interactive Project Director

**KRISTEN ZELENKA:** Interactive Coordinator

**MONICA SWOPE:** Educational Consultant



August 1, 2011, 1:05 pm | 4 Comments

## Interrupting Violence, on Screen and on the Streets

By TIM STELLOH



The men in orange and white Save Our Streets T-shirts were in a good mood.

It was Friday night, and [“The Interrupters,”](#) a new documentary that depicts the front lines of urban crime in Chicago and an anti-violence program trying to stem those battles, had just premiered at the [IFC Center](#) in Manhattan.

For the men in orange and white, watching the sold-out two-hour film was like a seeing a reflection — and confirmation — of their day-to-day work lives. In some of the movie’s more dramatic scenes, a woman working for the program, called [CeaseFire](#), inserts herself into the middle of a knife brawl and also calms a gathering mob seeking revenge for the killing of a friend.

In other words, she accomplished one of CeaseFire’s goals: to “interrupt” violence.

The men who attended the movie interrupt such violence, too, in [the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, through Save Our Streets](#), or S.O.S., a program modeled after CeaseFire. And they, too, often find themselves in the middle of the same raw dramas that was depicted on the screen.

“We see someone else doing the work that we’re doing, and it’s just like us being up there, word for word,” said Rudy Suggs, 48, who, along with several other [S.O.S.](#) workers, gathered at a McDonald’s across the street from the theater after the movie to compare their own experiences with what they had seen.

There were plenty of similarities, the men said.

In one scene, for instance, one of the film’s main characters, Ameena Matthews, visits an area where a teenager has been shot and killed. A large group of the man’s friends have gathered on the street and appear to be planning a counterattack. In typical fashion, Ms. Matthews, a former gang member and daughter of Jeff Fort, one of Chicago’s most legendary gang leaders, bursts into the middle of the crowd and defuses the situation.

Achisimach Yisrael, 35, of S.O.S. recalled that after a 14-year-old was killed this summer in Crown Heights, more than 100 of the teenager’s friends gathered at his wake.

“Seeing him laying there — that was real life for them,” Mr. Yisrael said, adding that a large group then left the church to confront those who they believed were responsible for the teenager’s death.

“Every last one of them had every intention of retaliating and basically creating a bloodbath,” he said.

From their storefront office on Kingston Avenue, S.O.S. workers saw the throng marching by. After quickly determining where the group was going, several workers were dispatched to the intended target; another squad headed to a nearby park, where a worker persuaded the dead teenager’s friends to congregate.

With a large, volatile crowd gathered around them, four workers undertook what was perhaps their most tense, most expansive mediation to date, said Lavon Walker, who works for S.O.S: They told the group that they needed to respect the dead teenager’s mother and family; that killing someone else would not bring their friend back.

“Then we called out and said, ‘Is there anybody in the crowd who is a father?’” Mr. Yisrael recalled. “Do you want to remove yourself from your children?”

In the end, the crowd returned to the wake, Mr. Walker said. This was one of the 54 conflicts the group has interrupted since early last year, when the program began, said Amy Ellenbogen, S.O.S.’s director.

Another echo of the group’s work was reflected in one of the film’s most memorable characters — the lanky, alternately hilarious and explosive Flamo, a pistol-carrying, self-described drug dealer and gambler whom a CeaseFire worker is attempting to deliver from a life of crime and prison (the program

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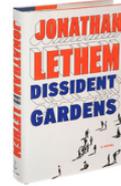
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### Reading 'Dissident Gardens' by Jonathan Lethem

Our next selection for the **Big City Book Club** will take us to Queens in the middle of the 20th century and right up to the present moment — to a world of communists and counterculturalists, of Stalinists and Occupy Wall Street.

We’ll be reading, as you may have guessed, **Jonathan Lethem’s latest novel, the expansive “Dissident Gardens.”** Lethem is the author of the much-loved, genre-bending New York novels “Motherless Brooklyn” and “Fortress of Solitude.”



The online discussion will take place on **Tuesday, Oct. 22, at 6:30 p.m.**, here on City Room.

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## Meet Chicago's Interrupters...

They are the shock troops in the city's battle against endemic street violence – peacemakers who once lived by the gun. As a documentary on their work reaches cinemas, we visit Chicago to see the campaigners in action



**Andrew Anthony**  
The Observer, Saturday 6 August 2011 23:48 BST  
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Ameena Matthews and Cobe Williams, outreach workers for the CeaseFire anti-violence initiative. Photograph: Jim Newberry for the Observer

On the stoop of a house on a dilapidated block in Englewood, the south side Chicago neighbourhood that tops the city's statistics for murder, drug addiction, teen pregnancy and most of other indices of social dysfunction, are eight young African-American men and two or three women. It's an oven-hot summer afternoon and the group is kicking back, drinking, shouting and laughing.

### The Interrupters

Production year: 2011  
Country: USA  
Cert (UK): 15  
Runtime: 127 mins  
Directors: Steve James  
[More on this film](#)

"I don't like crowd scenes," says Shango, a member of the city's anti-violence project, CeaseFire, as we pull up outside. He explains that such gatherings increase the chances of becoming a victim of a drive-by shooting.

The street we're in stands in the middle of a few blocks that have seen three murders in recent days, and countless more in the previous months and years. "Can't no anybody park up on this block," says Shango, who beneath his dreads wears an expression of mournful unflappability. His companion, T.J., a former prisoner and one of CeaseFire's more seasoned outreach workers, tells me that summer is the "killing season" because there's no refuge for grievances. In winter the freezing weather forces people inside, where tempers have time to cool.

One of the group on the stoop, a slim-built guy with a tattoo that crawls up out of the top of his vest like a weed, hobbles over to us on the sidewalk. His left foot is in plaster, the result of a high velocity encounter with a bullet.



Dee, whose life has been changed through the CeaseFire initiative. Photograph: Jim Newberry for the Observer

This is Dee, a reformed veteran of the south side's street wars. With his tattoos, gunshot wound and lively choice of company, he may not be Chicago's answer to Mahatma Gandhi, but he is nonetheless a new recruit to the cause of peace. "My life is on the right path today," he tells me, as Shango suspiciously eyes each car that turns on to the block. "I'm doing all I can for the betterment of my life, to keep me out of trouble. It took me 18 years to get my life into shape and it will take me another 18 years or more to make this transition. That's why I'm asking for the full support of the people for me to do what's necessary to do."

It's a noble little speech, and all the more commendable because the last time I saw Dee he was being attacked with a brick. That was in a scene from a remarkable new documentary film called *The Interrupters* that chronicles a radical approach to urban violence. The film is made by Steve James, who produced and directed the internationally acclaimed *Hoop Dreams*, which followed the plight of two African-American teenagers trying to become professional basketball players. That documentary was by turns touching, funny, distressing and uplifting, and if anything *The Interrupters* concocts a still more potent combination of conflicting emotions.

The tagline of the film is "A year in the life of a city grappling with urban violence". In most American cities, including Chicago, violence has actually been declining since the 1990s, with homicide rates plummeting. In 1990 there were 850 murders in Chicago. Last year there were 435. But that's still about three times as many as London, a city with three times the population of Chicago.

Nor has the decrease in homicide spread equally to all urban areas. As

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Xan Brooks praises Steve James's considered study of a group of former street gangsters trying to interrupt violent confrontation on the streets of Chicago.

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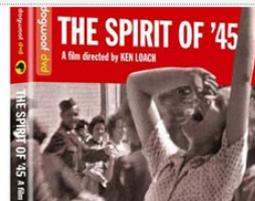


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CULTURE

# The Interrupters: Stopping the Contagion of Violence

By Maia Szalavitz @maiasz | Aug. 25, 2011 | Add a Comment

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Is violence a virus? The literal answer is no, but the metaphor offers important insight into stopping the epidemic.

It's what fuels the CeaseFire program in Chicago, which employs former gang members in the city's poor neighborhoods as "violence interrupters." Their job is to mediate disputes between gangs and prevent retaliatory killings. The program has been found to directly reduce shootings by 16% to 34% in targeted neighborhoods.



Cobe Williams, a "violence interrupter" with the CeaseFire program in Chicago

CeaseFire is now the subject of a brilliant new documentary, *The Interrupters*, a collaboration between director Steve James (best known for *Hoop Dreams*) and journalist Alex Kotlowitz (*There Are No Children Here*). It premiered at Sundance and has received virtually unanimous acclaim.

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Cobe Williams, 38, is one of the program's interrupters, followed in the film and recently promoted to national community coordinator. Kotlowitz describes Williams, a former drug dealer who served time for attempted murder, as an "affable teddy-bear-like guy who makes people laugh."

"All my life, I knew right from wrong, but my father was in a gang, selling drugs, having fancy cars like Cadillacs," says Williams. "As a kid, he was my role model. I wanted to be like my daddy. We looked up to the money-getters."

When Williams was three, his father was convicted of murder and sent to prison. Williams recalls visiting his dad and being impressed by his friends, their gang signs and camaraderie.

When Williams was 11, his father became the victim of a gang-related killing, and that only escalated his own involvement in violence. It wasn't until he was incarcerated himself that he first heard about CeaseFire, Williams says. "I'd seen them doing marches and I thought, 'Man, this is crazy, a mother or grandmother can't sit on the porch, kids can't play outside.' I gotta get out there and make a difference. I gotta be a man and raise my son," he says.

Williams started as a volunteer, until "CeaseFire hired me and I took off running." In the film, you watch him using his considerable charm and charisma to cajole, wheedle and sometimes beg young men heading down the path of violence to change.

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That's where the idea of violence as a disease comes in. "It's a learned behavior," Williams says. "I learned it from seeing my big brothers and uncles, and once I learned it, it spread like a disease. My little cousins learned it from me; my other cousins learned it from them, so it's spread and spread."

"That's why we as outreach workers, we're the cures," he adds. "We interrupt transmission and change the norms and make them think, 'No, we shouldn't do this. We shouldn't be about this.'"

Chicago's CeaseFire — not to be confused with the program originating in Boston with the same name — was founded by Dr. Gary Slutkin, an epidemiologist at the University of Illinois Chicago School of Public Health in 1995.

Slutkin, who had worked to curb tuberculosis in San Francisco and cholera in Somalia, realized that fighting violence was similar to fighting infectious disease: in order to stop infections from spreading, the most "contagious" people had to be reached.

That meant hiring people with serious criminal histories, people who had not yet distanced themselves from their pasts. If they were too far removed and no longer in touch with life on the streets, they would be of little help.

Of course, there's also always the risk that rather than inspiring gangsters to reform, the peer pressure from reformed criminals will push them in the wrong direction. "I had same question going in," says Kotlowitz, who first wrote about CeaseFire in a 2008 feature for the *New York Times Magazine*. "It's one of things that amazes me, a lot of the guys have been there since then. Part of [why it works] is that they've got a solid enough group that if someone



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### Police to partner with CeaseFire on anti-violence pilot program

By FRANK MAIN Staff Reporter/fmain@suntimes.com June 26, 2012 10:18AM

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Updated: July 28, 2012 6:20AM



Chicago Police Supt. Garry McCarthy

"The Interrupters," the acclaimed documentary about the Chicago-based anti-violence group CeaseFire, caught Mayor Rahm Emanuel's attention.

Worried about the city's rising tide of bloodshed, Emanuel was impressed with CeaseFire's strategy of sending ex-felons into the streets to mediate gang conflicts and stop shootings.

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The mayor decided to put his police superintendent, Garry McCarthy, and CeaseFire founder Gary Slutkin in the same room a few months ago to discuss a possible partnership, according to City Hall sources.

The negotiations were anything but smooth.

Behind the scenes, McCarthy complained about having to deal with an organization full of ex-felons that refuses to share information with the police department about brewing conflicts. And CeaseFire initially balked at demands the police department placed on the group before they could become partners.

But on Tuesday, police officials and CeaseFire announced they had forged a deal. CeaseFire will receive \$1 million in city money to put 20 workers each in the Grand-Crossing District on the South Side and the Ogden District on the West Side, both of which have seen recent spikes in gang-related killings. The pilot program will begin July 13.

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In return, CeaseFire agreed to attend weekly evaluations that police commanders are already subjected to under the department's CompStat system masterminded last year by McCarthy.

On Tuesday, First Deputy Police Supt. Alfonza Wyzinger said any rifts between the police and CeaseFire are history.

"With the amount of bodies from the homicides and shootings that are continuing to add up and make the city seem as though it is unsafe, if there were differences in the past — and I'm not saying there were — for the sake of the common good, those things have to go out the window," Wyzinger said.

CeaseFire has received state and county funding over the past dozen years, but no money directly from the city until now. The funding for the partnership is coming from a plan to have the state siphon outstanding city debts from the state income tax refunds of deadbeats.

Originally, CeaseFire was supposed to get \$1.5 million but that was under earlier plans that were to include three police districts.

McCarthy first revealed the police department was considering an alliance with CeaseFire following the bloody Memorial Day weekend. He said it was one of several crime-fighting strategies.

Over that weekend, 10 people were shot to death and the number of homicides in

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### IF YOU GO

The special screening for students is booked to capacity, but *The Interrupters* will be shown to the general public at 7 p.m. Wednesday in the Wexner Center's Mershon Auditorium, 1871 N. High St.

The 125-minute film will be followed by a panel discussion featuring two of the interrupters from the movie, the movie's coproducer and Ohio State University associate professor Deanna L. Wilkinson, who is trying to replicate the CeaseFire program in Columbus.

Tickets are \$7, or \$5 for members, students and senior citizens. For details, go to [wexarts.org](http://wexarts.org) or call 614-292-3535.

The film also will run at the Gateway Film Center from Friday through Nov. 24.

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By Theodore Decker  
*The Columbus Dispatch* • Sunday, Oct. 3, 2013

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An award-winning documentary that shows interrupters on Chicago streets will be shown to what organizers hope will be a larger audience from across the city.

After the credits roll at the Wexner Center for the Arts' screening, the 440 students will start their homework — devising school-specific plans to strengthen their community and prevent violence using lessons learned from the film.

The film *The Interrupters* follows three former gang members who crusade against street violence in their Chicago neighborhoods. They are part of CeaseFire, a Chicago-based organization designed to reduce shootings and killings.

CeaseFire employs ex-cons and former gangbangers to talk sense into those still actively involved in street life, in some cases trying to defuse violence when guns are drawn.

A local consortium led by Ohio State University associate professor Deanna L. Wilkinson has laid much of the groundwork for CeaseFire-Columbus, identifying the Near East and South Side neighborhoods that are most in need of violence intervention. But another attempt to secure federal startup money failed this fall, and the group hopes that private donors will fill the void.

Proponents of the CeaseFire model say credible messengers are needed to reach at-risk youths. If educators with Columbus City Schools are right, some of those messengers are walking their hallways.

Each high school was asked to choose 20 sophomores and juniors to attend the screening. They aren't all on student council or future valedictorians but were chosen because the student body views them as leaders in some way.

"We want a combination of all those, because all of them are leaders and they have influence with their peers," Superintendent Gene Harris said.

When the movie ends, they will break into groups to brainstorm.

"They are going to have independent conversations after the film, strategizing about violence prevention in their own schools," said Shelly Casto, director of education at the Wexner Center. Those ideas could include school-based public-information blitzes or stronger links to existing social programs.

School counselors and community leaders will steer the discussions, but the students must devise their own responses in the coming weeks.

Sponsors are covering costs of busing and lunch, and the community leaders are volunteering their time, Casto said.

Wilkinson said preparing for the event has forged better ties between her Youth Violence Prevention Advisory Board and the school district. She is optimistic that the film's arrival in Columbus will spark a broader discussion about the need for violence prevention in a city that has seen 80 homicides this year.

"This was a nice opportunity to line up some strategies and think big picture," she said.

Harris said the district doesn't intend for students to interject themselves in a situation that could prove dangerous, as CeaseFire's interrupters do daily.

"Really, what we hope to get out of it is an opportunity for continued leadership development for our students," she said. "Student-to-student communication can be very powerful."

[tdecker@dispatch.com](mailto:tdecker@dispatch.com)

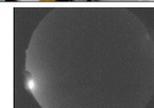


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