

# Kick, push, kick, push, escape

Skateboarding offers alternative for many struggling to resist the allure of gang life

By Azam Ahmed | Tribune reporter  
November 11, 2007

Ismael Carmona, a lanky 21-year-old, is skateboarding down a dilapidated street in his Back of the Yards neighborhood.

He rolls past gang tags sprayed on buildings, over shards of broken liquor bottles, through streetscapes littered with ghostly relics of industry. He rides to the same refrain, day after day, from the same gang members: "Hey, shorty, when you gonna join the family? When you gonna see the light?"

## He keeps skating.

Carmona is no saint, and skateboarding is no salvation; it's his vehicle, literal and figurative, for escaping the realities of a harsh neighborhood.

Once the province of West Coast surfers and then more broadly adopted by their admirers in suburbs around the country, the sport has now gained a foothold in some of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods, where a small but growing number of young men have latched onto the sport.

Even as they do tricks any skater would recognize, they are giving the sport their own, urban edge, and navigating past the handcuffs and bullets that have claimed so many friends and family members.

On any given day, Carmona may catch a ride to Wilson Skate Park on the lakefront, his friend Pablo Vargas and cousin Ramiro Garcia in tow. There they carve into the concrete kidney pools or grind down the metal handrails with skaters from across the city and suburbs.

They wander to Pilsen or Burnham Skate Park on the south lakefront. Or they might head for Uprise, a North Side skate shop frequented by skaters like Lebster Pabon from Humboldt Park or Maurice Burns from South Shore, men with stories like Carmona's.

"There's hundreds of them in Chicago from all the different neighborhoods, from Pilsen, South Shore -- literally every corner of the city," says Alvaro Gonzalez,

who has spent several years running an after-school skateboarding program for disadvantaged youths. "Almost every kid in my program is from a gnarly neighborhood."

At night, Carmona sometimes skates downtown, where he and his friends coast beneath the orange throb of city lights in search of an empty plaza. There, they practice kick flips and tricks, backed by a stream of laughter and forgetting. Sometimes they stay all night.

"In a way, we feel safer skating downtown than in the 'hood, because the colors we're wearing won't get us shot," Carmona says. "I always have to be on the move. I don't like feeling like a dog in a cage, and with skateboarding, you're always pushing yourself to the limits."

Contending with gangs is part of Carmona's daily routine, as it is for many in Chicago's pockets of poverty.

## 'A driving force'

"These young men have found a driving force, and for them that's skateboarding," says Tio Hardiman, a gang mediation director with CeaseFire, a violence prevention group. "I can use examples of guys escaping that life who are musicians, poets or athletes, but skateboarding is quite unique."

Carmona is not a kid. He's a father and has felt the pressure before. Though he's kept relatively steady employment -- at a string of jobs at fast-food restaurants and currently a gig as a magazine salesman -- he knows the pressure to hang out with the guys in the neighborhood, to be a part of something.

But he's seen what that life can bring; he has uncles and cousins in gangs. He's had friends killed.

He breaks down his choices like this: "Either pick up a gun or pick up a skateboard."

Nearly six years ago, Carmona was walking through his neighborhood when he spotted a white guy skateboarding. He didn't know which was stranger: a white guy in Back of the Yards or a skater.

"I saw him, and it put an image in my brain that I could do the same," Carmona says.

Intrigued, Carmona struck up a conversation with the nervous skater. Relieved, the skater offered to teach him. They built a lasting friendship along the way. Dozens of skateboards and more than 50 pairs of shoes later, it has retained its allure.

The sport offers an alternative family for some skaters.

"It's just almost a sense of belonging without being threatened," says Humberto Abad, 19, a former gang member. "That's basically what I wanted to do, to find another outlet where I could hang out and feel safe."

It took two days for Abad to leave the gang lifestyle. One night, he hit it off with a gang member his age. The next, he says, his friend was killed.

"That day it opened my eyes, like, 'This is not what I want to be,'" Abad says. "I found a Kmart board on the street near my house, and I just picked it up and started skateboarding."

Wynton Fargo, 17, began skateboarding three years ago, after signing up for Gonzalez's after-school program. Ashamed and leery, he used to carry his board around Englewood in secret to avoid confrontation with the gang members on the block.

"A lot of people really didn't accept it because I'm black, so I'd get into fights a lot," he says. "Some of my friends went into gangbanging, but I started skateboarding and I stuck with it."

*Skate*, from 1A

### **New horizons**

For those who've rarely strayed half a mile beyond their own block, skating opens up a whole new view of the city -- more than 300 square miles of paved frontier.

"A lot of the gang members I know have hatred for me because I guess they realize I have the freedom to go wherever I want," Little Village resident Leonardo Castillo, 19, says. "I don't have to look behind my back everywhere I go."

Joshua Nuniz, 16, of Humboldt Park says it simply: "I like life, and I like staying alive. The difficulty is sometimes you get made fun of because it's considered a white sport, but to skateboarders it doesn't matter what race you are."

### **'Everybody together'**

At a recent skate jam behind Roberto Clemente High School, black, white, Hispanic and Asian skaters congregated in the plaza. Skaters ages 4 to 40 rode the craggy edges of the concrete, taking turns on the ramps stationed for the day by Uriah Ruta, owner of Uprise.

"It's just a reason to get everybody together to skate and socialize," Ruta says. "There are so many people that skate from so many different areas, and you don't always get the chance to see everyone together."

Carmona's own list of friends bridges the city's formidable social boundaries. It's part of what he loves.

It's also why, despite the hindrances, he keeps going.

He's grown numb to the litany of sprains and fractures. It's the other dangers that Carmona can't shake. The occasional fights, the robberies. He's even been shot at, he says, for inadvertently wearing the wrong colors while skating through gang territory.

"Sometimes it's cool," he says, "They see me pass by, and they're like, 'Yo, do a trick!'"

Other times, it's physical. "Some stop me to check my tattoos to see if I have any gang tats," he says, pointing to the name of a deceased friend on his right forearm. "They make me take off my shirt and raise my pant legs to check."

And then there are the suspicious faces that watch him as he weaves through carefully manicured neighborhoods. Sometimes they ignore him; sometimes they call the police.

He handles that the same way he handles the derogatory names the corner boys in the Back of the Yards hurl at him. He keeps skating.

### **A growing trend**

And it seems to be catching on. These days, he gets approached by the shorties in his neighborhood interested in learning how to skateboard.

"If you take them to downtown and they see those buildings and people wearing nice clothes, it gives them something to look forward to," he says. "If you keep the kids in the neighborhood, they look up to the gangbangers and that role model is violence."

Carmona knows he's not the perfect role model, either. He never finished high school and jumps from job to job.

But success is measured in small things. In his small bedroom, used and broken skateboards cling to the wall like an ancient shrine, each with its own distinct story. The front page of a New York Times rests beneath them -- a memento from his first trip to New York, something he did on a whim, just to prove that he could.

"Sometimes, I think I'm alive today but I could be dead tomorrow," he says, staring out his window onto the empty street. On the carpeted floor, rock music blares from his speakers. "I got a lot of dead friends. I see the way their families suffer, and I don't want my mom crying over my body in a casket."

He grabs his chopped, black hair and searches for the words. His mouth opens and closes.

He wants to say this unlikely passion is his way of defining himself on his own terms, of defying stereotypes.

"When I go to a white neighborhood, the first reaction I see is that people think I'm up to no good," he says. "I don't want to be one of those people society targets. I'm something you don't think I am." ■