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Corrupting Power of Life on the Streets

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Tony Bogard was the King of Imperial Courts.

When he was killed Jan. 13 in a shootout at the Watts housing project, the gangbanger-turned-peacemaker was mourned as a martyr akin to Malcolm X. Nationally renowned for championing the 1992 truce between Crips and Bloods, he had become a symbol of redemption in South-Central Los Angeles, luring celebrities and government dollars to a community that rarely reaps such rewards.

But Bogard's heroic transformation was a myth—and a cautionary tale about the corrupting pull of the streets.

Even as he condemned the violence that he had wreaked for more than half his life, Bogard allegedly siphoned thousands of dollars from his gang's drug sales, dice games and robberies, authorities say. The FBI had been investigating him for months, and a federal prosecutor took the unusual step of attending his autopsy just to confirm that the star suspect had been lost.

Whether cruising in his '64 low-rider Impala or appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the 30-year-old ex-con preached the gospel of self-empowerment, urging economic development to ease the ills of riot-torn Los Angeles. Yet it was the treacherous economy of the underworld—long the source of his livelihood—that ultimately sank Bogard's dreams of tapping the American mainstream.

As he made his rounds that windy night in Imperial Courts, Bogard confronted a fellow member of the PJ Watts Crips in a parking lot on 114th Street. When the shooting stopped, 25 casings lay scattered on the ground, along with Bogard, caught without his customary bulletproof vest.

His supporters say that Bogard was standing up to a dope dealer, demanding that he donate a share of his illicit profits to compensate for poisoning their community. Critics argue it was little more than a shakedown, a common practice whenever Bogard's homeboys failed to "pay tribute" with a cut of their spoils. The alleged assailant, awaiting trial for murder in Compton Superior Court, claims he fired in self-defense—a contention supported by gunshot residue on Bogard's hand.

“Tony’s a perfect example of the shades of gray – the good and bad – that’s combined in a lot of guys struggling to make it out there,” said former NFL star Jim Brown, founder of a recovery program for ex-gang members. “He was instrumental in the peace, that’s true. But when it comes to the reality of survival, people go back to what they knew best. The ‘hood always tries to reclaim you.”

Peacemaker and warlord, defender and enforcer, victim and victimizer – Bogard seemed to be continuously crossing that line.

It may be because he operated in a Darwinian world where the line frequently shifts, where the distinction between right and wrong is blurred by the battle to stay afloat. Or it may be because the source of his power – the very thing that gave him the credibility to take control of the Watts truce – always was rooted in his fearsome reputation.

To his benefactors, such as rapper Ice-T, former Laker star Byron Scott and county Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Bogard’s conversion was what made him such a commanding figure – a spokesman for the regenerative potential of urban youth.

Others viewed Bogard as a fraud who embraced the truce only to camouflage his criminal schemes – “a black Al Capone,” charged the mother of one of his homeboys. But in Watts, a community hungry for role models, many residents still were willing to take a chance. To some, it mattered less that Bogard may have ruled by nefarious means than that he had the strength to rule at all.

“In that world, any male who can control his environment is seen as a hero,” said Constance L. Rice, a top NAACP lawyer. “I’m not excusing behavior that hurts other people, but deprivation creates a very different context. It’s not hard to understand why Tony had a hell of a lot to offer.”

Two years after Bloods and Crips emerged from the ashes with their red and blue bandannas tied in unity, the truce continues to hold in the Watts projects where it was born. Gang killings remain virtually nonexistent in the community’s three largest housing developments, a remarkable accomplishment after two decades of warfare.

Yet even after burying their rivalries, not all those gang members laid down their arms. Alienated and defiant, some redirected their energy into more profitable ventures, exchanging the risks of a drive-by for the financial rewards of a stickup.

As Los Angeles struggles to heal after America’s worst civil unrest this century, those who have been a part of the problem insist they must have a stake in the solution. Some believe the city’s future depends on creating economic bonds to connect the interests of the law-abiding majority with those of the dispossessed.

Bogard, packing a pistol as he called for peace, was a testament to the difficulty of bridging that gap.

BADGES OF A WARRIOR

When coroner's officials examined Bogard's 5-foot-10, 167-pound frame, they found him riddled with six gunshot wounds – in the chest, stomach, back, arm, knee and hand. All but one of the bullets – a 9-millimeter slug lodged in the triceps of his right arm – had pierced the flesh and disappeared out the other side.

Scar tissue and skin grafts covered his limbs, the result of a near-fatal attack four years earlier in which he was shot eight times with an AK-47 assault rifle. The coroner also found evidence of several other shootings, recovering bullet fragments from Bogard's arm, leg and thigh.

His body was marked by at least a dozen tattoos, some in memory of fallen comrades and others of a hatted man smoking what looked to be Bogard's trademark vice, a joint. On the back of his neck was the designation "O/G," for Original Gangster, and below that "PJ Watts."

They were the badges of a warrior. "You just seen strength in him," said Rebecca Hammonds, 28, Bogard's girlfriend of 14 years. "It was like, damn, you just seen something different."

By most middle-class standards, Bogard would not have rated so favorable an impression. A 10th-grade dropout from Jordan High, he was functionally illiterate, often signing his name in awkward block letters. He had no job prospects. He never obtained a driver's license. His first arrest – for grand theft auto – came at 13.

He eventually assembled a hefty rap sheet with nearly three dozen arrests, according to court records that show he was busted almost once a year beginning in the late 1970s. Bogard, whose legal name was Tyrone Tony Thomas, relied on more than a dozen aliases.

When he was 16, he spent two years behind bars for armed robbery. When he was 20, he did a year in jail for dealing PCP. When he was 26, he was convicted on drug charges after an informant told police he had seen several pounds of marijuana stashed at Bogard's house. The informant, court records show, also reported that gang rivals were plotting to kill Bogard, who was "loaded for bear" with a cache of more than a dozen AK-47s, MAC 10s and Uzis.

Bogard was "a live wire" who had been "seriously shaped to a large degree by the lifestyle and activities of gangs," a Los Angeles County probation officer told the court a few years later.

In the housing projects of Watts, as in most of the city's impoverished communities, such credentials can command respect as readily as they draw contempt.

Justly or not, many of the young men who struggle for recognition in that world see a gang as their only avenue to power, even if it means terrorizing the neighborhood they purport to defend.

It is a perspective that holds special allure in a place such as Imperial Courts, where Bogard spent his childhood before inheriting a house on 64th Street from his mother, who raised him and his six siblings on her own. According to the 1990 census, more than half of the project's households are headed by single women, 64% of adults never finished high school and the per capita income of \$3,931 is less than one-fourth of the county average.

"When I was young, you know, I mean, I seen my big homies selling dope or robbing somebody. I mean, it was, that was the thing to do," Bogard said on national TV last year. "I mean, if you wasn't strong or you wasn't doing something like that, you ain't going to survive."

On Jan. 17, 1990, as Bogard told it, his concept of survival changed.

As he stood in the doorway of his stucco bungalow, framed by a striped awning and a neatly trimmed cylindrical hedge, someone with a high-powered military-style rifle pumped him full of lead.

Clinging to life-support machines, Bogard felt an unfamiliar tinge of repentance tug at his heart. For the first time, he later explained, he fathomed the terrible price of being a Crip, of ravaging a community he claimed to love.

Then he made a deal with God: If he lived, he would do right by the people of Watts as surely as he had done them wrong.

"It was sort of like a deathbed epiphany," said Barbara Cottman Becnel, a writer who is featuring Bogard in an upcoming history of the Crips and Bloods. "He didn't want to spend the rest of his life being hurt or hurting others."

But after nearly a dozen operations and skin grafts, followed by months of physical therapy, Bogard again crossed the line.

One May afternoon in 1991, he walked to the turf of the Grape Street Crips, which had been engaged in a long and bloody feud with the PJs. Taking aim at a rival's sister, he opened fire with a 9-millimeter pistol, barely missing her and three others.

By the time the witnesses were called to testify, three had disappeared and a fourth had changed her story. It may have had something to do with the nightly barrage of gunfire that had forced their families to sleep on the floor. "The victims' . . . reluctance and relocation suggest a high level of fear generated by this defendant," court documents alleged.

In an effort to salvage their unraveling case, prosecutors agreed to make a deal, reducing four counts of attempted murder to one charge of assault with a deadly weapon. Instead of going to prison for the shooting, Bogard received a suspended sentence. He walked free in May, 1992—just in time to grab the truce’s reins.

TRUCE IN THE PROJECTS

The truce, which was hammered out months earlier during a series of meetings at a Watts mosque, was formally declared on April 26, three days before Los Angeles erupted in fiery rioting.

For weeks, Bloods and Crips held rollicking, beer-soaked parties at the Watts projects—Imperial Courts, Jordan Downs and Nickerson Gardens—tearfully toasting an end to their savage rivalry.

Although the projects are sometimes troubled places, they were also fertile ground for the truce. The complexes, seemingly worlds unto themselves, offer a sense of history and cohesiveness rarely found in the sprawl of neighborhoods claimed by the county’s 300 other Crip and Blood factions.

“Watts is showing all the other communities that we can get together, that we’re all one,” Bogard told *The Times*, sporting his trademark Georgetown cap and toting a cellular phone.

As one of the oldest gangsters in the neighborhood, Bogard had the credibility, or “juice,” to call the shots. He saw the truce not just as a party, but also as an opportunity to take a step closer to the resources of the legitimate world.

On the Fourth of July weekend that year, he unveiled an imaginative new venture—Hands Across Watts, a nonprofit corporation designed to create lawful business deals for reformed Crips and Bloods. Its logo featured two clasped hands, one red and the other blue. Its board of directors included pro athletes, the Grammy-winning engineer of Natalie Cole’s *Unforgettable* album and Bogard’s defense attorney.

“I think Tony just saw that a lot of things he had been involved in as a younger man weren’t worth anything,” said the lawyer, Stanley Granville. “He was somebody who really transcended his background.”

Lean, with a shorn scalp and narrow mustache, Bogard was not physically imposing, still hobbled by a limp from the 1990 ambush. But he was forceful and charismatic, speaking in a raw, visceral voice that captured the attention of a national media focused on post-riot Los Angeles.

“We don’t make the AK, we don’t bring kilos of cocaine over here, we don’t go for none of that,” he said on *Oprah* last year. “They drop it off in our community for us to grab it like rats. And they see how we act and they make money off it till they lock us up.”

At times, the exposure seemed to be a substitute for the sense of identity that gangbanging had once provided.

In an ornate commendation, the County Board of Supervisors applauded Bogard for his “deep commitment to the community.” *The Wall Street Journal* featured his entrepreneurial plans on its sober front page. A production manager for Castle Rock Entertainment had him over for dinner – the first time Bogard had eaten at a white person’s house. Last year, he was invited to a Pan-African conference in Uganda.

“When I first met him, he thought he would be lucky to be 30,” said Pat Mulligan, an international golf course designer, whom Bogard picked as the first Hands Across Watts executive director. “By last year, he thought he was going to make it to 40.”

The attention translated into money for a community that was long ago abandoned by investment.

In all, Hands Across Watts reports taking in about \$125,000 in contributions, including \$5,000 from Mayor Richard Riordan’s private foundation and the proceeds from an Ice-T video filmed outside the Imperial Courts gym. Last fall, the group also received a \$200,000 federal job-training grant, steered its way by Supervisor Burke.

With that, Bogard was able to dole out paychecks to 150 young adults for maintenance work in the projects. The rest of the money paid for community barbecues and dances, as well as a youth program that took hundreds of youngsters to Dodger games, Knott’s Berry Farm and the beach.

Although it all amounted to more legitimate funds than Bogard ever could have hoped to control, he was disappointed that the donations came to less than half of what had been budgeted. Many corporations that routinely give to charity seemed reluctant to invest in someone with such a recent criminal past. Bogard, who was to receive a \$40,000 salary, had to settle for small stipends whenever there was available cash.

“I always tried to convince him that if we could make as much money doing right as we did doing wrong, we’d be rich,” said Hammonds, Bogard’s girlfriend. Instead, she said, “we took a cut in pay. It was a slap in the face.”

From the beginning, however, others viewed Bogard as an opportunist, including some of his own homeboys. One of them, Dewayne (Sniper) Holmes, who was the first Imperial Courts gang member to reach out to the rival projects, recalls that Bogard spent months objecting to such overtures.

“The Tony I knew was out for himself,” said Holmes, 26, who is serving a seven-year prison sentence for a robbery he insists he did not commit.

Speaking in starched denims at a state prison near Bakersfield, Holmes described how an uneasy cease-fire in early 1992 evolved into a string of Sunday meetings – only one of which, he said, Bogard attended. It was only after Holmes ended up in custody, a week

after peace was announced, that he learned Bogard was suddenly taking credit for the truce.

“That’s what led me to believe that maybe his motives were somewhat unpure,” Holmes said. “He just took the opportunity to exploit this for his own gain . . . to get what he could out of it while it was on.”

Mujahid Abdul-Karim, whose mosque, Masjid Al-Rasul, served as the neutral site for the negotiations, also was skeptical. On several occasions, Abdul-Karim confronted Bogard, urging him not to jeopardize their fragile accomplishments.

“He would say he just wanted to make money, that’s all he was concerned about,” said the minister, a quiet man who wears a simple white robe. “There wasn’t anything spiritual; it was just material.”

Other proponents of the truce, such as Daude Sherrills, a former rival from Jordan Downs, had no objections to making money. But Sherrills, who co-founded Hands Across Watts and says he coined the name, worried that Bogard was more interested in constructing his own empire than rebuilding their community.

Almost immediately after forming Hands Across Watts, Sherrills decided he could not work with Bogard and quit as president. Bogard took his spot.

“He was trying his best, but that brother was just conditioned from birth to think with negativity,” Sherrills said. “Tony believed in controlling – he wanted the power and the money. But (the truce) wasn’t about us. It was about the development of our neighborhood.”

The neighborhood, unfortunately, is no safer today than it was before the truce.

Although police concede that the cycle of gang killings appears to have halted, they say the Watts gangs continue to be just as criminally active, even if their mayhem is no longer based on traditional Crip and Blood rivalries. In 1991, within the 1 1/2-square-mile area that houses the three projects, there were 2,152 serious crimes reported, including 18 murders, 293 robberies and 845 assaults. Last year, there were 2,150 serious crimes, including 17 murders, 424 robberies and 768 assaults.

Los Angeles police are convinced that Bogard remained part of that crime wave. Neither they nor the FBI would disclose details of their investigations, but law enforcement sources say they have been investigating reports that Bogard was a gang kingpin, enriching himself by taxing the illegal rackets of his underlings.

“Hey, the truce is a good thing and, to the extent that Tony Bogard facilitated the truce, I put one in the plus column for Tony,” said LAPD Lt. Dennis Shirey, commander of the South Bureau’s anti-gang CRASH unit. “But I don’t think the truce made Tony a new man. I don’t think he woke up one day and said: ‘I’m now on the side of law and order.’ And I don’t think that, in net, he had a positive effect on that community.”

THE FINAL SHOOTOUT

The morning after Bogard was gunned down, he was hailed as a visionary in a world not ready to open its eyes.

Wiping tears from behind their sunglasses, dozens of former gang rivals and community activists gathered at the Kedren Community Center in Watts, where they exchanged hugs and vowed to make Bogard's dream real.

One of his most grief-stricken colleagues, 30-year-old Malik Spellman, said Bogard had been in Imperial Courts the previous night only because he needed to raise money for a Hands Across Watts phone bill. If the city's business and political establishment had been more supportive of the group's efforts, he contended, Bogard would not have been forced to look for funds on the neighborhood's mean streets.

"You all guilty of a crime," Spellman charged, sobbing into a sea of TV cameras. "You all killed Tony. Not us."

Several weeks after Bogard's death, the Rev. Carl Washington, a deputy to Supervisor Burke, acknowledged having heard rumors that Bogard was still trafficking in drugs. But Washington said he dismissed such talk as jealous backbiting.

Having known Bogard since his own childhood in Imperial Courts, Washington is convinced that the truce leader died trying to keep a pusher's profits from being sucked out of the neighborhood.

"We talked a lot about recycling black dollars," said Washington, who serves, with Burke, on the Hands Across Watts board. "It was like, if you're not putting any money back into the community, you can't work here, you can't deal here, you can't come around here anymore."

At a preliminary hearing in Municipal Court last month, Bogard's method of soliciting contributions was described in less-than-neighborly terms.

Before the shooting, word had circulated that Bogard was irate with the defendant, Rodney Compton. Some said it was because Compton, 21, had failed to share his earnings from a major cocaine rip-off. Others said it was because the victims of the rip-off had taken their beef to Bogard, who felt Compton's scam had jeopardized the Imperial Courts gang.

When they finally met, according to Compton's testimony, Bogard demanded he hand over "\$25,000 and some dope."

"I don't have it," Compton said he told Bogard. "I don't know what you talking about."

Bogard accused Compton of being a “mark” and a “buster,” meaning he was weak and unwilling to defend the gang’s interests. “He told me . . . I got to break bread with the projects,” said Compton, who is being held on \$1-million bail.

In a scene worthy of an Old West gun duel, the men then squared off. Bogard, according to Compton, drew a large-caliber handgun and fired two rounds. Compton, wounded in the right arm, said he pulled out his pistol and took 12 shots at Bogard. At least one other shooter, whom police have yet to identify, also opened fire.

“If Rodney Compton had not acted, he would be dead today,” said his attorney, Edi M. O. Faal, whose defense work in the Reginald O. Denny beating trial earned him the accolades of many South-Central Los Angeles residents. “With due respect to Tony Bogard . . . his actions were inconsistent with the role of a peacemaker.”

Even prosecutors have conceded this probably is not a case of first-degree murder. What it boils down to, said Deputy Dist. Atty. Scott G. Carbaugh, “is who pulled the gun first, who was first or quickest on the draw.”

That point may be difficult to prove. Homicide investigators have found only one witness—and not a particularly reliable one—who saw Compton kill Bogard.

No one else, not even the homeboys who rushed their dying chieftain to the hospital, has come forward.

A MEAGER KINGDOM

In the end, it was a sad and meager kingdom that Tony Bogard ruled.

He owned a two-bedroom 1920s-era house that contained only one concession to opulence, a giant color TV set by the living room window. But its four-foot screen was punctured by a gunshot, accidentally fired by a friend showing off his new Uzi.

Bogard was buried in a humble, city-operated cemetery in San Bernardino, his body placed above that of his sister, Yvonne. She was killed last year at age 33, when assailants fired through her kitchen window in what police believe was a drug-related attack.

A eulogy, etched into Bogard's headstone, asks his loved ones to remember the good times they shared and disregard those who would speak ill:

Let the rumors be

Don't worry about what's said about me

Everybody had something to say about TB