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C.R. teen could walk away from violence, but will he? A profile.

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Chris Cungtion will come home in April or May, and then he will have a choice to make.

A born-and-bred Cedar Rapidian who turned 17 three weeks ago, Cungtion is the boy who was found guilty of firing a revolver into the air at the onset of an August brawl between 30 young men from Iowa City and a half-dozen from Cedar Rapids.

As punishment, Cungtion (pronounced CUNG-shun) was sent to Woodward Academy, a boarding school and treatment center for young men that's 20 miles southwest of Ames.

He is doing well there. He starts at point guard on a solid 2-A high school basketball team. He earned four A's and a B-plus on his report card. He is running for president of his dorm after living there for only two months, and he probably will win. He exudes confidence and charisma -- a natural leader.

What nobody knows for sure -- maybe not even Christopher Lee Cungtion Jr. himself -- is whether he can translate success at Woodward into a successful life. Whether he will channel his considerable gifts into schoolwork, a job and a plan for the future.

That is the choice his parents, grandmother, teachers and lawyer want him to make, because the alternative -- and the one police believe is more likely -- is for Cungtion to become a living stereotype, a depressing example of squandered talent, an embodiment of the struggles that haunt so many young, black men in America -- problems with the law, prison, a life on the margins of society.

"I got a feeling," said Bertha Sykes, Cungtion 's grandmother. "My grandson is going to go the right way."

A lot of people hope she's right.

III

Cungtion is short and powerfully built. His skin is light brown, and he has big, dark, liquid eyes that lock in when he listens or speaks. He folds his hands when he talks and speaks clearly.

One of his earliest memories from when he was little is floating in a wave pool at a water park in Wisconsin, trying to keep his head above water.

"When my mom was around, me and my brothers and my sister and her, we used to do a whole bunch of stuff, like go to Wacky Waters and go to Wisconsin Dells and travel down to Mobile, Ala., to visit family," he said.

His father was a Gangster Disciple gang member from Chicago and one of the early crack cocaine dealers in Cedar Rapids. Chris Cungtion Sr., in a Gazette newsfeature in 1995, renounced his criminal lifestyle, but he was arrested in 1997 and charged with murder in Cook County, Ill., when his son was 4. He was convicted and sentenced to 30 years in prison. He remains in a penitentiary west of Peoria.

Cungtion 's mother struggled with drugs and built a lengthy criminal history, including theft, extortion and robbery. She has been in and out of prison for years. When Cungtion was 10, he and his younger brother moved in with his grandmother, Sykes, a fierce little woman who works at Quaker and raises her two grandsons in a town house on a hill, overlooking the Cargill plant in southeast Cedar Rapids. Cungtion calls her "Mom," as do her other grandchildren.

"My background, it seems like it's rough, but my grandma stepped in, and it was such a smooth transition," Cungtion said. "My life hasn't been as hard as it should be, based on the facts."

Both his parents have exhorted him, from prison, to stay out of trouble.

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Cungtion first got into trouble with the law when he was 9, for shoplifting. Other than a few curfew violations, he had no major problems until he started his freshman year. His recent troubles started when he had a disagreement with school administrators -- he won't say what it was -- and left Washington High School in the spring and switched to Jefferson.

"I should have stayed at Wash," he said.

At Jefferson, he started cutting class.

"The real reason is 'cause I didn't have friends at Jeff, and I said, 'Forget this, I'm leaving,'" Cungtion said. "Then, when my friends came, I was already in the habit of skipping, and it was like, 'Forget this, we all leaving.'"

He kept his truancy hidden from his grandmother. Even when he attended school, he sometimes begged teachers not to call her if he got into trouble. It wasn't until he landed at the alternative Metro High School in 2009, in the spring of his sophomore year, that he started attending school regularly again.

In the summer, he got a job with Kirkwood Community College, setting up computers and organizing parts and supplies.

"He's very, very professional for his age," said Sean McAtee, an Iowa Jobs for American Graduates teacher who helped monitor Cungtion 's work. "We were really impressed with Chris."

Cungtion enjoyed the work and worked practically full time from June to August. He was making music with his friends and getting ready for his junior year. Then, in August, the gunshots went off.

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Cungtion was part of a group of boys from southeast Cedar Rapids that called themselves the Benni Boyz in middle school and later the Cedar Rapids Hard Body Soldiers. More than anything, they were a group of teenagers who hung out, made rap music together and carried a certain bravado.

A rivalry developed between the Hard Bodies and a larger group from Iowa City calling themselves the Broadway Goons. Police call both groups "wannabe

gangs." Part of the animosity was over some Iowa City girls Cungtion and his friends had met at Hog Wild Days in Hiawatha.

In late July, the Hard Bodies went to a party at a house in Iowa City. Both groups were dancing. It was sort of a competition. Girls were watching. The night was hot and humid, and it started raining hard. Somebody pushed somebody, and the groups came close to fighting. Police showed up and told everyone to go home.

A couple of weeks later, on Aug. 5, Cungtion and some Hard Bodies -- Patrick James, Rahmal Ginger, Kenneth Scott, Antonio Johnson and Antesio Sykes, Cungtion's cousin -- were back in Iowa City. They went to the home of Taylor Williams, a girl Cungtion was dating. Three other girls were there. The kids had something to eat, listened to music on a computer and some of them smoked marijuana on the back porch.

Some Broadway Goons showed up in the front yard, and an argument broke out. Ginger and Cungtion came outside. They talked about "squashing it" (peaceful reconciliation) but instead decided to "bang" (fight). Before long, both groups were headed toward Fairmeadows Park down the street, ready to fight. Cungtion and five friends were about to face some 30 Broadway Goons.

A gun went off. Lights flipped on in the neighborhood, cops were called, people started running. The boys from Cedar Rapids jumped into a white Buick, pulled onto Lakeside Drive and sped away as two Iowa City boys fired guns at the receding vehicle. Police believe the first shooter was Cungtion. They believe one of the others was an Iowa City 12-year-old.

It was, in the view of the neighborhood and Iowa City police, an unacceptable escalation to a disturbing trend of lawlessness among teenagers that summer. No one was hurt, but a line had been crossed. No longer were police responding to fistfights, shoplifting or robberies of pizza deliverymen. Guns were involved, and teenagers were shooting.

Police detectives told their wives they'd be working late for a while. They were ordered to find the shooters whatever it took -- particularly the one who shot first.

Fourteen teenage boys have since been charged and 12 convicted of various minor charges. Cungtion, who maintains his innocence, was charged with

reckless use of a firearm.

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His trial took place in October, on a rainy Monday at the Johnson County Courthouse in Iowa City. Police had not recovered the gun and had no evidence against Cungtion but the testimony of his friends.

The prosecution called them one by one to the witness stand: Rahmal Ginger, Patrick James, Taylor Williams, Antesio Sykes, Antonio Johnson, Ieshia Dunigan. A boy from Iowa City named Don Williams also was called.

It was a brutal day for the teenagers. Clearly, none of them wanted to be there. Sykes and Johnson pleaded the Fifth, because charges were pending against them. Ginger testified he heard someone say Cungtion had fired the gun. Don Williams, who is not friends with Cungtion and was recently featured in a Gazette article, said Cungtion shot the gun. Taylor Williams said Cungtion told her he fired it. James, after the judge cleared the courtroom, said Cungtion fired the weapon.

Cungtion's lawyer, Rachel Antonuccio of Iowa City, a private attorney who occasionally takes on state cases for indigent clients, argued the testimony was convoluted and those who testified against Cungtion did so because charges were pending against them.

"Because the accounts have all been so conflicting and inconsistent in that regard, I believe the state has not met its burden," Antonuccio said.

The prosecutor, Pat Weir, said the shooting presented a terrible risk to life and property, and that Taylor Williams and James clearly had no desire to testify against Cungtion but did so anyway.

"Everybody bargained for a fistfight, except Chris," Weir said.

A week later, Judge Stephen Gerard issued his ruling: Cungtion was guilty.

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Cungtion is appealing the verdict as he serves his time at Woodward Academy.

It's partly because of this steadfast denial that police take a dim view of Cungtion 's future. They see him as a charmer with a hardened conscience and a knack for scamming adults.

Speaking on behalf of investigating officers, Iowa City Police Sgt. Troy Kelsay said Cungtion is intelligent, formidable, manipulative and bright enough to succeed wherever he goes.

"For him to truly turn it around, he has to play within somebody else's rules," Kelsay said. "They're not convinced that he's willing to play within anybody's set of rules other than his own."

The authorities at Woodward Academy also see that he has the ability to manipulate a situation. He immediately attracted attention there, and a following.

"He's smart, and he knows it, and he does have that leadership ability, and he can play the game when he wants to play the game, in a good way or a bad way," said Shawn Hollenkamp, the group living director at Woodward. "We want to be able to see consistency. Chris has done well since he's been here, but it's been a short time. We need to see that consistency."

Cungtion is living in a strange world. Woodward, unlike the Boys Training School in Eldora, is not a locked facility. It's strict, though. Students live in sparse dorms where beds are lined up barracks-style. After bedtime, no talking is allowed, and everyone's shoes are taken away to discourage attempts at escape.

Students barely outnumber staff -- 200 students to 140 staffers -- and the rules encourage students to work out conflicts on their own.

Woodward has a system for earning privileges. Cungtion 's goal is to become a "positive knight," which essentially would mean he gets an endorsement from staff and peers, that he is trying to use his gifts to encourage positive behavior. If he gets that, he is allowed to watch certain televisions, use certain student lounges, sit on certain couches, take visitors on tours and, ultimately, go home. His entire stay there should be about six months.

The Woodward Academy Knights played a basketball game Dec. 11 at Ogden High School, a few miles to the north. It was a close contest, and Ogden, using a full-court press, had fought to within six points with 1:31 left on the clock. Cungtion , a smooth ballhandler and passer with a silky 15-foot jump shot, broke the press and dribbled up the floor.

He was fouled in the middle of the court and walked to the free throw line for a one-and-one. Make the first shot, get a second shot. It's one of the best tests of a basketball player's mental toughness. With a heavily partisan crowd screaming at him and thundering in the stands, Cungtion drained both free throws. His team went on to win by 9 points.

"Cool, calm and collected," said Hollenkamp, who watched the game from high in the stands.

Ultimately, for Hollenkamp and the rest of the people working with Cungtion at Woodward, the question is not whether he will decide to "be good." What matters to them is that he learns, thoroughly, that following the rules is in his self-interest -- at school, in the dorm, in society.

Cungtion says all the right things. He says he didn't shoot the gun but admits he was guilty of leading his friends into trouble, of escalating a pointlessly dangerous situation.

"I could have ended up with a bullet in my head, or I could have watched one of my friends die," he said. "Me being in this situation now is probably the best thing for me."

He said the negative will always catch up with you, the momentary pleasure of getting into a fight isn't worth the consequences and that he has no interest in making trouble when he gets back to southeast Cedar Rapids, girls, high school and his grandma's house.

"This is the first time I've really been punished for doing anything," he said.

He tells his younger brother, Christian, to stay clean, advising him he doesn't want to be at a residential placement when he's 16. The boys' mother gets out of prison this year, and their father will likely be paroled in 2012.

Cungtion , who embraced his role helping Antonuccio defend him, says he

wants to be a lawyer.

"He's going to be a lawyer, just as sure as my name is Bertha Sykes," his grandmother said.

"And he's going to be a damn good one."