

## Issac is 10 and trouble

*One kid's perilous path: On the street, Little Issac is older and more experienced than his years. Nine days ago, he was arrested for peddling drugs, police say. This child of the streets, it seems, is a little kid no longer.*

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It's 1:37 in the afternoon and Little Issac is just waking up. He's been out all night, dodging the cops, hustling with his boys, trying to get paid. He'd do just about anything to get paid so he can buy the things he wants. "You gonna pay me?" he asks, as he wipes the sleep from his eyes and tugs on his black Flintstones T-shirt. "I ain't gonna tell you my Life Story unless I get paid. I don't do nothing until I see me some green."

Nine days ago, L'il I-Man, age 10, got arrested on Fairmount and Luzerne in Southeast Baltimore after police say that he sold three chunks of ready rock cocaine to a couple of undercover narcs.

He fought the cops hard, neighbors say -- spitting on them, kicking, cussing and screaming. Issac explained later that one of his favorite cartoon characters is the Tazmanian Devil.

The bust made the news big time. "A 10-year-old is the city's youngest drug dealer," they said on the TV. "Arrest reflects troubling increase of child criminals," the newspapers said. Within a couple of days, Issac walked out of the foster home they put him in and was back on the street.

"Man, I was all over the news," Issac says, as he munches down a cheeseburger, a jumbo box of fries and a vanilla shake, his deep brown eyes lighting up for a second in the clean, warm interior of a McDonald's. "But they didn't use my name. Nobody knows my name. How'd you get my name, anyway?"

Truth is, everybody knows Issac's name down in McElderry Park. They know his name all the way up the bomb-blasted length of Rose Street to North Avenue, back down Montford to Patterson Park, across the racial divide of East Fayette, all the way west to Johns Hopkins Hospital.

In these neighborhoods where children drift and swirl like wind-blown leaves -- disappearing under the bumpers of speeding cars and in the paths of errant bullets and into the maw of Juvenile Services -- Issac is one of the kids people remember.

"Look close into those eyes," one resident says. "I'm afraid he needs more love than this world can give him."

Then, she sighs and tells you he's not the only one. Not even close. Nor is he the youngest offender. Or the worst. He just happens to be the one the police caught, the one who made it into the news. The one everybody is after.

'Turn yourself in to juvie?'

``Issac, you gonna turn yourself in to juvie and go away, right?'' Inez Coley, 34, asks the youngest of her five kids.

``I don't know," Issac says sullenly. ``Sometimes, I don't want to go away."

``Issac, don't do this to me," his mother says.

``I'm not doing anything to you," Issac shoots back. ``People keep wanting to do things to me."

It's Thursday afternoon, six days after Issac was named in a warrant charging 58 people with working a drug network that has been linked to nearly 60 shootings and three homicides. Four of the suspects are kids under 15.

The 75-pound shrimp-sized boy the dealers called ``L'il I-Man" is the youngest.

Issac and the rest of the family are holed up at his grandmother's cramped rowhouse on North Avenue with a bunch of his cousins. Children's faces pop out from doorways, peering into the darkened dining room, listening to Issac and his mother go over the same old ground.

The refrigerator is empty. The kitchen is turned upside down. A roach skitters up the wall above a table littered with the remains of a peanut butter lunch. Issac's grandmother is none too happy that visitors have come to call when her house is such a mess.

``We may be poor, but we got our pride," she says firmly. ``I want you kids to get busy cleaning this place up!"

Outside, sirens wail. Police storm into a house across the street, guns drawn. They haven't come for Issac. Not yet.

This is the last safe harbor for Inez Coley, who has moved her kids from one rent-subsidized slum house to another at least six times since Issac was born, court records show.

Through it all, she and her kids have remained in the ` crime-ravaged grid of narrow streets east of Johns Hopkins Medical Center.

The children have different last names. Their fathers are either dead, in jail or just plain gone. For the better part of two decades, since she was a teen-ager herself, it's been all

Ms. Coley could do just to keep her family intact.

Her fine angular features harden at certain questions.

“It's not often that people talk nice to us, so I know what they're thinking when they read this,” she says. “But if all these drugs and guns was in front of their house, then they'd know what my reality is. They'd know how hard it is. I'd like to see some of those suburban people get by for one day where we live.” A difficult pregnancy

Inez Coley's fifth baby was a difficult pregnancy, she says. He flipped and flopped and twisted around until she was worn out and short of breath. “Issac was always hyper,” she says with a laugh, “even when he was in my stomach. He'd kick me out of bed at night. After he was born, he was always pulling things down and getting into things. You couldn't make him sit still.”

By the time he reached school age, she says, he was diagnosed as hyperactive and depressive -- a one-two punch that put him into a special education program, a special special ed program. It was decided that Issac needed the close attention that only a private school could provide.

He was enrolled in Villa Maria Home for Children in Timonium, amid rolling lawns and tree-lined pathways, as far away from his old neighborhood as the moon.

“We got to do a lot of fun things,” Issac says. “It was all green everywhere. You could see a lot of things. You could do a lot of things. They had a bus stamp, and every day you came to school you got a stamp, and after you went to school for something like a hundred days you got a basketball or a toy or some cologne -- to keep and take home.

“It was like getting paid to go to school.”

But the oasis he had found faded from view every day out the back of a school bus window. Home was still East Baltimore. And his piece of it was about to come under siege.

By 1994, Inez Coley's family had migrated to the 100 block of N. Rose St., a narrow, neat-as-a-pin block of spotless Formstone rowhouses. Robert Carter, then 61 and working as a seafood packer, lived next door. He had moved onto the street seven years earlier seeking a quiet place to take his son, who was dying of cancer. He came expecting problems -- his was the first black family on the block.

“People just opened their hearts to us,” he says, scratching his gray head in lingering amazement. “All these little old white ladies would come by every day to take care of my boy while my wife and I were at work. I still can't thank them enough. Now, I'm almost embarrassed by what these kids have done to this neighborhood.”

“The Trouble” had begun.

Two powerful forces were unleashed on the well-integrated neighborhood that year that no one in the local civic groups could have planned for or predicted.

First, the city decided to tear down its high-rise housing projects and give the poor vouchers to pay their rent anywhere they pleased. Then, Baltimore police undertook a series of spectacular drug raids above North Avenue aimed at driving out the gunslinging gangs that had occupied the Greenmount and Alameda neighborhoods for years.

“The effect in our neighborhood was almost immediate,” says Ed Rutkowski, 48, who quit his \$60,000-per-year job as a computer analyst four years ago to take up civic organizing full time from his Baltimore Street rowhouse. “Those populations started pouring down here. Homeowners got nervous and a lot of them moved. Speculators moved in and bought up the houses at a discount and started [renting them out].

“The delicate balance we had worked so hard to achieve tilted drastically.”

“It happened so fast,” says Glenn Ross, 46, a beefy former prison guard who raised two little girls on Milton Avenue while transforming his McElderry Park rowhouse into a civic command post. “It was like we woke up one morning and found ourselves surrounded.”

Inez Coley readily admits that Little Issac was adrift by then. He was cutting school, hanging out on the corner of East Fayette and North Rose, falling increasingly under the thrall of the drug peddlers and their entourages.

“I yelled at him one day when he was out front of the house,” she says. “They was giving him candy, and I said, ‘Issac, that’s enough, you can’t have no candy today. You don’t need all that sugar, it makes you crazy!’”

With that, one of the bigger boys barged up her front steps and “got right in my face,” she recalls. “He told me Issac could have whatever he wanted out on the street. He told me I could make any kind of rules I wanted inside my house, but out on the street they made the rules. Now, what was I supposed to do with that? I couldn’t lock him up in his room 24 hours a day.”

Increasingly, Issac’s house was becoming a flash point for neighborhood tensions. Mr. Carter recalls that music thumped through the walls all day and night. Kids hung out on the steps, dealing dope and showing off their guns.

“Issac wanted to be one of the big boys,” says Leona Cero, 40, who lived on the block until she was driven off. “It’s like overnight, he went from being this sweet little kid, smiling and playing, to spitting in my daughter’s hair and shoving her face down into the street.”

He also had developed a peculiar mannerism when adults scolded him. “He’d curl his

little hand into the shape of a gun and shoot it at you," Mrs. Cero says. "Pop, pop, pop! Then he'd curse you out and run away."

Police logged more than 90 calls for service to the block -- more than a dozen of them to Issac's house -- in one three-month period.

On Sept. 6 of last year, the ordinary brutality that had descended on once-peaceful North Rose gave way to calamity.

One of the drug boys started beating up Issac's sister. Mr. Carter's son, Ivan, 28, was visiting his parents and leaped into the fray. The boy's friends rushed in.

"They came pouring down the street from every direction," Mr. Carter recalls. "And they came straight for my son."

A neighbor ran out into the street and handed Ivan a .32-caliber revolver. Shots rang out. A 17-year-old kid in the gang was hit in the head and chest and nearly died. Ivan's in prison now for attempted manslaughter.

Since then, at least five murders have occurred up and down North Rose. Shootings and killings in the surrounding blocks have become too numerous for the residents to track -- let alone all the fires, robberies, car thefts and random acts of vandalism.

As for Inez Coley and the kids, they left North Rose in September when their water heater broke down. The house is boarded up now. And a measure of quiet has returned to the 100 block, although old bullet casings can be found glinting on the pavement.

Chewing on his cheeseburger at Mickey D's, Issac talks about what it's like to grow up in such a world. He describes it all in an off-handed way, like another kid might recall a soccer game or a science experiment.

He is kind of upset about one thing, though, and he wants to get it off his chest.

He complains about being pulled out of Villa Maria and put into a public school up on North Avenue, where they don't have any trees or grass and they don't give out prizes for coming to class.

"It's a lot of hard work and you don't get paid," he says, wiping ketchup from his chin. "That's why I don't go anymore. I'd rather be out somewhere doing something to get paid."

That's what he was doing when the undercover detectives videotaped him rushing up to an unmarked car and shoveling a sandwich bag under their noses with three rocks of crack inside.

Issac claims he found the stuff laying on the ground. And he knew a chance to get paid

when he saw one.

“I needed the money for a bus ride home,” he says, jutting out his chest, acting bad.

His mother says he's been acting bad for a few years now, although she's “pretty sure he doesn't have a criminal record. Assault maybe, but I don't think so.”

But if you ask him a question he wasn't expecting, his guard comes down. His face softens. Those big brown eyes get wide. He becomes a kid again.

He says he likes Donald Duck, but he thinks Michael Jackson makes more money. His favorite game is football, mainly because he's too short to play basketball. His favorite player is San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Jerry Rice “because he can catch the ball over his shoulder.” He's undecided about who he likes more, Fred Flintstone or Barney Rubble.

“So Issac, what's your favorite color?”

“Guess,” he says. “I give up.”

“Red,” he says.

To our readers To protect the rights of juvenile defendants, The Sun does not customarily publish the full names of such individuals, unless they are charged as adults. For this reason, this article does not include Issac's last name. Similarly, no photo of Issac is published.

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