

## A Turning Point In My Life

by Randolph Outlaw

When I went to lunch, I found that my fight with the teacher had won me several friends from the Fulton Street gang. They told me not to worry about my cap being stolen. After school I started hanging out with them. No one stole my clothing anymore in school. I was accepted — I belonged. Conversely, because of the incident with the teacher, I was labeled an aggressive child by the school administration. I was left back at the end of the school year and put into special classes for children who had learning disabilities and physical handicaps from the fifth grade on. Outside of the classroom, those special classes were what we children called "dummy classes."

This incident was a turning point in my life for several reasons. By being accepted into a gang, I was protected from the violence and robberies that occurred in school. My clothes were no longer missing, so I stopped receiving whippings at home, which resolved the immediate "no win" situation I was in between Junior (my step-father) and the gangs. Yet, at the same time, I was a victim of a larger problem that I could not grasp. The school was more detrimental to me than Junior and the gangs because it mislabeled me as a "dummy" and determined what I could and could not accomplish. The school limited my growth as a person because I could not break out of the predetermined structure of their system. This made a big difference in my later life when I thought about a career and asked myself, "What am I suited for? What has school shown me about my potential? What skills should I concentrate on developing?"

Over the next few years, I became a veteran of my neighborhood. I grew discontent with school, because I could not compete against the stereotypes of the teachers, which were also reinforced by my step-father. Violence at home alienated me from my family. I began to identify with other youths in the streets, because they had experiences similar to mine. My relationship

with these youths was important because they were the only people who understood my anger and affirmed me as a person. Still, life held many future experiences that I did not understand and was unable to cope with.

Now I can look back and see the progression of events that shaped the course of my life and left me with feelings of low self-esteem.