

Chattanooga Times Free Press

To the judges:

Speak No Evil is a disturbing, nuanced and intimate look into the cycle of violence and death in one of the most dangerous cities in the South.

Joan Garrett McClane and Todd South spent nine months interviewing more than 150 people and analyzing nearly 300 shooting cases dating back to 2011. They discovered that it's not hard to shoot or kill a person in Chattanooga and get away with it.

A code of silence in the inner city was driving the city's shooting epidemic and protecting the most violent members of the community.

Their investigation unearthed that in nearly 60 percent of unsolved shootings case witnesses who saw violent acts refused to cooperate with police, preferring private justice to public reckoning.

They also found that years of mistrust, suspicion and hate have cemented a divide between the police and the policed, making prosecution nearly impossible.

Many people said we would not be able to tell these stories, that if people refused to cooperate with police and prosecutors there was no way they would go on the record with a reporter about the code of silence. But McClane and South were persistent.

They sat on porches in the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city and built trust with residents. They stood on corners where gang members were selling weed. They walked door to door to find common stories of unsolved shootings and murders, to capture the impact of these cold cases. They monitored gang activity online every night. They rode shotgun with police searching for suspects and were given unprecedented access to interviews with reluctant witnesses.

For months, McClane shadowed Shonda Mason, a woman who hated police but was forced to rely on them after the gang execution of her 18-year-old son, sometimes staying with her for more than 12 hours at a time.

The no-snitch culture plagues cities across the country, but McClane and South explained its roots, its prevalence and its long-term effects like no paper has done before.

They also explored the solution. McClane interviewed nationally renowned criminologists and traveled to North Carolina to talk to police who had worked for decades to combat the divide between mistrusting inner-city communities and police.

The reporters' clear and compelling writing untangled a complex topic with serious public safety implications, and their reporting elevated a conversation that before was barely a whisper.

McClane and South wrote with authority because they built trust with people who were deeply impacted by the no-snitch culture — victims, witnesses, police, prosecutors, judges and murderers.

As one reader said, it “peeled away one sordid layer after another on our city's tragic black-on-black shooting epidemic. I have never seen anything to equal *Speak No Evil* and I believe it is a journalistic masterpiece.”

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The Times Free Press published *Speak No Evil* in an unprecedented special section — eight broadsheet pages with no advertisements — and delivered thousands of copies at no cost to residents of the inner-city neighborhoods most affected by the violence.

Speak No Evil also was presented in a sophisticated online package — reflective of the mood of the material — with additional graphics, audio stories, photo galleries, police records, hand written journal entries from a teenage shooting victim and footnoted versions of the stories. The website represents our greatest effort to date to modernize our readers' storytelling experience and exemplifies the best of storytelling across multiple platforms.

Readers were captivated by *Speak No Evil*. Mothers of murdered sons said we had given them a voice. Police applauded our fairness. White suburbanites said they grasped the complexity of inner-city violence for the first time.

“I was so inspired by the newspaper’s achievement I believe it ought to be ‘required reading’ in every junior high and high school in our region. It will become an invaluable tool for our city’s progress and its future,” one reader wrote.

“This should be posted in every city,” another wrote.

“Thank you so much for getting this out into the city of Chattanooga. There were times while reading this that I was totally choked up with emotion! I actually spent a small fortune on the Sunday paper today just for this story so I could get it into as many hands of my friends and neighbors in East Chattanooga as possible,” said another.

McClane and South didn’t want the conversation to stop with the series. A week after *Speak No Evil* was published, they led a forum on race, reconciliation and truth telling in one of the neighborhoods most affected by violence.

More than 200 community members attended. Many spoke passionately, yelling and crying. Officials from the mayor's office, the district attorney's office, juvenile court and the police force attended to answer questions. So did former gang members and the relatives of people serving prison time for shootings. The paper also flew in an expert from High Point, N.C., to talk about how that community had improved relations with police.

Community members thanked the newspaper for beginning the public conversation. Since then, teachers have used the special section in their classrooms. Community members have scheduled three upcoming forums on the topics raised by *Speak No Evil*.

Please consider *Speak No Evil* for the Pulitzer Prize in local reporting.

Sincerely,

Alison Gerber
Editor