'Cowboy' and 'The Saint'

They forged a friendship in a crucible of chaos

By Elizabeth Slowik
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PRESS PHOTO/HOYT E. CARRIER II

William Pritchett, left, and Richard Donley, revisit Division north of Franklin, one of the areas they worked in the Summer of '67.

Richard Donley didn't know he had a nickname when he agreed to trade the West Side for the streets along South Division Avenue in the summer of '67.

One of 15 street-smart young adults hired to keep the heat down in Grand Rapids' inner city during a fiery summer, Donley carried a reputation as tough both on Union High School's football field and off.

The others hired for the Task Force as part of a federally funded United Community Services youth program, called him "The Saint."

All physically-imposing athletes, the young men were just out of high school and college. Donley was one of two whites.

William "Cowboy" Pritchett, who grew up in Chicago and Allegan, was assigned as his partner. Already a Ferris State College graduate, Pritchett was employed at Franklin-Hall Complex. "Cowboy" was the last in a series of nicknames and the only one that stuck, Pritchett says.

Over the summer, Cowboy and The Saint became like Siamese twins "joined at the waist," says Donley, now 39, of Walker, director of buildings and purchasing for Kent/Grand Rapids Community Action Program.

Against a background of American cities exploding into violence all summer, Task Force members headed for Grand Rapids' streets. They met people by playing and coaching basketball and baseball, talking troublemakers out of parks and settling disagreements with sheer size and willpower — no punches.

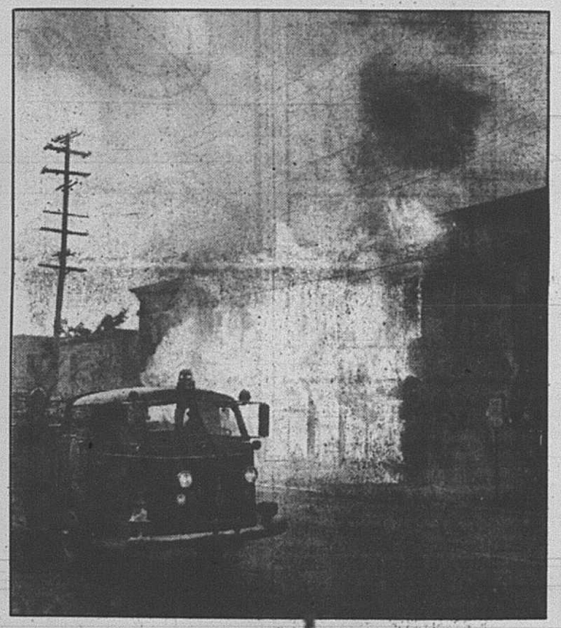
"It was a tough time, but him and I stoned out a relationship that still lasts, that time ain't gonna take away," Donley says of Pritchett. "It was an instant fraternity."

"We were like The Three Musketeers after a while: one for all and all for one," says Pritchett, now 47, of Southeast Grand Rapids. "And staying together over this long was a good thing about what happened with the Task Force. He turned out to be a real good friend."

Even though Cowboy and The Saint have not seen each other for a few years, they share an easy banter, finishing sentences for each other, teasing, laughing. The last time they met, Donley says, they had run into each other at a Grand Rapids City Commission hearing, and got to talking so intently that "we forgot what we were there for."

The first time they met, Pritchett and Donley had no idea how tough the summer would be.

"We were supposed to try to be the cooler heads that were to prevail in different situations," recalls Pritchett, who has worked for several Grand Rapids community organizations. He's been "self-employed" since last fall, when he lost a job as director of the South East Community Association after being arrested for illegally selling alcohol. He was acquitted in a February trial.



The number on the Task Force swelled to about 40 during the riot, but Pritchett and Donley were part of the original group.

They remember earning about $200 a week, with "unlimited hours," Donley says.

"We didn't have hours. We worked all the time," adds Pritchett.

"It was, 'We call you, you come. If you ain't here when we call, you're here late,'" adds Donley.

By mid-summer, Task Force's peaceful powers of persuasion were overpowered: On July 25, a riot in Grand Rapids began on the heels of unprecedented violence in Detroit just days before.

"We all knew something was going to happen," Donley says. "There were rumors of guys coming from Detroit ... and those kind of rumors, whether they're true or not, just accelerate

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Summer, 1967. The heat of racial tension was exploding in violence across the country.

Against that background, 15 athletes, just out of high school and college were recruited for Task Force in Grand Rapids, part of a federally-funded United Community Services youth program called Project Summer.

Their mission: Head off trouble here, but on July 25, three days of rioting began in Grand Rapids.

In this crucible of chaos, two Task Force members nicknamed Cowboy and The Saint crossed a chasm that seemed deepest that summer — one is black, the other white — and forged a friendship.

Earlier this month, at Flair's request, they got together to remember the part they played in writing the history of that searing summer of '67.

Help bring history alive

Flair is celebrating Michigan's 150th birthday with a monthly series that gives our readers a chance to make history. With your help, we're describing events of our past in the words of people who lived through them.

We're looking for ordinary people who, by going about their daily lives, had a hand in molding history. We would like to interview them for consideration in developing later stories.

If you or someone you know can help, let us know by writing: Birthday, in care of Flair, The Grand Rapids Press, 155 Michigan St. NW, Grand Rapids, Mich., 49503. DO NOT SEND US ORIGINAL MATERIAL. Simply sum up what you can contribute. Print your name and address and include a daytime phone number.

PRESS PHOTOS

July 1967 smoldered with tensions that finally burst into violence during three tumultuous days in Grand Rapids.

SUMMER

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ated that whole week."

Though the violence here was minimal compared to Detroit, it was no less serious to those involved.

For three days, an ill-equipped Grand Rapids Police Department tried to quell disturbances, but the frustrated officers had little control.

"I remember sending people out to buy motorcycle helmets. The department didn't have more than a half-dozen (helmets)," says Lt. Victor Gillis, GRPD spokesman. In '67, Gillis was a patrol officer.

"There was a prevailing feeling at the time: anywhere else, but not Grand Rapids."

The Grand Rapids Fire Department raced from arson to arson, weary and pelted by rocks. Gov. George Romney ordered a 9 p.m. curfew and curtailed sales of gasoline and alcohol. Jittery state troopers were pulled from duty in Detroit and sent into the Furniture City fray.

On the night Grand Rapids broke loose, Task Force had gathered at the home of one member.

"All week it'd been really tense. We were all together probably 80 hours that week, and it looked like things had cooled down," Donley remembers.

"It wasn't 9 o'clock, I don't think. We had all kind of just got there and just started to have a beer and lay back."

"Everybody was kicking back, the music was playing," says Pritchett. "Then it rings: 'Oh, no!' I think everybody, to a man, *knew* when the phone rang. It didn't let up after that."

"What happened was," says Donley, "they sent four or five squad cars in front of Hooker Paint (Hooker Glass and Paint Co., 742 S. Division Ave.) and the cops kinda joined their arms together and that was the end of it, man."

A crowd was milling outside, and when authorities appeared, so did the rocks.

"Another big confrontation was on Jefferson Street," Pritchett says. "The police were trying to come down Jefferson, going toward downtown. They could only get as far as Sycamore Street.

"It was like the movies when the cop cars were coming through and, *erhrhrh* (he imitates brakes squealing), because people were throwing bricks through the windshields."

"People were getting hurt all over," Donley says. "Cowboy saved me from getting hurt in front of Hooker Paint. Some guy pulled a knife on me. I'll never forget that night. People were ready to do damage. That's all there was to it.

"Thanks to Cowboy, it was one of those instances where we were a good team. I knew when to keep my mouth shut, he did the talking and that saved me, because it was going to be bloody.

"I remember driving in front of Franklin-Hall Complex and there was a rental truck in front of one of those stores they were looting, and these were grown men."

Pritchett agrees that "looting was the biggest attraction."

In the midst of the frenzy, people did strange things that Donley and Pritchett still remember, and now can laugh about.

"I saw one guy running down Division with a mannequin out of that clothes store," Donley says.

"I don't know what he was doing with this mannequin. He's running with this mannequin over his shoulder and the thing had but one arm on it. It had fallen off."

Pritchett, too, says he was amazed at the items stolen and carried for blocks.

"The feats of strength — I mean, a large stereo, just one person carrying it, going home with it, hustling trying to get it up a flight of stairs. Things that normally would take two people, or three.

"And that mannequin — some of the things people were taking didn't make a lot of sense.

"Everybody wanted to get involved, it looked like, to show that they weren't happy with what was going on, the way things were going," Pritchett says after the laughter dies down.

"We laugh, but these were tense times," Donley adds. "People got hurt. This was not a game."

Newspaper stories at the time recounted how some rioters joined arms and sang "Downtown," a popular song at the time, to taunt police.

"That's where the city drew some real stern battle lines," Pritchett continues. "'If they come across Wealthy and Division, that corner there, then there's going to be bloodshed. We're not letting them get downtown under no circumstances. If they want to tear up the blocks in between Hall Street and Wealthy . . .'

"And that was our message to the people we contacted, too: 'Hey, don't try it.'"

During the confrontation near Hooker Paint, Cowboy and The Saint realized that mere vandalism was turning into violence, and that Grand Rapids was going to join the list of riot-scarred cities. Donley describes it:

"I remember standing there, and watching these kids running down the street, and seeing windows being broken. I was just standing there, the whole world was going around me, and I looked over at Bill, and he looked at me, and we both just looked down the street.

"All summer we'd been talking about this possibility. There wasn't a word spoke. After that brief silence, there wasn't silence for four days."

"I think we knew it was going to go. It wasn't going to stop then," adds Pritchett.

"The other thing that sticks out in my mind is sitting in the Franklin-Hall Complex (the base office from which they worked) with bullets coming through the window, and laying there on the floor waiting for somebody to figure out . . . who they were shooting at and who was shooting at us," Donley says.

Pritchett recalls trying to stop looting at a grocery store.

"Some of them was listening (to Task Force members). And then the police arrived and people started scattering every which way," Pritchett says.

"I could hear people out in the parking lot, saying, 'They (police) are on Jefferson Street. I can see them coming up the street now. They're right by the barricade, they're putting up a barricade. They're trying to get around the building. They're in the parking lot. Don't come out the front door, they're in the front.'

"People were screaming and women started screaming and people were hiding meat. Police were grabbing them by the jackets, hair, anything they could, and trying to shake whatever they had out of their hands. People were going out doors that I didn't even know existed on that building, with shopping carts loaded up with meat."

By the third night, when the Michigan State Police arrived to aid the beleagured local police and sheriff's deputies, the riot had changed.

"You didn't see a lot of people out, but every once in a while you'd hear a bunch of guns shooting off," recalls Donley.

"It was still, like after a storm has ended," Pritchett adds. "Police were driving in the street with their headlights out. . ."

". . .guns sticking out the window," Donley says, finishing Pritchett's sentence.

Fear and misunderstanding seemed to prevail. A 9 p.m. curfew was ordered for predominately white East Grand Rapids, where two windows were broken. Blacks who had nothing to do with the rioting were afraid to travel through white areas to their jobs, Pritchett recalls.

"If you've already heard on the news that, 'if blacks are seen around here, we're going to shoot first and ask questions later,' how are people gonna get to work?" he asks.

Being a member of Task Force produced its own lessons.

"If we told you everything you heard us say now, that that was going to be what the job was, would you take it?" Pritchett asks.

"That's the only time that being 'bad' has been rewarded."

"Over the weeks I learned a lot," Donley says. "I had prejudices that were washed away from me, and they weren't washed away from me from any miracle. It was from from getting next to some people that I hadn't had an opportunity to get next to.

"I picked up more prejudice in my home area than I ever did here," he adds. "And after the riots, it was, 'Rich, you're a nigger-lover,' this kinda stuff.

"I generally had a way I reacted to that. It wasn't positive."