From Gangster to Guardian:
How a bullet led one man from the streets of NY to law school
By Jan Pudlow

It's hard to think of Azim Ramelize as paralyzed, the way he maneuvers up the courthouse steps on his crutches lickety-split.

And there's no stopping his passion to speak up for children, his voice rising to make a point as a member of the Bar's Commission on the Legal Needs of Children. He knows the whole court system, drawing on his experiences as an assistant state attorney, assistant public defender, and now as assistant general counsel at the Department of Juvenile Justice in Davie - oh, yes, and as a member of a gang playing out the high drama of gunfire and bloodshed on the streets of Brooklyn's Crown Heights.

The story behind his crutches is a wrenching, life-changing event that happened on his 17th birthday. Originally from Trinidad, he was a member of a gang called the Jolly Stompers, and they were as close as family. In a tough neighborhood where it was commonplace to get held up for grocery money or go to school with a coat and come home in shirt sleeves, the gang members learned young to arm themselves with guns, knives, or brass knuckles.

On this fateful night, Ramelize was defenseless when he was shot in the back, the bullet chipping a bone that splintered into his spinal cord, leaving him bleeding on a street grate in front of a store.

"I saw the life falling out of me," he said, describing how his whole young life flashed before him, swirling around like the lights in a patrol car siren, beginning with the image of him as a baby in a crib.

"And I said, 'Oh, God, I'm dead.' Then something inside of me said: 'You've got to fight.'"

And fight he did - during a whole year of recovery in the hospital, where gang members visited him every day. Another gunshot victim, an older man in the next bed, had such a bedsore he had to drive his wheelchair on his stomach.

Another patient named Pearl had both legs amputated and inspired him when she said: "You give out, but never give up."

Young Ramelize - known on the street at Bud - thought: "Here I am running the street and playing gangster and people are just suffering. I was throwing it away. When I get out of the hospital, I'm not looking back, and I'm going to do something with my life."

Borough Manhattan Community College, he said, was "the place I realized I had a brain." From there, he went to Cornell University, where a special American history professor, Nick Salvatore, had him write a paper every week just to catch up on his reading and writing skills.

More than once, Ramilize told Salvatore that in an odd way, getting shot was the positive turning point in his life. If he hadn't been shot, Ramelize still says matter-of-factly: "I would be dead or in prison." And many times, the student taught the teacher about finding the source of strength inside.

"Azim was one of the first non-playing blues musicians I ever met in my life," said Salvatore. "What he's able to do without being Pollyanna, he is able to find transcendence in the midst of the pain. He doesn't deny the pain. The crutches are real. It is not denial, but understanding, and insistence on going beyond. That's the essence of the blues."

Ramelize went beyond graduating from Cornell to getting his law degree from Loyola University in 1990.

"What drove him to the law was his own experience," Salvatore said. "He can be a very passionate advocate and also has a stern understanding that when you mess up, there are consequences. He doesn't fit into pigeonholes."

Society is too quick to label children, those who will succeed and those who won't, Ramelize said, shaking his head when he recalls the rehabilitation counselor who urged him to just settle for a trade, like learning to fix watches.

Whenever he has a chance, he tells kids, including his own 8-year-old son, Malik: "Never give up on your dream."

What he tells lawyers and judges and anyone else who will listen: "One place you can make a difference in people's lives is in juvenile court. Really, if you want to change a person, you have to start young."

Yet, he said sadly, "A lot of lawyers say, 'I don't want to practice in kiddy court. Don't waste my time.'"

In his office, filled with black history artwork and drawings given as gifts by clients, he keeps the words of federal Judge Learned Hand: "If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice."

"In juvenile court, there is a lot of rationing of justice going on," Ramelize said. "I see so many judges with 'robitis' - they put on a robe and that's it."

That reminds him of the words of social worker Alice Miller, who said, "The truth of our childhood is stored in our bodies. You can drug it, deny it, but some day the body will present its bill."

"That's the way we treat kids," Ramelize said. "If we store good things in their bodies - like education - good things will come out."

His boss, DJJ General Counsel Robert Sechen, said: "Azim has enough energy to light a small city. When he's focusing his energy, he's phenomenal. Azim brings a toughness and energy into play into everything he does. I think Azim would be a very rich plaintiff's or defense lawyer for tort cases, if he chose to, because he would stand in front of a jury and they would be totally attentive to him. But he chooses to work with us and kids, and that's a nice thing."

In his spare time, Ramelize is working on a book about his gang days. The first chapter will be about his nephew, shot 17 times - one bullet for every year of life cut short by violence.

"I tried to tell him, 'You're wasting your life.' He didn't listen. His pain brought back my pain," Ramelize said.

Researching his book has kept him in touch with some of the boys in the 'hood.

Cornel Reid, 43, was a member of the Jolly Stompers gang - known as "Sweet." Shot in the neck in 1988, he's a quadriplegic.

"I tell Azim all of the time: 'You are my role model.' I know Bud is out there trying hard, so I have to try hard. I don't want him to think I'm a punk."

He got his GED and certificate in computer training,

"Now, I'm working with kids. I do a lot of counseling and I have a basketball team here on Long Island," Reid said.

Another member of the Jolly Stompers who made it out alive is Richard Jones, an award-winning chief engineer at Grubb & Ellis in Sunrise, Florida.

"I'm surprised that Azim is a lawyer today not because I didn't think Azim had the potential," Jones said. "I'm surprised because in those days our life expectancy was 25."

After Ramelize was shot, Jones said, it triggered a lot of shootings in the neighborhood.

"There were many funerals after that. What wasn't witnessed as a funeral was substituted as a jail term. To this day, it surprises me that somehow he and I avoided that," Jones said.

"Every time I look at Bud - I still call him Bud - I know how serious it was. I have a few stitches on my arm. Bud says to me one day, 'You know, you are the dream of our entire gang. You're the lucky one.' I said, 'You're the one who's the state attorney. And you call me lucky?'

"And his next comment shut me up forever: 'Yeah, but I'm on crutches.'"

What Reid said he and Ramelize learned from the streets were tenacity and courage.

What Ramelize learned from his own mistakes was to summon that inner strength to make his mark - and it's a mark that speaks for justice and hope for every child.