

STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON



For the past three months I've been working on one of the best stories of my career. It appears in *Sports Illustrated* today and is called "Straight Outta Compton." It's about a boy, his parents, and their quest to make it out of one of the most gang-infested areas in America.

To report this story, I worked with an amazing team – Armen Keteyian, chief of the investigative unit at CBS Evening News; his fearless producer Josh Gaynor; Pulitzer Prize-winning, freelance photographer Deanne Fitzmaurice; and my exceptional editor B.J. Schecter. The result is a package of stories in the magazine, on the web, and on television.

Compton is the birthplace of the Bloods, the Crips and gangsta rap. I spent a lot of time there on this project. Along with Keteyian, I got a crash course on gangs and the streets they occupy, courtesy of Sgt. Brandon Dean, the head of the gang unit for the LA County Sheriff's Dept. Dean, 34, drove us all over town, showing us where gangs reside, how they mark territory, and the wreckage they leave behind.



But my reporting really took off the day I went to watch Compton High play cross-town rival Dominguez High in a Friday evening contest. With pad and pen in hand and nearly two hours to kill before kickoff, I went looking for people to interview. That's when I encountered Kitam Hamm, a 5'9", 170-pound running back and safety.

"Are you being recruited by colleges?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Which ones?"

"Harvard, Stanford, Columbia."

That got my attention. Ivy League schools don't recruit athletes unless they are serious students. Hamm told me his GPA was around 3.8.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked.

"A lawyer."

"Why?"

"I like defending people."

These were not typical answers. Neither was his tone. He was humble and polite, soft-spoken, yet serious.

"Why don't you gang bang?" I asked.

“My dad would kill me,” he said. “My dad said before he’d let a gang take me he’d take me out himself.”

Everyone I had talked to in Compton – police, coaches, players—said fatherlessness was rampant there. Gangs exploit this situation, morphing into families for boys lacking parental guidance.

“Will your dad be at the game tonight?”

“My dad is at *every* game.”

Once the game started, I went looking for Kitam Hamm’s father in the bleachers. I talked to dozens of people before I finally found him seated with his wife Donyetta. I told them how impressed I was by their son.

“My husband and I were told we would never be good parents,” Donyetta said.

“Why?” I asked.

They told me how they met. They were both 15. Kitam Sr. was running with a street gang and selling drugs to put money in his pocket. Donyetta got pregnant and had to drop out of her high school. At 16 she was on welfare and raising their first child. Not exactly an ideal start for a family.

Yet there they were, still together 24 years later, with two daughters in college, a third daughter living at home, and Kitam Jr. fielding scholarship inquiries from top schools around the country. “We don’t let Kitam go anywhere without permission,” Donyetta said. “He has a structured home. We eat meals together. Having a father in the home makes a big difference.”



When I discover stories like this, I can’t think about anything else. I left Compton that weekend determined to return. I wanted to essentially move into the Hamm home and see how they live. And I wanted to go to high school with Kitam and shadow his every move.

Fortunately, I have an editor with vision. He gave me the green light. The Hamms said yes. And I got permission from the Compton principle to essentially be a student for a day.

On Oct. 26 I arrived with my overnight bag at the Hamm's apartment in Compton. They live in a neighborhood where the rule of thumb is 'Don't go out after dark.' Since entering high school, Kitam Jr. has lost nine friends to gang violence, including several athletes. For these reasons, his parents don't let him go anywhere after football practice.

That night I ate dinner with the family, interviewed them extensively, and stayed up until midnight with Kitam while he did homework, listening to music, and texted back and forth with NFL wide receiver Greg Camarillo. Then I slept on a cot at the foot of his bed.

Just before sun up I woke to the sound of a car alarm in the alley beneath us and police sirens on an adjacent street. But Kitam didn't stir until 6:15 when his iPhone started vibrating.

Moments later he stood in front of his closet, carefully choosing what to wear. Most kids take for granted what to wear each day. Not Kitam. Not in Compton. The wrong colors can put a young man in peril. He chose a plaid shirt and jeans; then ironed them in the kitchen while a monitor mounted to the wall flashed images from security cameras all around the exterior of his apartment.



Kitam Hamm Sr. may be one of the best fathers I've ever come across. He drove us to school because it's not safe to stand at the bus stop in Kitam's neighborhood.

Over 2,300 students attend Compton High: 79% are Hispanic; 20% are African-American; the remainder is Polynesian. Going to school with Kitam was an experience I'll never forget. It was probably more educational – and certainly more interesting – than my entire four years in high school.

But the highlight of this project was getting to know an American family that inspired me. Kitam Hamm Sr. and his wife Donyetta have built a marriage based on love and raised four terrific children. And they've done it in an environment where all the odds are stacked against them. I consider myself blessed to have had the opportunity to bring their story to light.

