

# A Safer Chicago

*How Ron Safer and his team took down the Gangster Disciples*

**F**or law enforcement officials in Chicago in the 1990s, the first meeting with Assistant U.S. Attorney Ronald Safer was often a disappointment.

Detective Mary Hodge was the case agent in the task force designed to take down the Gangster Disciples, the largest narcotics gang in the country; but the case had languished for years and the task force was disintegrating. Then in late 1992 it was assigned to Safer, a former Schiff Hardin attorney who joined the U.S. attorney's office in 1989.

"I was explaining the case to him," Hodge remembers, "about what we had and what we hoped to do. And I just wasn't impressed." She searches for the right words. "Ron hardly ever raises his voice. He's always even-tempered." A word is suggested for her. "That's exactly it," she agrees. "I didn't think he was tough enough to do the job."

Gang and narcotics detectives were similarly underwhelmed when they joined the task force a year later. "You have to realize," counsels Commander Jim Darling, "that I have a 15-man team with some hard-working gang specialists that have been doing this a long time. And now we're associated with the U.S. attorney, who, from the beginning, we felt was just blowing smoke."

"*Open* disdain, I would say, for me," recalls Safer with a broad smile. "Nothing subtle about it. [Jim Darling and Pat Fleming, commanders of the gang and narcotics units] could not get far enough away from me in the room when we would have these meetings."

The Gangster Disciples, or GDs, was a Chicago-based gang whose reach extended into 28 states, with approximately 30,000 members and annual profits estimated at more than \$100 million. Its leader, Larry Hoover, was in prison from a 1973 murder conviction, but it was from prison that he built up and ran the gang. Unlike the Bloods and Crips in L.A., the GDs was a tightly run, monolithic organization. Below Hoover, there was a board of directors, and below the board there were governors, and below the governors, regents and chairs and enforcers, and then soldiers, the kids on the streets who sold drugs and were the targets of

drive-by shootings and police busts. The higher-ups didn't touch the drugs, and nobody in the organization talked about gang business. The gag order was known as "the duck," as in "Nothing will hurt the duck but its bill." Anyone who talked risked death. Worse, there was a growing veneer of respectability to the organization, as Hoover, with his phalanx of lawyers and accountants and bankers, branched off into legitimate areas of business: a clothing line (Ghetto Prisoner Clothing, Inc.), a music promotion company (Save the

Children Promotions, Inc.) and even a political action committee (21st Century V.O.T.E). When he came up for parole in August 1993, some of Chicago's most influential politicians, including former Mayor Eugene Sawyer, various aldermen and officials of Operation PUSH and the Chicago branch of the NAACP, were willing to advocate on his behalf.

And in this corner? A soft-spoken prosecutor whose virtues include politeness and patience.

Turns out the Gangster Disciples' very strength was its weakness, while Safer's seeming weakness was a strength.

"[Ron] is like a quiet storm," Mary Hodge fondly recalls today. "All I saw was quiet. I didn't see the storm."

**Growing up in the projects** of Queens in the 1960s and '70s, Ron Safer had always imagined himself a defense attorney like Perry Mason on television; then he clerked for a U.S. district judge in Washington, D.C.

"Judge Thomas ... Aquinas ... Flannery," Safer says, rolling each word around in his mouth with obvious pleasure. Safer is sitting behind his desk in his law office on the 75th floor of the Sears tower. Broad-shouldered without the suit jacket, he's dressed in a blue-and-white striped shirt and tie. He has a slight overbite and speaks with the slowness of someone who appreciates, even

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARRY MARCUS

## THE QUIET STORM

The soft-spoken Safer was underestimated at first, but it wasn't long before his tenacity earned him the nickname 'Mad Dog'



luxuriates in, the power of words. “Great guy,” he says of Flannery. “Nixon appointee gone wrong. They used to say about him that he would *praise* a defendant to jail.”

In November 1979, a caravan of nine cars, filled with neo-Nazis and Klansmen, stopped and opened fire at an anti-Klan rally in Greensboro, North Carolina; five died. Despite four cameras that videotaped the murders, no one was convicted by the state, and every federal judge in North Carolina recused himself for the civil rights jury trial. Judge Flannery got the assignment, and Ron Safer followed him south.

“And I thought, ‘Geez, if you could make a living prosecuting folks like this?’” Safer’s smile broadens. “You know, that’s God’s work.” And the Klansmen? “They were all acquitted, unfortunately.”

Safer was also drawn to prosecuting by the thought, ironically,

of not prosecuting. Something Judge Flannery told him wound up on a file card by Safer’s computer in the U.S. attorney’s office: “A conscientious prosecutor,” the card read, “can do more for an innocent defendant, or even a person who is technically guilty but who should not enter into the criminal justice system, than the best defense attorney in the world: He can *not prosecute*.”

Later, ensconced in private practice in Chicago, Safer petitioned for the pay cut of public service. It took two years to hear back from the U.S. attorney’s office and even then their answer was no. Safer persisted. “They decided to save themselves the pain of being badgered further and let me in,” Safer remembers.

In one of his first cases — gun trafficking — he ran into the kind of initial doubt from law enforcement that would surface on the Gangster Disciples task force. Mike Casali, a tough ATF special agent, was concerned not only that the jury wouldn’t be convinced

by the soft-spoken Safer, but that they wouldn't be able to bear him. But Safer was confident in his abilities and told Casali to wait and watch. Afterwards Casali bestowed upon Safer the semi-ironic nickname that stuck in the Chicago ATF offices: "Mad Dog."

His reputation grew. Tenacious but fair. Persuasive and inspirational. Respectful of others. Able to see the big picture. Quick to deflect credit. Although the practice of "prosecutor picking" is discouraged, some ATF agents would wait for days until they could get Ron Safer. He helped prosecute Richard Bailey in the sentencing hearing for the infamous Helen Brach murder. He grabbed an ignored civil rights case — a black kid beaten senseless with a baseball bat in Cicero — and pounded the pavement until he found a witness, a child, whose statements were the key to the case and upheld on appeal.

"Rarely have I met a man that young who understood the rules of the court as well as he does," U.S. District Judge Paul Plunkett says today. "There were many sidebar discussions we had on the rules of evidence where he and I were in a discussion and the defense lawyers couldn't keep up. Basically I had to argue the defense position."

When Matt Crowl joined the U.S. attorney's office, he was urged by a federal judge to seek out Safer, whom the judge considered one of the best; Crowl, now the first deputy chief of staff to Mayor Daley, claims to have stalked Safer in the hallways to work with him. He was impressed. Safer's cross-examinations were not all-out assaults but commando raids. "He gets in, he gets out," Crowl says. "In the end a light bulb goes on, and you can literally see a jury nodding. 'Oh! I see where he's going!'"

In general, law enforcement officials tend to think Safer's court personality differs from his everyday personality — he's tougher in court, they say — and they feel that this is the key to his success. Lawyers think he's the same man in and out of court, and that *this* is the key to his success. Both sides agree about his tenacity.

"I've never seen a person more determined to serve justice, no matter the circumstances, than Ron," ATF agent Dan Ivancich says.

"If you're standing between where he is and where he thinks justice is," Crowl warns, "you're in trouble."

Then the Gangster Disciples case landed in his lap.

**For 20 years, law enforcement** had busted the gang bangers selling drugs on the street corners, but for Safer this was the lesson of the file card; it was precisely who shouldn't be prosecuted. "Those kids are there *for* you to arrest," he observes. "There's an endless supply of them. They're the *victims* of the gang." No, everyone on the task force — which had dwindled to just two police officers, two DEA agents, a sheriff's deputy and group supervisor Rick Barrett — agreed: Larry Hoover ran the gang from prison. Get evidence against him. Use the organization's very structure to bring it down.

Prison life for Larry Hoover wasn't like prison life for most convicted murderers. He was incarcerated in a minimum-security facility, the Vienna Correctional Center, which looked more like a college campus than a prison. Within the Center, Hoover came and went as he pleased. The bars to his cell were shut only when he wanted privacy. He was on the phone eight to 12 hours a day. He was said to smoke marijuana with his girlfriends in the warden's office. How could he get away with all this? Because he ran the gang, and the gang ran the prison system. If he lifted a finger, there would be riots; if he lifted another, there would be peace.

He was also smart and disciplined. When the GDs task force

finally got the evidence to allow for the review of Hoover's recorded prison phone conversations, they heard him talking about politics, books, sex, the Bulls — everything except business. If someone brought up business he would interrupt with a curt, "Come see me." Later they would meet in a lunchroom and stroll as they talked. How to find out what they were talking about?

It was Rick Barrett who thought of introducing — and bugging — visitors' badges. By the time the GDs got used to the badges, Safer had cleared the wiretap with the Justice Department and taping began.

"All of a sudden we start getting conversations," Safer recalls. "And they're about what you think they're about." Drugs, violence, public corruption. After six weeks, and 55 hours of taping, the GDs discovered the wiretaps. By then DEA felt they had enough to indict, but Safer wanted to ensure that no one could fill Hoover's void. "We've got to show how this goes on in the streets," he insisted, and, for that, they needed the Chicago Police Department.

It was a fragile alliance. Safer had to school state officials about what evidence was needed to prove federal conspiracy charges: Not drugs or guns so much as phone numbers, photos, GD pins. Telling the cops how to do their jobs? A hard-headed approach might have backfired. But, as Mary Hodge says, "Ron possesses something a lot of attorneys wish they had: the

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**Safer shifted focus** from the drug dealers in the streets to the leaders who ran the gang from prison. "Those [street] kids are there *for* you to arrest. There's an endless supply of them. They're the *victims* of the gang."

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demeanor to make everybody comfortable when you're talking to them. He never talks down. He's a listener." At the same time he wasn't a pushover. He had his rules, his "non-negotiables," for the task force. One was treating everyone with respect. GDs were addressed not by gang names or first names, but with the honorific — never "Larry," always "Mr. Hoover." Another non-negotiable was sharing information. Regular meetings were scheduled, and Safer declared, "Go out and make all the arrests you want. Unless you tell it to me, in this room, it's not going in an indictment."

The police found they could call Safer at any hour. "Never a beef out of him," remembers Jim Darling. "And he would never say or do something, or make a *promise* of doing something, that he didn't back up. That's important to a copper." The task force was slowly becoming a team. When one of the street-corner drug dealers didn't cooperate, Safer prosecuted him, which sent a dual message. To the dealers: cooperate or risk long jail sentences. To the police: your hard work will pay off. Matt Crowl remembers everyone on the law enforcement side crowding into the courtroom. "To a person the police left that courtroom say-



ing, ‘This guy’s great’ ... They could tell they had a ringer for a trial lawyer.”

The case was not without its price. In the summer of ’95, a likeable informant, Charles “Jello” Banks, was killed on a drug corner by six gunshot wounds, four to the face. It devastated the team. Eventually Safer traveled to Alabama to turn a crucial witness to the murder; but 10 years later he still gets emotional talking about it; he still blames himself for not bringing Banks in sooner.

**Ron Safer was raised by** an accountant father and a mother who made everyone feel welcome in their home. His upbringing was moderately religious. Bar mitzvahed, he disagreed with his rabbi over the concept of the Jews as a chosen people. In fact, the main lesson he took from his years of religious education was the parable of Hillel. “Hillel is studying the Talmud,” he explains, “and a cynic comes up behind him and says, ‘If you can teach me all the Talmud has in it while I stand on one leg I’ll become a devout Jew.’ And Hillel, without looking up, says, ‘Don’t do unto others what you don’t want done unto you. The rest is all elaboration. Go learn it.’”

When it’s suggested that, sure, what happened to Charles Banks was tragic, but he was a criminal after all, one can hear the parable of Hillel in Safer’s reply.

“He wasn’t a criminal. ... Charles Banks had few options in life. He had no parents that he knew. He had no formal education. He was not a particularly bright fellow. He had nobody to show him the right way. He grew up with this organization. And the first time somebody said to him — absolutely under threat of indictment — ‘This isn’t the only path, there’s another path,’ he took it. Now ... do I have a romanticized view of him? I don’t think so. He liked some folks in that organization, he hated others. He drank a lot. He was not the world’s straightest arrow as an inform-

ant. But, bottom line, he decided, for whatever reason, to make a difference in his community, knowing the risks. I think that’s entitled to a great deal of respect; I know it’s entitled to mine.”

Before the police fanned out across the city on August 31, 1995, to arrest the GDs, Safer held a final meeting with his task force. He wanted to tell them that once the indictments went down, a lot of people would claim credit for the project, but he felt that they were the ones who really deserved it. As he sat down, he noticed Commander Darling of the gang unit pulling up a chair next to him, and Commander Fleming of the narcotics unit, on the other side, doing the same. “That, to me, was success,” he says.

**The first four indictments** named 38 GDs plus a police officer. During the trials, Safer’s life was threatened, and chants of “Free Larry Hoover!” often resounded in the plaza of the federal courthouse, while the hallways were lined with gang-bangers trying to intimidate witnesses. Hoover saw himself as a political prisoner in the mold of Malcolm X. He said the GDs were a positive force in the community. Safer never denied the good works the GDs did; he just reminded everyone how it was funded — with drugs — and how this warped the future of the children in the community.

A crucial defense witness, a dignified South Side minister, testified how, when his storefront windows were smashed one night, and when the police could do nothing, he told the GDs, who tracked down the culprit. A more combative prosecutor might have attacked the minister’s story; Safer simply aided it along. He got the minister to talk about how the GDs found the culprit within an hour, how they brought him to the church on his knees and made him apologize. The testimony turned chilling. No matter that the GDs sometimes used their power for good, it was still power — illicitly bought and violently enforced. The defense witness had suddenly become a government witness.

In March 1996 the first group of eight were convicted. In May 1997 Hoover was sentenced to six life terms at a federal super-maximum-security prison in Florence, Colorado. In July 1998, Darryl Johnson, the GDs’ leader who ordered Charles Banks’ murder, got the death penalty. All the GDs began talking. The duck had shrunk and become mostly bill.

A year later, Safer, who had become chief of the criminal division, returned to private practice at Schiff Hardin, where he heads up the white-collar criminal defense group. Recently he became managing partner of the firm.

“Bottom line?” Safer says. “I had the incredible good fortune of working with a very talented group of people in every case.” On the GDs case he mentions Matt Crowl; he talks up Mary Hodge and her contagious devotion, the creative genius of Rick Barrett, the huge contributions by the outspoken Jim Darling and Pat Fleming. “*Super Lawyers* or no *Super Lawyers*, anyone who portrays anything that I did as *me* doing it is portraying a falsehood. I was, in some cases, the quarterback, in some cases the lineman on some very good teams. But never more than that.”

Four months after the Hoover conviction Ron Safer received a phone call from a woman who put all their hard work into perspective. She tried to thank him. When he told her he’d pass her message along to the team, but, really, they were just doing their jobs, she responded, “You don’t understand. My children played out on the streets this summer for the first time in their lives. For the first time in their lives, there weren’t gang bangers on each corner selling the bag. I wasn’t afraid of them getting caught in a drive-by. All of my neighbors were outside. We got to know each other. The kids played together. You took the gang off the street. We have it now. And we’re not giving it back.” ❖