Praise for the First Edition:

"The Ville is an ambitious, densely packed, atmospheric book... [It] brings to life the smells, the feelings, the language of Brownsville–East New York and the people who form its world." —The New York Times Book Review

"At considerable risk [Donaldson] has given our wounded society a book that is smart, noble and potentially restorative. Read it. We need to."

—The Los Angeles Times Book Review

"Greg Donaldson depicts his subjects with the immediacy and insight of great fiction, so richly and with such compassion that you come to care deeply about them... This is a powerful book, honestly reported."

—Washington Post Book World

"Full of charged moments... [The Ville] vivifies the humanity of ghetto residents on both sides of the law, and stands as one of the most gripping inner-city chronicles of recent years."

—Kirkus Reviews

"Donaldson, a longtime teacher in Brooklyn’s inner-city schools, has composed a powerful, searing look at Gary Lemite, a brave and dedicated Housing Authority police officer who tries to stem the tide of crack and guns in the area, and Sharron Corley, a talented and handsome teenage, who is hoping to escape the neighborhood of which he is very much a product... Donaldson’s insightful analysis and deep human understanding make this a memorable book."

—Publishers Weekly

Associate Professor GREG DONALDSON is a writer, actor, and teacher. He has written for several newspapers, including the New York Times and Newsday. His articles on gangs, crime, police, and popular culture have appeared in many major magazines, including Rolling Stone, Esquire, Playboy, Men's Health, Sports Illustrated, and New York. His latest book is Zebratown: The True Story of a Black Ex-Con and a White Single Mother in Small Town America.

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THE VILLE
COPS AND KIDS IN URBAN AMERICA

UPDATED EDITION

GREG DONALDSON
For John and Constance Donaldson
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The re-publication of Greg Donaldson’s *The Ville* by Fordham University Press is a great event for anyone interested in New York City history or the politics of drug enforcement. *The Ville* is, without question, the best book ever written about inner-city New York during the years of the crack epidemic. *The Ville* presents this tragedy from so many vantage points—those of the dealers, the police and prosecutors, the teachers and school principals, the families trying to raise children amidst the carnage, and the young people who, despite living in a danger zone, try to stay clear of a drug business that promised unprecedented rewards and even graver risks.

I can think of no other book that penetrates an inner-city neighborhood in New York in this era with such insight, such eloquence, and such respect and compassion for different groups of people trying to make a life in a world of limited opportunity rent by deadly violence. To put *The Ville* in perspective, I have to turn to media other than books. The only places I can find youth narratives of equal eloquence from the crack years in New York are in the hip-hop storytelling of JZ, Nas, Biggie Smalls, and Wu Tang Clan. *The Ville* is the perfect companion volume to three of the greatest hip-hop albums of all time, set in the housing projects of Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island: Nas’s “Illmatic,” JZ’s “Reasonable Doubt,” and Wu Tang Clan’s “36 Chambers.” Donaldson captures the worldview of young people in a world shaped by crack almost as well as these amazing artists—while also providing an equally compelling portrait of their major adversary, the police.

And here, to put *The Ville* in perspective, you have to turn to what many think is the greatest TV series ever made, “The Wire.” *The Ville* is “The Wire” in print form, ten years earlier, set in Brownsville, Brook-
lyn, rather than Baltimore, Maryland. Donaldson brings to life what it means to be a police officer in the drug war without either demonizing or romanticizing the police. You see the heroism, the cynicism, the racism, the careerism, the price officers pay in health and family life for being in such a high-risk profession. Humanizing both the police and the sellers at the peak of the drug war is extremely challenging, but Donaldson manages to do it. This makes *The Ville* a unique contribution to urban ethnography and investigative journalism the way “The Wire” was groundbreaking television drama.

To understand what Greg Donaldson was able to do in *The Ville*, as well as the risks he took in writing it, you have to know something about the neighborhood he portrayed, as well as the period in which he did the bulk of his research. Brownsville, Brooklyn, was the most dangerous single neighborhood in New York City at a time—the late 1980s to the early 1990s—when the annual homicide rate in New York City approached 2,000. The streets Donaldson walked, the housing projects he visited regularly, even the high school (Thomas Jefferson) he spent time in were free-fire zones where bullets could begin flying at any time. I worked with community groups in East New York during those years and would not take my Fordham students with me because I could not expose them to the risks. One group I worked with, United Community Centers of New York, started a campaign called “Shield the Children” after a drug dealer in the Cypress Houses pulled a three-year-old out of a stroller to use as a human shield during a gun battle. The group was also up in arms about an incident in a library on New Lots Avenue in which the entire staff was taken hostage by armed intruders, and about five murders that took place in a single year inside Thomas Jefferson High School.

This was the challenge Greg Donaldson faced when he decided to spend two years in Brownsville accompanying police on buy-and-bust operations, visiting families in the local projects, working with the theater program and basketball team at Thomas Jefferson High School, and spending hours and hours talking to young people one-on-one in their apartments, in school, on the subway, and on project benches. And the way he won their confidence was by exposing himself to the same risks they faced every day and night. And because he was willing to face those risks, because he was literally willing to die to write this book, he won the respect of people who almost never trust outsiders.

“Willing to die” may seem to some who have never spent time in Brownsville or a community like it to be a tired cliché, but it was a
powerful existential reality for those living amidst crack and poverty’s overpowering influence. It is no accident that Biggie Smalls, one of the greatest hip-hop narrators of the crack years, entitled his best-known album “Ready to Die” or that the two great educators whom Donaldson portrays in his book, teacher and theater director Sharon King and principal Carol Beck, both indicate that they are willing to put their lives on the line to protect their students and command the respect necessary to do their jobs. In Brownsville, as Donaldson shows, risking one’s life was a daily occurrence, and no one working in that community, whether teacher, police officer, or, in Donaldson’s case, investigative journalist, is going to get the time of day from residents unless they show they are willing to do that.

Donaldson passed that test with everyone. And so he could present Brownsville from the inside in a wide variety of settings, from picnics and barbecues to plays and basketball games, to shootouts and beefs, to bitter conflicts in stationhouses between racist police officers and those who respected the neighborhood and its people. And also because he was able to help folks out. As a former college basketball player with a background in theater, Donaldson was a valuable resource for teachers, coaches, and young people and was involved with mentoring and opening up opportunities for the young people he was writing about. Given this, The Ville does not claim to be an objective work of social science. It is written from the perspective of a participant in the life of the community, motivated by a deep compassion for its residents and a profound understanding of how they were scarred by racism and poverty. Never does Donaldson let us forget that the Brownsville story is intimately connected to the history of racism and race-based economic inequality in the United States, and that the suffering of its residents, and the suffering its residents impose on one another, is something for which we all bear responsibility.

When you read this book, you will come away deeply saddened that life could be this grim and dangerous for so many people in the richest country in the world. But you will also come away with respect for the people who live amidst the violence, who take risks most people wouldn’t, and, when they rise above the pain, display incredible courage and resilience. And you will also come away with respect for the much-maligned civil servants who work in those communities, the police and the teachers, some of whom have given up, but others who go well beyond their official job descriptions to give Brownsville residents opportunities to live a decent life.
This beautifully written, courageous, insightful book is something that all who love New York and its people will cherish. I am so proud that the Press of the university where I teach is bringing it back into circulation for both a general audience and for college classes.

Mark D. Naison
PREFACE

This book about Brownsville and East New York, isolated and troubled neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, is an attempt to bring the people behind the cardboard images of cops and inner-city African American teenagers to life. It is an effort to fill a gap in understanding that troubles this country deeply.

There are people in Brownsville, thousands of them living in city housing projects, who overcome the conditions there and continue to prevail. The private and public struggles go on. The East Brooklyn Congregations has built large numbers of affordable private homes that are pockets of stability. It plans to erect thirty square blocks more of housing. Activists such as Reggie Bowman, who founded the Community Coalition to Save Brownsville, continue to fight a system that is content to allow levels of joblessness, despair, and violence to persist in Brownsville (and communities like it) that are destroying a generation of African Americans. Bowman has spent the better part of the past decade battling to make New York City deliver on its promise to construct East Kings High School on an empty lot on Bristol Avenue. Symbolically, the city recently broke ground for a $35 million high-tech juvenile detention facility on the site.

The story of the political struggle for the future of Brownsville and the many lost battles is one that should be heard. Instead, I have chosen to write of day-to-day life in Brownsville through the eyes of police officers and teenagers who live there now. On that excruciating line between officers of the law and young men of the streets I hope to catch the soul of a community.
To write *The Ville*, I spent more than two years in Brownsville and East New York. I accompanied the Housing police on every kind of call, from domestic disputes to shootings. Sometimes I followed officers and suspects from the initial radio call through pursuit, arrest, and court case. I visited Thomas Jefferson High School regularly, sat in the classrooms, and traveled with the basketball team. I walked the streets of Brownsville, was a guest in people’s homes, attended community and church events. Whenever and wherever I could, I followed the central characters, officer Gary Lemite and young Sharron Corley. The events in the book are real, based on my own observations or interviews. Nonetheless, I saw fit to change the names and identities of some of the characters portrayed and to disguise some locations. In some instances, I have shifted the time frame of an event to suit the narrative.

I chose to follow Gary Lemite, a Housing police officer, instead of a New York City policeman because of the close and constant contact Housing police have with the people in the public housing projects they patrol. The officers I depict in the book are the ones I met; it is incorrect to assume that they are representative of all police in inner-city neighborhoods. In fact, I observed distinct differences between the performance of Housing police and NYPD officers from precincts serving Brownsville and East New York.

Likewise, the young men I have focused on are not representative of all black teenagers, even those in Brownsville itself. There are a number of two-parent households in the neighborhood that manage through herculean effort to guide their children past the dangers and on to productive lives.

I could have concentrated on one of those priceless victories, but instead I chose to tell the story of a young man from Brownsville who lives on the edge between success and disaster. Sharron Corley, who is the centerpiece of this book, does not have an impenetrable parental buffer. He is young and intelligent, sensitive and ambitious, and he is a living record of the relentless economic and social forces in his community and his country. To the extent that his travails reinforce negative stereotypes of black teenagers, the book has failed. To the measure that the story humanizes the struggle of inner-city black teenagers to make sense of their lives, not only to survive but to make something special of themselves, it will have succeeded.