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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Author and Journalist Alex Kotlowitz on "Chicago Stories" Podcast

On this week's episode of "[Chicago Stories](#)" podcast, Mayor Emanuel was joined by author and journalist Alex Kotlowitz for a discussion about stories of love, redemption, hope and grace that grow out of the trauma of violence in his new book, *An American Summer*.

Kotlowitz burst into the public over 25 years ago with his seminal work *There Are No Children Here*. Now he's out with its bookend, *An American Summer*, a collection of 14 stories of individuals affected by the trauma of gun violence—from mothers and daughters, to fathers and sons, social workers and former gang leaders.

Yet, despite for all his years of coverage, Kotlowitz told Mayor Emanuel he doesn't consider himself a public policy expert, much less someone with solutions to the issue.

"I really think of myself as a storyteller," Kotlowitz said. "What I'm really interested in is the personal stories of people who are somehow struggling and somehow emerge from that standing upright—usually, hopefully."

A self-proclaimed "accidental" Chicagoan, Kotlowitz first moved to the city as a young journalist more than 30 years ago, expecting to stay only a year or two. Instead, he never left, building a body of work encompassing four books, a documentary film, numerous radio pieces and countless articles, all shaped by his own sense of right and wrong.

"The thing that drives me is just this notion that life ought to be fair," Kotlowitz said, "so I find myself writing about these moments and these places where life just doesn't seem particularly fair or just."

In the opening pages of *An American Summer*, Kotlowitz wrote he had been working his way to his new book for a long time—in many ways since first published *There Are No Children Here*.

"I wanted to write a book that felt as intimate as I could with the people whose lives are so directly impacted by this violence," Kotlowitz said.

The stories include men like Eddie Bocanegra, a former member of the Latin Kings who is currently a senior director at the Heartland Alliance. And women like Lisa Daniels, a Chicagoan whose son was killed in neighboring Park Forest in a drug deal gone bad.

Overcome by grief, Daniels rejected the public's notion that her son was only a criminal, while also finding that, in fact, the lines between her son and his killer were blurred. "She came to see . . . it could have just as easily been her son who shot this small time drug dealer, could just have easily been the other way," Kotlowitz said.

As Kotlowitz told Mayor Emanuel, Daniels ultimately found compassion for her son's killer, beginning a correspondence with him in prison, and recently has taken a job on the Illinois' state parole board.

"For her it wasn't really about forgiveness," Kotlowitz said. "It was about justice—about what felt just."

Be sure to listen to the entire episode as Mayor Emanuel and Kotlowitz discuss the causes and solutions for gun violence, the role of choice, the need for comprehensive national gun control, and much more.

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