

# 'IT WAS DIVINE DESIGN'

## Chicago grandfather tells why he's lead plaintiff in case that sets sights on city's handgun law

BY MARK KONKOL

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Otis McDonald doesn't care what you think.

You can accuse the black inner-city grandfather of betraying Chicago neighborhoods overrun by thugs with guns.

Go ahead, call him a pawn of wealthy, white gun-nuts suing to lift the city's handgun ban.

But the 76-year-old Morgan Park man who has become the face of one of the most important Second Amendment lawsuits in history wants you to know this: He is not a "showpiece" for the pro-gun lobby in the landmark case that could overturn Chicago's handgun ban. The case is set to come before the U.S. Supreme Court today.

"It doesn't matter what anyone's motives were for picking me for this," McDonald said. "I have my own motives, and they are so compelling and so heavy that to me this is worthy of my effort."

The liberal South Side Democrat said he put himself in the spotlight over the right to pack a pistol because he's living on a block where the bad guys with guns have him outnumbered and overpowered.

Drug-dealing neighborhood punks have broken into McDonald's house. They've wielded pistols steps from his front porch. They've threatened to "put him down."

McDonald is convinced that being allowed to carry a pistol would eliminate the advantage bad guys have had over him for too long. He won't change his mind.

"I am a man of my convictions," he said. "My mother was like that."

McDonald grew up near Fort Necessity, La., which wasn't much of a town — just "two stores and a cotton gin."

One of 12 children born to his sharecropper parents, McDonald would hike into the backwoods with his Marlin single-shot rifle to hunt.

"I wasn't nothing but 7. Out there by myself. I'd get me some rabbits, squirrels, 'coons, opossums," McDonald said.

When McDonald was 17, his mother emptied her savings from



"I am a man of my convictions," Otis McDonald, 76, explains at his Morgan Park home. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

the cookie jar — all \$18 — and paid a stranger to drive her boy to Chicago so he might make a better life for himself.

His first job was filleting fish at State Fishery on 35th and State. He worked other dead-end jobs before joining the Army, serving three years as an artillery officer.

When he returned to Chicago, McDonald still couldn't get a good job. He finally got steady work as a janitor at the University of Chicago in the early '60s.

He made waves on campus when he applied to be a building engineer apprentice at a time when blacks didn't get those kinds of opportunities. After "running into many brick walls," he got the apprenticeship, became a journeyman and got promoted to lead engineer. He had offers to make more money at other places, but stayed at the university determined to "change the status quo" there.

"There were a lot of [black] guys there who didn't have the guts I

have," McDonald said. "If I didn't stay, they might continue to work as a janitor and be afraid to bid on jobs that are available to them."

McDonald retired after 32 years. He helped many of his African-American colleagues get good-paying jobs along the way. He even learned something about himself.

"I was not going to back down from a situation because of fear," he said. "You see, I'm not built like that. I don't have that thing called fear, I don't guess."

The first time McDonald spotted a hoodlum trying to break into his garage, he grabbed his rifle, sneaked into the backyard and took aim.

"It was a kid, 12 or 14. I started to call the police, that was my intention. I talked to him, talked to him like a parent. I said, 'Look, this is not the way to go about it,'" McDonald said. "I told him I would do anything I could to help him, but if he ever tried to take something from me again ... it could be very dangerous. I never saw him again."

Over the years, local punks broke into McDonald's modest frame house three times. They got away with TVs, electronic equipment, hunting rifles and "anything they could sell for a quick buck."

McDonald said it's impossible for Mayor Daley or any other politician backing the gun ban to know what it's like to live unarmed on a block where bad guys are packing guns and willing to shoot.

"I wish I could get Mayor Daley to feel what I feel and see what I see," McDonald said. "Maybe he could come here and spend the night, especially during the summer, and listen to what I listen to out my window. If he could, and he was open to that, he would see what's really going on in his city ... and maybe he would understand where I'm coming from."

McDonald wants to be allowed to have a pistol in his house to protect his family if necessary. He lives with his wife, and his daughter and grandkids are regular guests.

"If this handgun ban was working, I would say, 'OK, no problem,' even though it's against my constitutional rights. But it's not working," McDonald said. "If law-abiding citizens could have handguns, a robber in the streets will have something to think about when he get ready to do one of these numbers on somebody. He don't know who might have one."

In 2008, McDonald spotted a local kid in the alley next to his house "leveling down" a pistol at a fleeing car that escaped around the corner before any shots were fired. One of the would-be shooter's pals spotted McDonald inside his enclosed front porch calling police. They got away before officers arrived.

A few days later, three guys blocked McDonald's car as he headed to Jewel.

"They did all this cussing ... saying, 'I'll put you down, you old gray-haired mothers-and-such; I'll put you down.' And they're grabbing at their side, running up to the truck door, and I'm sitting there defenseless," McDonald said. "That's the things that was on my mind when I made the decision to go with this lawsuit."

In 2005, McDonald became active in the pro-gun lobby when Illinois lawmakers were considering an assault-rifle ban. He worried that type of restriction might outlaw hunting rifles. He started attending gun rallies in Springfield and was "the only black guy" he saw. He met people who introduced him to Alan Gura, the lead attorney in the suit against Chicago, who at the time was searching for prospective plaintiffs. After a few conversations with Gura, McDonald agreed to be the lead plaintiff.

At first, McDonald wondered if he was selected because he was an elderly black man in the city. But he quickly got over that.

"I decided it didn't matter to me what anyone else's motives were," he said. "I needed something, and I was getting the opportunity to have my voice heard. I felt honored, and I felt the Lord put me here for this. It was divine design."

Comment at [suntimes.com](http://suntimes.com).

## Daley optimistic about Supreme Court ruling, knows stakes high

BY FRAN SPIELMAN

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Mayor Daley said Monday he's "very optimistic" the U.S. Supreme Court will uphold Chicago's strictest-in-the-nation handgun ban and refused to discuss a legal fallback.

"What's at stake for those of us on the front line ... is nothing less than the safety of our streets and

our families and all of our children," Daley told a news conference at police headquarters on the eve of oral arguments in the landmark case.

"How many more of our children, our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers must needlessly die because guns are too easily available in our society today?"

If the Chicago ban is struck down, it will endanger the lives of

police officers, Daley warned.

Police Supt. Jody Weis added, "Every time there's a domestic disturbance, we [will] have to assume there's a gun."

In a 2008 decision Daley called "frightening," the Supreme Court overturned Washington, D.C.'s handgun ban on grounds the Second Amendment establishes the right to own a handgun for self-defense.

At issue now is whether the Second Amendment applies to states as well as the federal government.

Even after overturning the D.C. ban, the Supreme Court specifically said governments can continue to ban people from carrying weapons around schools, public buildings and other situations that might endanger the public. Comment at [suntimes.com](http://suntimes.com).

## SURVEY: 1 IN 3 TEENS COULD GET A GUN

One in three teens say they could get a handgun if they really wanted to, a new national survey released in Chicago indicated Monday.

Among the oldest males surveyed — 16- to 18-year-olds — nearly half said they could get a handgun if they really wanted one, the survey by the Uhlich Children's Advantage Network said.