

Instability marked the life of mom who gave away baby - Shaniqua Betty often a victim

Detroit News, The (MI) - Monday, October 1, 2001

Author: The Detroit News ; Shawn D. Lewis

DETROIT -- The homeless man hung out at a deserted bus stop at East State Fair and Woodward that hot night, simply seeking shelter.

It was nearly 1 a.m. Aug. 3 when the barefoot, distraught young mother approached, clutching her infant wrapped in a towel.

Shaniqua Betty, 20, described as "slow" by her father, thought **Harold Reed**, 48, a convicted child molester, was a desperately needed beacon in the night. She confided in **Reed**, describing an explosive argument over the baby's medication that caused her to flee from the child's father, Ivan Brown Jr., 37.

Reed consoled her. She began to trust him. Hold my baby, she said, as she handed Isiah Lewis to him. She was frantic to return to Brown's house for her purse and shoes, but didn't want to take her son.

Betty would never see her 3-month-old son alive again. That split-second decision began a nightmare that baffled Metro Detroiters. One question has yet to be answered: Why would a mother hand over her baby to a stranger in the middle of the night?

Today, Betty has a hearing at 36th District Court in Detroit on a charge of second-degree child abuse in the death of her son. **Reed** has been charged with first-degree murder in the boy's beating.

The answer to why Betty would leave her child with a stranger will not come from the hearing.

The answer may instead be found in a childhood marked by emotional problems, the drug-overdose death of her mother, her father's decision to leave the family and the instability she and her siblings then endured. Relatives and friends unfolded her story in exclusive interviews with The Detroit News.

Through the years, Betty had no family stability or role model for effective parenting.

As a youngster, she was whipped with a switch by her father. As a young woman, she was assaulted by her boyfriend, Ivan Brown Jr., who served 30 days in jail and is on probation for two years.

Broken family

One of the most devastating events happened when she was 2: Her father, Freeman Matthews, left Shekellea and their five children at the family's home in Pontiac.

That broke up a family that had been doing fairly well.

Matthews worked in landscaping and brick masonry, and Shekellea Betty worked in a downtown Pontiac restaurant. The family lived in a well-kept bungalow in a middle-class neighborhood, owned by Shekellea's grandfather, Charles Lewis.

"We weren't struggling. The kids had everything they wanted, and nobody was abusing them," Matthews said.

But fights between Matthews and Shekellea, who never married, became too much for him.

"I would leave after arguments, and I'd stay away for a couple of weeks, sometimes longer, and then return."

In the early 1980s, he left for good. "I just packed and walked out. ... I didn't say goodbye to anyone."

Matthews continued to have a presence in Shaniqua's life -- but the relationship was not always good. He acknowledged whipping his daughter with a switch at least twice.

"She cursed me and her great-grandfather out. She would curse anybody out," he said. "She had a bad temper."

The state investigated the whippings. A March 29, 1993, report by a social worker to Oakland Probate Court on one incident says: "Mr. Matthews admits the injury occurred while he and Shaniqua were fighting he stated that he would continue disciplining his child any way he chooses."

Matthews remains unrepentant. "Yes, I said it. We have a better relationship now that she's grown up, but back then it was rough."

Mother's death haunting

On Aug. 28, 1982, life became rougher for the family: Shekellea Betty died of an overdose at 30. Her death certificate lists "combined drug intoxication."

That death has haunted Shaniqua ever since, said her sister, Tanisha Betty, 30.

Shaniqua often asked her older sister about their mother.

"She wanted to know if she looked like our mother and asked other questions about her. But I can't remember anything about her other than how she looked. I don't even know where any photos are. But I do wonder how our lives would have turned out if she hadn't died when we were all so young," Tanisha said.

But Matthews believes Shekellea's abuse of painkillers might have limited the intelligence of her daughter Shaniqua. "Maybe that's why Shaniqua is slow. Shekellea was taking them throughout her pregnancy."

Guardianship terminated

After her mother's death, Shaniqua Betty and her siblings went to live in Pontiac with their great-grandfather, Charles Lewis, a General Motors worker.

Shaniqua was so fond of her great-grandfather that she gave her baby his surname.

"We called him 'Daddy' because that's who he was to us," her sister said. "We were no different from the kids of doctors and lawyers because he gave us everything we wanted."

But life with their great-grandfather ended in late 1993 when Lewis declared himself in Oakland Family Court unable to control the children, especially Shaniqua, and withdrew as their guardian.

Lewis "had to terminate guardianship due to his ill health and inability to control the incorrigible behavior," according to a Nov. 17, 1993, court document.

Shortly after leaving his home, Shaniqua went to live with an aunt in Pontiac. But that was short-lived, because, again, she was incorrigible, according to the aunt.

In March 1994, she was sent to an independent living arrangement through Spectrum Human Services, where she was kicked out of the program because of a fight with another resident.

In 1997, Shaniqua was sent to the Children's Village juvenile delinquent home in Oakland County because court documents say she "left without permission from her relative's care."

She was described by Juvenile Court Referee Joseph T. Racey Jr. in court documents as "having an attitude problem" and as "incorrigible." A 1993 evaluation measured her I.Q. as "intellectually deficient."

Counseling was recommended repeatedly during the seven years she was a ward of the court. She had been having "adjustment problems" in school, and was arrested for shoplifting in 1997.

"Shaniqua has not gotten into therapy at Catholic Social Services. We have been talking about this for over one-half year, and the court today finds that no reasonable efforts have been made," Racey, the court referee, wrote on Aug. 25, 1997. "Shaniqua needs counseling and there are serious issues that have not been addressed. ... She is an angry child. There are school problems." Racey added Shaniqua eventually was provided intermittent counseling, but conceded, it was not enough.

Some encouragement

Once Shaniqua Betty was no longer a ward of the court at age 19, a former teacher's assistant let her move into her house in Pontiac.

Shirley Michael, who used to tutor Shaniqua in reading at Mark Twain Elementary School in Pontiac, had concerns about the young woman who often acted childishly.

"She would ... bathe and curl up with a magazine and say: 'See, I'm all fresh and clean now. Don't I look like a baby doll?' She would prance about with her arms going up and down, and reminded me of a butterfly. She was adorable ... like the daughter I never had."

Michael encouraged her young charge to return to school for her General Education Development certificate degree, get a job and eventually move into her own apartment.

Shaniqua took some of Michaels' advice. She worked briefly at fast food restaurants and a dollar store.

Domestic violence

But then, in 2000, Shaniqua Betty met Ivan Brown Jr., the man who'd become the father of Isiah Lewis.

On Nov. 6, 2000, Pontiac police were called after Brown hit her.

Brown punched her in the nose with a closed fist after she hit him with a magazine, according to the police report. She fell to the ground, and Brown walked to his vehicle and left. Betty was taken to the hospital and released.

Brown did not respond to calls for comment about the incident.

The couple continued to see one another, however, right up to that fateful argument Aug. 3 that led Betty to storm out of Brown's house with her baby son and take him to the bus stop where she met **Reed** .

While Betty has spent much of her life as a victim, **Reed** has served time as a predator.

While living in McKees Rocks, Pa., in 1991, **Reed** grabbed a 10-year-old boy by his genitals and wouldn't let the boy leave until police arrested him. In 1995, Pittsburgh police wanted him on drug-dealing charges.

Reed spent a month in the Wayne County Jail, beginning in mid-June, for assaulting an ex-girlfriend.

Out of jail in July, **Reed** drifted to the city's northern edge by the Michigan State Fairgrounds for the fateful chance meeting Aug. 3 with the distraught Betty.

Family supports Shaniqua

Despite the charges Betty now faces after she gave her son to **Reed**, her family remains resolute that she should not spend one day in jail.

"I don't like what has happened to her at all," said Tanisha Betty, who added that Shaniqua, pregnant with another child, continues to baby-sit her children. "I love my sister to death, and prison is not the place for her. No one knows what they would do in that same situation.

"If I felt that if I took my baby back to that house, it would be in danger, I would probably have done the same thing."

Troubled life

* Shaniqua Betty: Born in Pontiac on Jan. 19, 1981.

* Family: She has two brothers and two sisters. Her parents never married.

* Setbacks: Her father abandoned the family when Shaniqua was 2, and her mother died from a drug overdose shortly afterward. She was shuttled among relatives, a delinquent home and an independent living situation.

* Behavior: Her I.Q. tested as "intellectually deficient" and a former teacher's aide, who took her into her home, said she often acted childishly.

Caption: Freeman Matthews, 50, rear, sits on the porch with his daughter, Tanisha Betty, 30, with her daughter, Taja'Nique Benton, 2, and his son, Fred Betty, 19. The family split up when Matthews' kids were younger. Shaniqua Betty visits with her father at his home in Pontiac in an old family photograph. "We have a better relationship now that she's grown up, but back then it was rough," Matthews says of Shaniqua's childhood. Isiah

Edition: One Dot

Section: Metro

Page: 01C

Index Terms: BABIES ; (TO ; AGE ; 2) ; DEATHS ; MURDER ; CHILD ; ABUSE ;
MISFORTUNE

Dateline: DETROIT

Record Number: det10601210

Copyright (c) The Detroit News. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett
Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.