

TASK FORCE SAYS IT CAUGHT KINGPIN - SPURRED BY GIRL'S DEATH, INVESTIGATORS CLAIM THEY BROKE DETROIT DRUG RING

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Tuesday, January 14, 2003

Author: BEN SCHMITT FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When Detroit's drug trade got so intense that an innocent girl was killed in a turf battle, law enforcement officials vowed to change their approach to catching and prosecuting drug dealers. Now, 10 months later, a joint **task force** has toppled a suspected drug dealing organization that controlled the market in a west-side corridor for 20 years, authorities **say** .

The so-called Johnson Family drug gang became the center of an intensive investigation after 3-year-old Destinee Thomas was **caught** in the crossfire of a drug war and killed as she played in her bedroom March 23.

The culmination of the investigation came Friday when William Johnson, 22, of Detroit was convicted of second-degree murder in connection with the shooting death of a 23-year-old man at a Hamtramck party last year.

Johnson is thought to be the head of the drug ring, which controlled the drug trade along Wabash between Interstate 75 and Grand River, Wayne County Prosecutor Michael Duggan said. Duggan announced that 10 people from the Johnson Family have been charged with various felonies and seven of those 10 have been convicted.

"Project Destinee shows the type of success you have when you work as a team," Detroit Police Inspector Richard McCarty said Monday. " **It** led to numerous arrests that finally led to chopping the head off an organization."

The **task force** is made up of Detroit Police officers, federal agents -- those with the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms -- the U.S. Attorney's Office and Wayne County prosecutors.

"We're not under the illusion that we are going to stop all drug dealing in the city in the near future," Duggan said. "We do think that we can dramatically cut the violence by targeting our resources to the drug dealers who are shooting people."

Two Detroit men, Cedric Pipes, 22, and Julian Key, 20, were charged with first-degree murder and convicted in Destinee's death. Both men were sentenced to life in prison last week.

Duggan said they were members of the Johnson Family and shot up Destinee's house on Woodrow after feuding over control of an area where drugs were being sold. A man was dealing drugs on the Johnson Family turf and got into an argument with Pipes and Key the day before the shooting, Duggan said. Key opened fire on Destinee's west-side home because the rival drug dealer was there, Duggan said.

In Project Destinee, officers hit the streets, went into the community and followed up on arrests. The goal was to target big-time drug dealers who used guns to operate, instead of concentrating on everyday street-level dealers.

During an April 9 raid on Wabash, eight illegal guns were recovered. During another raid June 6 on Poplar, five illegal guns were recovered, officials said.

Police **say** they learned of Key's and Pipes' connection to the Johnson Family shortly after Destinee's death. Johnson, meanwhile, was wanted for the March 3 slaying of Detroit's Carlos Davis, 23, in Hamtramck. Davis was killed during a fight at BHA Hall on Caniff in Hamtramck, in which two other people were shot and two were stabbed. The other victims survived.

Johnson eluded police for seven months until members of the **task force** arrested him Sept. 9 after a high-speed chase in Detroit. He is to be sentenced Feb. 4 and faces up to life in prison.

"The only reason he was **caught** is because the **task force** went after him," Duggan said of Johnson's arrest.

U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Collins said the level of cooperation between federal, state and local law enforcement agents is unprecedented.

"We will continue to work together to target violent crimes, to target violence and to target gangs," Collins said.

Still, Carl Taylor, a Michigan State University professor and Detroit native who has authored two books on gangs, said the community cannot rely solely on law enforcement to defuse the drug trade and stem the violence that comes with **it**.

"Law and order begins in the home, not with a criminal-justice system," said Taylor, who is also director of community and youth development programs at the Institute for Children, Youth and Families at MSU. "The underground economy has become, in many parts of the community, the aboveground economy. The community needs to step up and **say** : 'This is unacceptable.' "

Contact BEN SCHMITT at 313-222-6597 or schmitt@freepress.com.

EVENTS LEADING TO PROJECT DESTINEE

March 3: Three people are shot -- one fatally -- and two people stabbed in a fight at a party at BHA Hall on Caniff in Hamtramck.

March 11: A first-degree murder warrant is issued for William Johnson, 22, of Detroit in the shooting death of Carlos Davis, 23, of Detroit in connection with the Hamtramck death.

March 22: Cedric Pipes, 22, and Julian Key, 20, both of Detroit, get into an argument with a man they think is dealing drugs on their turf in front of a store on Wabash and Temple on Detroit's west side.

March 23: Pipes drives the car while Key sprays Destinee Thomas' home with bullets in an attempt to retaliate against the drug dealer, who is in Destinee's home on Woodrow. Destinee, 3, is killed in her bedroom.

March 29: Pipes and Key are charged with murder in Destinee's killing. Project Destinee is announced with the goal of rooting out the rival drug-dealing gangs surrounding her death. Investigators learn that Pipes and Key are members of the Johnson Family drug organization, believed to be headed by William Johnson.

April 9: First **task force** raid conducted at 4131 Wabash. Eight illegal guns are recovered. Over the next several months, approximately 12 raids in the surrounding area produced drugs, cash and 25 weapons.

Sept. 9: Detroit Police officers and federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents arrest William Johnson after a high-speed chase in Detroit. Johnson is charged with first-degree murder in a separate case.

Dec. 11: Pipes and Key are convicted in Wayne County Circuit Court of first-degree murder in connection with Destinee's death.

Jan. 10: William Johnson is convicted of second-degree murder and three counts of assault with intent to murder for the March 3 shooting in Hamtramck. A day earlier, Pipes and Key are sentenced to life in prison.

Source: Wayne County Prosecutor's Office
Caption: Photo

William Johnson is thought to be the head of a drug ring.

Destinee Thomas was shot while she played in her bedroom. (PHOTO RAN IN STATE EDITION, PAGE 1A.)

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: ARREST ; DRUG ; MULTIPLE ; CHILD ; HOMICIDE ; DESTINEE THOMAS ; EFFECT

Record Number: 0301140339

Copyright (c) 2003 Detroit Free Press