

LOVE AND DEATH AN ACT OF VIOLENCE IN A DETROIT PARK ENDS A SAD ODYSSEY

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Eleanor Mitchell rescued her daughter from dozens of dope houses and abandoned buildings in Detroit, often finding her sprawled in a filthy hallway, on the brink of death.

"It seemed like I always found her just in time to save her life, clean her wounds and dry her tears," she recalled.

And Deborah Haynes, a drug addict and prostitute, always found her way back to the streets.

Except for the last time.

On the chilly morning of Oct. 28 in Balduck Park on Detroit's east side, Haynes, 29, was stabbed and slashed to death. According to Detroit police, she had been picked up by four members of a gang known as the East Side Vandals who boasted afterward of being inspired by publicity about the 100-year anniversary of the Jack the Ripper killings in London.

Haynes died 654 miles from her mother, who lives in the Bronx, N.Y., at a time when the two women had never been emotionally closer. They were drawn together by the disease AIDS, which both had, and by their shared determination to live in spite of it.

"I kept telling her we could beat anything together -- even our AIDS," said Mitchell, 46. "Finally I got her to believe that."

Haynes, reed-thin, scarred by needles and missing one finger after years of injecting drugs there, did not die easily.

According to the Wayne County Medical Examiner's office, she was stabbed six times and suffered eight additional slash wounds to her arms and legs, indicating a fierce struggle.

Left naked near the park's graffiti-covered bathrooms, Haynes tried to hang onto a quilted black coat her mother had given her for the winter, police said. But the killers ripped it away and shredded it, along with the rest of her clothes.

"That was just like her. Debbie had been a fighter ever since she was a little girl," said Mitchell. "That was why I always clung to the belief that no matter how bad things got, she would make it off the streets. She never gave up or stopped hoping for a better life."

Haynes was drug-free when she died, the medical examiner's report showed. Mitchell said that three days before her death, Haynes told her by telephone that she had been free of heroin since February, when she learned she had AIDS, and was weaning herself from methadone.

Haynes told her mother she wanted to come home.

Now she is home for good, buried in New York City. And Eleanor Mitchell wants to do one more thing for her only daughter.

She raised enough money to come to Detroit for the final pretrial hearing of the men charged with murder in Haynes' death. It is scheduled for Friday. Mitchell intends to return for their trial.

"It's my final responsibility to Debbie to see that they go to jail for doing this to her," she said, crying on a recent Sunday afternoon at her daughter's grave in Queens. "She was not just a drug addict or a prostitute. She was my daughter and nobody could know how much we needed each other.

"If they don't go to jail, at least I can take some comfort in thinking that maybe they've written their own death sentence and they'll all die from AIDS," she said.

"We had our first heart-to-heart talk ever when she discovered she had AIDS. She knew what I had gone through with AIDS and it scared her; it made her angry," said Mitchell.

Haynes probably got the lethal disease from shooting dope and sharing needles, according to a blood analysis from a New York drug clinic. Mitchell got the AIDS virus from a Detroit man with whom she had a three-month relationship, she said.

Mitchell belongs to an AIDS support group at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital and hoped Haynes would join her in the treatment program there.

"I always thought that AIDS was the worst thing that could ever happen to anybody," Mitchell said. "But Debbie and I were drawn together by this. And together was how we were going to beat the disease. I told her we probably had 50 years left together."

When she learned of her own AIDS, while she was living in Detroit in September 1986, Deborah "saw me go from on top of the world to poor and homeless," Mitchell said. "She saw everybody walk away from me, fear me. But she was always there, cooking for me or cleaning the house or doing whatever she could.

"She loved me and accepted AIDS in me," Mitchell said. "It was up to me to help her accept it, understand it and battle it in herself. That's where we left off."

Sometimes, Mitchell said, she wonders if people are right when they tell her to be glad Haynes won't have to live through the torment of AIDS. "But all I feel is the complete loss of hope," Mitchell said. "When she was alive there was always a chance, always a dream of happiness together."

Mitchell's grief over Haynes' murder is compounded because so few people valued her daughter, said Dawn Cavrell, a social worker at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital.

"This deepens her social isolation," said Cavrell, who is Mitchell's counselor. "Because Debbie was a drug addict and because she was a prostitute, there is a stigma added to this grief. That halts the whole healing process; nobody acknowledges this mother's pain."

Mitchell said she's seeking help through Parents of Murdered Children, a national organization that offers legal advice, counseling and other resources.

"If people aren't turning away from me because of the AIDS, they're turning away from me because of Debbie," Mitchell said. "They tell me to get over it. I should have expected Debbie to get killed like this, living the kind of life she was.

"But I didn't."

Mitchell and Haynes lived separately in Detroit for four years before Mitchell discovered she was carrying the AIDS virus. Mitchell was an executive secretary at a top Detroit accounting firm when the American Red Cross notified her that blood she had given during a blood drive tested positive for AIDS and had been rejected by the Red Cross. She asked that the firm's name be withheld because she is still negotiating disability benefits.

"At first, Detroit held so much promise for us," said Mitchell, who moved to the city in 1981, a year before her daughter arrived. "Then came the despair."

Within a year after learning of her AIDS, Mitchell said, she lost her job, her husband and her home. She went back to New York in September 1987 to live with her sister.

"I was trying every step of the way to get Debbie to come with me, because practically everybody else treated me like a leper," Mitchell said. "I couldn't bear not hearing from her or not seeing her."

Haynes, meanwhile, had been living with a 37-year-old man who also used drugs. She had worked as a prostitute to support their habits and the two talked of marriage, Mitchell said.

"It became a tug of war between us," Mitchell said. "He told her he loved her despite her AIDS and despite her scarred body. But in the end, she was coming home."

Mitchell described her daughter as a slow, clumsy child who couldn't live up to her own simple dreams of being a beautician and mother, and who was tormented by an abusive, alcoholic stepfather when the family lived together in a fashionable Queens neighborhood.

"Well, I know I gave up on her early," said the stepfather, 58, who described himself as a recovering alcoholic and born-again Christian.

He acknowledged being a tough disciplinarian with Mitchell's children.

"There were rules they had to live by in this house and they knew what was right and wrong by me," he said. "I don't know what happened to Debbie. I just know that you can live in the same house with a child and not have a clue as to what's going on with them."

He couldn't recall beating his family, he said. But he added, "There are a lot of things I don't remember about those years."

Mitchell couldn't forget. She is certain that much of her daughter's tragic odyssey from drug dens in Detroit to drug clinics in New York and back to the streets of Detroit was intended "to kill the pain" of her childhood.

"He beat us at breakfast, lunch and dinner. And when he came home real late at night after drinking, we'd hide in the closet until we heard him snore. Then we knew it was safe to come out," said Mitchell, who pointed out the closet in the man's presence during a visit. "By the time I had the guts to leave, my children were already brain-damaged by fear."

Mitchell recalled Haynes telling her: "Ma, you just don't understand. I like using drugs, so stop trying to get me quit."

" 'I just want to kill the pain,' she would say. I wouldn't accept that," Mitchell said.

Part of her determination to help Deborah salvage a life was a result of her own guilt for staying with Deborah's stepfather for 19 years, Mitchell acknowledges. She left him in 1980. By then, she said, Haynes had run away from home and become addicted to cocaine and heroin.

She also accomplished one of her dreams -- having a daughter, Tiffany, who was addicted to cocaine at birth.

"She had always wanted to be a mommy and was so happy to have a little girl. But she knew she couldn't be a mother until she got off drugs," Mitchell said.

When Tiffany was 18 months old, Haynes finally gave up on the dream, surrendering Tiffany to Mitchell's mother after enrolling in a New York drug rehabilitation clinic.

Tiffany, now 11, a quiet child with large, soft brown eyes and long, dark hair like her mother's, still lives with her 74-year-old great-grandmother and attends a Catholic school in the Bronx, where she is a straight-A student.

Haynes left the New York drug program in 1982 and joined her mother in Detroit, a city that then seemed small, safe and friendly to Mitchell, a Puerto Rican who grew up in Spanish Harlem.

But before long, Haynes discovered Detroit's drug world and plunged in. Detroit's promise turned to pain.

"Fifty times I went after Debbie, gave her money, gave her clothes, cleaned her up," Mitchell said. "People would tell me I was a fool because she'd just turn around and use all the money for drugs. But you know, I felt better just knowing that that meant one less night she'd have to work the streets."

Haynes' death came just when she had decided that she did not want to die on the mean, lonely streets of Detroit, Mitchell said.

"Now I don't have to search among the drug addicts in the alleys for Debbie anymore," Mitchell said.

"But finding her in the cemetery is not the same as holding her in my arms and telling her, 'We'll be OK as long as we have each other.' "

Suspects in addict's slaying linked to east side gang

They set out that Friday night to the hard rock sounds of Luke Skywalker, drinking Budweiser and "looking for some people to laugh at."

The four young men, loosely associated with a gang known as the East Side Vandals, found Deborah Haynes.

"We got to Seven Mile and Van Dyke and were riding around looking for some people to laugh at -- fat people, punk rockers or weird persons -- when we saw this black female prostitute," said Mathew Copeland, 19, of Detroit, in a statement to police.

"I stabbed her in her body, I'm not sure where," said Copeland. "All I could do then was feel confused and happy."

A 10th-grade dropout who has spent most of his teenage years in youth homes for juvenile offenders, Copeland said to police he was high on mescaline at the time of the Oct. 28 killing and imagined that Haynes was somebody else he wanted dead.

He has been deemed mentally incompetent, for now, to stand trial.

His companions that night -- **Mark Barrera**, 20; Fred Johnson, 21, and Patrick Musall, 17 -- await trial on charges of first-degree murder.

Before the Haynes slaying, the Vandals were known for petty theft and property damage, mainly painting swastikas and racial slurs alongside their logo on vacant buildings, garages, trash cans and billboards, police say.

Area residents, who identified Copeland as a leader of the Vandals, said they were well known for disrupting the generally quiet, middle-class neighborhoods of the east side by hurling racist comments at passersby or brandishing knives and wooden planks at people.

"I'd say they're skinheads," said Mike, 17, of East Detroit, who grew up with Copeland. He asked that his last name not be used because he feared retaliation from the gang.

"They dress the part, act the part and just do bad things. They hate blacks," Mike said.

Skinheads generally are young white men who consider themselves rebels, wear military clothes and British-made work boots, shave their heads and espouse a violent, racist creed.

Skinheads were not involved in violence in the city before Haynes' killing, Detroit police say. All four of the men arrested deny being skinheads.

Daniel Less, the assistant Wayne County prosecutor on the case, said he believes the accused are skinheads, but will not pursue the case on that basis.

"This is a first-degree murder and that's how I'm pursuing it," he said. "For whatever reason, they planned to kill her."

How to find help

Relatives and friends of homicide victims can find support, referrals and advice through the local chapter of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC) or Detroit-based Save Our Sons and Daughters (SOSAD). Contact Patricia Rourke at POMC at 241-0142, 9-6 Wed. and Fri.; 9-9 Mon., Tues. and Thurs., or call SOSAD's hot line at 345-2700 anytime.

CUTLINES

Deborah Haynes with daughter Tiffany in 1980.

Eleanor Mitchell at the grave of Deborah Haynes, her daughter, in New York.

Eleanor Mitchell with granddaughter Tiffany. Tiffany lives with her 74-year-old great-grandmother and attends a Catholic school in New York, where she is a straight-A student.

Balduck Park, where Deborah Haynes was killed.

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