

# **SHATTERED CHILDHOODS - IN A HOME FORGED AS A HAVEN FROM VIOLENCE, GUNSHOTS POISON AN ORDINARY DAY TODAY, THE BRUTALITY IS GETTING WORSE. THIS FREE PRESS SERIES LOOKS AT WHAT THAT MEANS TO FAMILY, POLICE, BYSTANDERS AND THE CITY ITSELF**

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Saturday, December 4, 2004  
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## **WHY THIS SERIES? WHY NOW?**

Through November, there were 1,279 people shot in Detroit - 247 more than in all of 2003 - and 341 people have been killed.

Why is this city killing itself? What has it done to the community's soul? That's what the Free Press wants to show you, in this special series starting today. After you meet the victims, after you travel with the detectives and see their frustrations and successes, after you walk through the neighborhoods and feel the tension and fear, you will find some surprises.

## **HOMICIDE NUMBER 192**

Victim: James Ford

Black male, 28

Date: June 16

Location: 7-04 Lakewood

Outside the house, in the darkness, on a street wet from a light rain, a man pulls out a gun. It is loaded and ready to fire. Somebody is going to die.

Inside the house, in the front room, the children sit shoulder to shoulder on a thick, comfortable purple and black couch pushed against the window. Eight adorable children, lined up by their mothers, the crowns of their heads visible from the street. Little targets in a game of chance against the devil.

They've been running around all day. It's time to sit down and chill. In a few minutes, they will go to a slumber party -- but only if they calm down first. Emyshia Trapp, the oldest, an 8-year-old who loves Barbie dolls and macaroni and cheese, is the leader. She gets everybody to be quiet. She dangles her black and white flip-flops off the couch.

The children live together in this cozy place, where four single moms have made a sanctuary on the east side of Detroit. The mothers have been touched by violence in profound ways -- losing loved ones to murder -- so they don't allow guns in the house, not unless it's one that squirts a stream of water. They keep an open Bible next to the window, overlooking the street, and each morning, they pray for God to cover the house with Jesus' blood for protection.

Some of the mothers are upstairs. Others are playing cards in the dining room.

Outside, in the darkness, a gun goes off. And then another gun. And then a third gun.

Too many shots to count.

It's raining hell on the east side of Detroit.

To 7-year-old Chalkney Travier, who likes pizza and "The PowerPuff Girls," it sounds like a cartoon as something shoots past her ear, tickling the air: Ssshew. Ssshew. Ssshew.

A bullet shatters the front window, above the couch, missing the children by inches, and lodges in a wall, leaving a jagged hole.

Another bullet goes through the same window -- just above their heads again -- passing through two rooms, traveling the length of the house, searching for someone to kill. It ricochets off the wall at the top of the staircase, losing strength but heading back toward the children, arcing toward the couch, fighting against gravity until it falls to the ground, tumbling across the hardwood floor.

A third bullet goes into the window and more shards of glass fly through the air, sprinkling a coffee table with sharp, sparkling gems.

Emyshia tells the other children to "get down, get down." They follow her, crawling on their bellies across the carpet, using their elbows, Army-style. Twelve feet to the dining room. Past the cabinet with DVDs.

Emyshia leads the children out of the front room, and they follow her like soldiers. They turn left into the kitchen, with its orange countertops and blue walls. They go past the overflowing garbage can -- it's trash day in the morning.

These are the children of violence.

When one of the girls was an infant, her father was murdered, left in a car and set on fire. The case was never solved. The man she calls her father is really her uncle. Her mother doesn't know when she will tell her the truth.

Somebody grabs Emyshia's foot and her black and white flip-flop comes off. Only then does she start to scream. Michelle Travier, 25, one of the mothers playing cards in the dining room, cuts off the lights. She's terrified, trying to figure out if they are targets of a madman or collateral damage in a street war. What if somebody has run into the house, trying to kill them? Upstairs, in a bedroom, Monica Travier, 23, is watching television when she hears the shots. It sounds like a line of firecrackers. She waits a moment and then rushes down the stairs, past the hole in the wall at the top of the staircase, crossing the exact path the bullet took. She goes to the kitchen, where she finds the children.

"Momma, are you OK?" they say, grabbing her tight.

She pushes them away and looks up and down their bodies. "I want to make sure you are OK," she says.

Monica Travier hates guns. When she was 14, she went to a friend's house to see her boyfriend. But there was only one person there: a 19-year-old man she didn't really know. He pulled out a shotgun and pointed it at her, forcing her to strip. She remembers crying as she took off her jeans and removed her T-shirt. To this day, she believes she was saved from being raped -- or killed -- when somebody knocked on the door and she was able to get away. She never told the police -- the truth is, she told her mother about the incident only a few years ago -- and she never saw the man again.

"I tell the kids that I'm terrified of guns," she says. And she leaves it at that.

In another bedroom upstairs, Toqunie Branch, 18, is watching the movie "Enough," starring Jennifer Lopez. When she hears the night explode, her sister, Christina Smith, 26, pulls her to the ground. "Get on the floor, get on the floor," Christina says.

"What's going on?" Toqunie asks.

"Don't you hear them shootin'?" Christina asks.

Toqunie, wearing blue jean shorts and a tan shirt, pats her arm and legs to make sure she isn't hit.

They wait a few minutes and then rush down the stairs. They find the children in the kitchen, crying. Three years ago, Toqunie's boyfriend was murdered. A couple of months later, her best friend was killed in a drive-by shooting.

"I didn't think I was dead because I was still moving," she would say later.

The women and children hurry down 12 creaky wooden steps to the basement.

The children are crying. Emyshia is upset about her sandal.

At the bottom of the stairs, on the cement floor, are four plastic bags filled with unpacked clothes. The four mothers moved in together about 1 1/2 months earlier. The kids love playing together in this giant, seven-bedroom house, and the mothers take turns doing chores and cooking meals. The house is nothing fancy. One of the bedrooms doesn't have a door, so they hang a sheet over the door frame, but there is a wonderful vibe in this place. The women agree on how they want to raise the children, stressing education, faith and trying to keep them from violence. The kids don't usually play down in the basement. It's too dark and spooky. After about three minutes, they hear police sirens and decide it's safe to go upstairs.

The children are whisked away to the slumber party. Before going to bed, Chalkney prays for safety: "God, please help my momma and me and my sister. Amen."

Then she falls asleep.

At the sleepover, Emyshia has to use the bathroom so bad it hurts, but she is afraid to move, afraid of walking past any windows and being shot, and she can think of only one option to stay alive: She wets herself, sitting on the floor, crying and ashamed.

The phone rings in the homicide unit at police headquarters.

Another shooting on the east side of Detroit.

The victim is in critical condition, so it will be handled as a homicide.

A detective takes the basic information and copies it into a book that stays on the desk in main office. In some ways, the entire homicide unit revolves around this book. It has a blue denim cover and a metal binding and a title written in black ink: 2004 Complaint Book.

Every time someone is shot in Detroit or dies under suspicious circumstances, the information is recorded in these pages. The book is a calendar of crime, a log of death and mayhem, reducing every shooting, every homicide, to the most basic elements of lost life: name, age, address, race, type of assault.

Almost all of the victims are black. Almost all are male. And almost all have been shot. What the book doesn't say is that most of the time the violence involves drugs, directly or indirectly.

On the far right side of the ledger, printed in red ink, is a type of shorthand scribble that becomes a running tally of this year's homicides -- homi 1, homi 2, homi 3 -- sprinkled among the non-lethal shootings. Some of the numbers are out of order, which happens when a shooting occurs on one day and the victim doesn't die until the next, forcing the detectives to go back and add some more red ink to the log.

No matter. Keeping track of murder is never a clean and simple business.

This book is the one place where everything is bound together concisely -- everything from the mundane killings of dope dealers to the high-profile murders that have happened this year, such as the killing of two police officers in February, the murder of a family of five on April 1 after 24 hours of torture and abuse, the nine people who were shot at the Freedom Festival fireworks, and the shooting death of 7-year-old Deva White just five days ago.

This book is the one place where the enormity of Detroit's problem becomes clear.

If you study the book long enough, it's not the number of murders that is surprising, but the constant barrage of shootings -- there were 1,279 through November, already 247 more than all of 2003. Ten or more shootings on a single day is not uncommon. There is a tendency to focus on the issue when there is a spike in homicides -- such as when 18 people were killed in six days in January -- because that's the easy way for TV and newspapers to get a handle on the problem.

But when you leaf through this 2-inch-thick book and study the worn pages and see the names of all the victims, it's clear that short-term spikes are meaningless. It is nothing but a matter of chance or fate, aim or circumstance, or the skill or magic of paramedics and ER doctors that separate a shooting from a murder.

The cost to the city is enormous, in dollars and perception.

"One study estimated that in 1992, the cost of every lethal gunshot wound in America was \$21,700; \$28,000 for every nonfatal gunshot requiring hospitalization and \$6,500 for every nonfatal gunshot wound without hospitalization," according to "Murder American Style" (Wadsworth, \$38.95), a criminal justice textbook.

The damage to those who survive, even the ones who dodge the bullets, can last a lifetime.

The case is assigned to Sgt. Dale Greenleaf, who leans against the wall holding folders and a flashlight. His cell phone is pressed to his left ear. He's wearing his usual attire: dark trench coat, dark suit, tie, cowboy hat and cowboy boots.

The homicide bureau is on the fifth floor of police headquarters, a dilapidated building infested with cockroaches. The electrical system is so touchy that fuses blow when a window air conditioner is turned on in one of the squad rooms.

He takes the elevator to the first floor and tries to find a car. The Police Department doesn't have a parking lot. The cars are parked in no particular order on the street, wherever they can find a spot near 1600 Beaubien, near Greektown Casino.

After looking at three different unmarked cars -- all four-door Chevy Impalas -- he finds the right one when his key works in the door.

It is 12:03 a.m. June 17.

Greenleaf adjusts the radio and puts on WRIF-FM (101.1).

"Rock 'n' roll," he says, smiling.

The light rain has turned into a downpour and he flicks on the windshield wipers.

He drives down Jefferson Avenue, past a blur of vacant businesses and boarded-up windows, and is at the scene at Freud and Lakewood in a matter of minutes. The corner is roped off with yellow tape: Police Line Do Not Cross. It is in one of the strangest areas in metro Detroit -- the stark confluence of rich and poor -- about four blocks from the Detroit River and a half-mile from the lush green yards and stately homes in Grosse Pointe Park.

Greenleaf is told a black male was shot and remains in critical condition.

"He got shot here and made it to Chalmers," a police officer says. "He walked east on Freud. He goes to Chalmers and goes north a few houses. Goes up on a porch, collapses and the lady there calls 911. That's where we found him. He told us he got shot over here at 704 Lakewood. We came over here, got the gun and shell casings."

There's a certain rhythm at a homicide scene, especially at night. The cops move slowly, holding flashlights by their faces, pointed down, careful not to step on evidence, looking for bullet casings and trying to take it all in, to see everything, even the things they don't see. There's no panic, no rush. Their actions are solemn and reserved.

"Got any casings?" Greenleaf asks.

"Most of them are in the road," the officer says.

"How many rounds you got?" Greenleaf asks.

"We counted eight," an officer responds.

It's not uncommon to see a scene with multiple gunshots. The violence in Detroit has morphed into something new, something truly evil. The code of the street has changed. Ten or 20 years ago, there was a morality to street violence. There were unspoken rules: Never kill children. Never kill family members. Take one person at a time. But now, the killers shoot at anyone. They empty a clip into a crowd. They shoot in any direction.

The situation is getting worse, not better. Criminologists, community leaders and police say that the recent spike in violence stems from a mix of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, drug use, hopelessness and a gangsta rap culture. It forms a violent cycle that has spun out of control for generations.

Greenleaf points at the seven-bedroom house on Lakewood, where all the children live.

"Could you knock on doors, to make sure nobody else has been hit?" Greenleaf says.

The officer nods. "OK, we will do that."

"You know, I'll come with you," Greenleaf says. "Because I gotta talk to them anyway."

Greenleaf stands on the porch, talking to a woman.

"Is everyone in your house OK?" Greenleaf asks.

"Yeah," Monica Travier says.

"Nobody got shot or anything, from stray bullets?" Greenleaf asks.

When somebody is killed by a stray bullet, some experts call it a mushroom murder, because bodies can pop up so unexpectedly.

"No, no," she says. "Just shaken up."

"And everybody is awake, that is in the house?"

"Yes."

"Did anybody see anything?"

Nobody did.

"We were at the table, playing cards," Travier says. "When the bullet came through our window, we just got down."

She doesn't mention the children.

He finds a slug on the hardwood floor and covers it with a plastic cup to preserve the evidence. Another slug is stuck in the wall.

"This is what's gonna happen," Greenleaf says. "My evidence techs are gonna come out and take photographs and take some measurements and gonna collect slugs. They may do some damage to this wall to see if they can recover the slug out of here. But they do this all the time so they know how to do this without doing a lot of damage."

"OK."

"If you have any questions, I'll be floating around out here. We'll try to get this wrapped up as soon as we can. OK?"

"Thank you."

He leaves to go talk to a neighbor. The victim collapsed on her porch and lay there, dying. When the sun rises, this woman will scrub the blood off her front porch.

After the sleepover, several of the children are back at the house, playing in the front room with their two cats, Pebbles and Jordan. Glass fragments are sprinkled across the coffee table and on the carpet.

How will this affect the children? What's the legacy of violence? In some areas of Detroit, it seems as if everyone knows someone who was killed. It permeates almost everything.

"This scared everybody, but you can't run from it," says Christina Smith, who lives in the house with her two children. "It's everywhere. We don't want our kids to see it and think, this is OK, this is how we are supposed to live. It's scary."

Two weeks earlier, her niece and nephew's father was killed at a house party on the west side. And 1 1/2 years ago, her brother killed himself, shooting himself in the head.

Christina is a full-time student at Wayne County Community College, studying secondary education. She wants to become a high school teacher, to help change lives: "Nobody tells these kids about college or anything to help better their life after high school. Nobody is telling them about the adult world after high school. Nobody teaches them anything. It's sad. You have to tell these kids, there is something else out of Detroit and you can do it."

Emyshia walks through the house, pointing at several holes. Twelve hours after the shooting, her imagination has already taken hold, changing facts, altering reality, making the world seem like a dark, evil place. For this 8-year-old, every nick in the wall is a bullet hole, every scrape or gouge another sign of the violence. In her eyes, it's all around her. A constant reminder. "The bullet went there and there and there and there and there," Emyshia says, pointing at every wall, even ones that were not damaged. "I thought my momma was gonna die. The bullet hole almost tore her head off."

## EPILOGUE

Two months ago, the mothers and their children moved out of the house and went their separate ways. Neighbors said they moved because of the violence. A memorial marks the site of the shooting -- 22 dirty teddy bears tied to a telephone pole. The **shattered** window has never been fixed.

## ANSWERS ON THIS SERIES,

QUESTION: Detroit has had a high murder rate for years. Why write about it now?

ANSWER: City leaders have tried to stop the violence in Detroit - teaching children tools for conflict resolution, flooding areas with cops, targeting the drug trade, buying back guns and even holding a day of prayer.

But the situation is getting worse. Criminologists, community leaders and police say that the recent spike in violence stems from a mix of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, drug use and hopelessness.

Each murder directly affects eight to 10 people, according to police and anti-violence activists. That means thousands of Detroiters are touched by extreme violence every year. Murder has a chilling effect on Detroit's national image. Murder keeps people, business and culture away from Detroit.

Q: How did the Free Press put this series together?

A: Staff writer Jeff Seidel and photographer Eric Seals spent the past six months working on the project. They traveled with homicide detectives to crime scenes, crossed the yellow tape and watched them try to solve the crimes. Seidel and Seals also spent time with the families of victims, in the courts and in the neighborhoods where people are getting killed.

Q: How did the Free Press pick the stories?

A: We picked stories that illustrated specific points about the legacy of violence, the effect on innocent bystanders, the frustrations of families looking for answers, the struggles of police officers and solutions to make it better.

Q: How is this different from what I see on the TV news?

A: When we talk about violence in Detroit, it's often superficial. After somebody is killed, a story hits the nightly news for only a few seconds and then it is over. Sometimes, there is an item in the newspaper, sometimes not. This series is different. The detailed, intimate stories and photographs reveal the people, not just the crimes.

You will meet ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives amid extraordinary violence: exhausted police officers, families who grieve for lost loved ones; resilient citizens. For all the hopelessness, there is hope. For all the death, there are people who are trying to solve the crimes, people who are trying to make a difference. And you'll see that one person can make a difference.

Q: I live in the suburbs and go downtown only for the Red Wings or Lions. Why should I care?

A: Detroit is seen as the center of the region, of the entire state. If the violence continues, it will affect how many businesses come to the region and how quickly the city is rebuilt.

Q: Will this series make me afraid to go to Detroit?

A: Not unless you are involved in the drug trade. More than 50 percent of the murders are related to drugs.

Q: What will I learn from this series?

A: Why some murders are so difficult to solve.

What life is like in a neighborhood where murder is expected.

Why it keeps happening.

What one person can do to make a difference.

And why solving a case is so different from what you see on television crime shows that tie up everything by the hour's end.

Tell us what you think

Do you have a comment for the Free Press or a concern about violence in Detroit you'd like us to address? We want to hear from you.

Do you know someone who's making a difference in the city? Tell us.

By e-mail: [homicide@freepress.com](mailto:homicide@freepress.com)

By mail: Homicide in Detroit, Features Department, Detroit Free Press, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit MI 48226.

How you can help

The Children's Center of Wayne County in Detroit has a bereavement program for children who have been affected by homicide. They need donations and volunteers to mentor and tutor children. Go to [www.thechildrenscenter.com](http://www.thechildrenscenter.com) or call 313-831-5535.

Contact JEFF SEIDEL at 313-223-4558 or [seidel@freepress.com](mailto:seidel@freepress.com)"

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Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

Emyshia Trapp, 8, of Detroit, in the front yard of her home on Lakewood. She was sitting with a group of kids on a sofa beneath this window when bullets burst through over their heads. The Bible was always open at the home Emyshia Trapp shared with her mother, three other women and their children. Detroit Police officer Marvin Quinal looks for bullet holes with the help of a flashlight. LEFT: Emyshia Trapp, left, led the other kids to safety when the shooting started by having them crawl on their bellies to the back of the house. BELOW: These children were sitting at home when bullets **shattered** the window above their heads and ricocheted through the house.

Left to right, front row: Jaylin Jackson, 4; Kaila Davis, 3; Marchay Montford 7; Back row: Eugene Trapp, 7; Armon Matthews, 5; Chalkney Travier, 7, and Emyshia Trapp, 8. Chalkney Travier, 7, describes how she prayed the night of the shooting. She and her mother, Monica Travier, 23, flank a spot where a bullet went into the wall.

Memo: FREE PRESS SPECIAL REPORT PART 1; SERIES;HOMICIDE IN DETROIT:  
ECHOES OF VIOLENCE;SIDEBARS ATTACHED

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: crime ; series ; homicide ; Detroit ; increase ; analysis ; major story ; child ; effect ;  
fear ; url ; telephone ; psychology ; counseling

Record Number: 0411772604

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