

The last sad days of one of Detroit's downtrodden

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By Charlie LeDuff The Detroit News

DETROIT — **Johnnie Redding's** body had not even been put in its grave before another man had moved into his house.

This was an outrage, and one of **Johnnie's** friends threatened to evict the interloper by force. Even the people of the rough and raw streets have their law. **Johnnie's** friend pounded on the door of the little A-frame wigwam, made of felt and perched on top of an abandoned garage. The wigwam had a framed window and a chimney. It had a river view and a garden.

The interloper cowered inside.

"You's probably the one who killed **Johnnie**," **Johnnie's** friend barked at the plank-board door, alcohol vapors tumbling from his mouth. "You killed **Johnnie** and now you sleeping in his bed! You bes' be gone by sundown."

Of course, **Johnnie's** friend would not return at sundown, what with the small matter of scrounging up a dinner and another pint of vodka. The interloper would still be sleeping in the wigwam. And by the time the sun had set, there would be no more reminders that **Johnnie** walked these streets.

Johnnie Redding died of a cocaine overdose, coroners said Wednesday. It was the final word on a man whose death might have gone unnoticed.

His body was found at the bottom of an open elevator shaft last month, encased in ice, only his legs jutting out. Adding to the surreal picture was a pillow that gently propped up his left foot, dressed in a clean white sock and shoe with fresh laces. He looked almost peaceful.

The photograph of **Johnnie** would make its way around the world, along with the details that many knew his cadaver was down there but did little, if anything, about it. City boosters complained it was another case of the media focusing on the bad in a city with many wonderful qualities.

Except that **Johnnie** was found in a gaping elevator shaft owned by a local billionaire in a city with tens of thousands of abandoned buildings. And still, some of these decaying buildings keep people alive. Almost 20,000 homeless people drift through the streets of Detroit, meaning that one in 47 here is without a bed, according to the Homeless Management Information System, which tracks people who seek services. With too few shelter beds and too little money to help the walking poor, places like the crumbling warehouse where **Johnnie** was found have become the de facto shelters.

"People accept it, and it is not normal," said Durene L. Brown, the Detroit ombudsman. "It's not normal for a child to walk out of her house and see all these abandoned buildings and blight. It's not normal for a man to be frozen at the bottom of an elevator shaft.

"City officials must drive around with their windows tinted too dark."

Johnnie's last moments

Johnnie killed himself. His autopsy revealed no broken bones, no wounds and no water in his lungs, which means he did not fall into the flooded shaft and drown. Most likely, **Johnnie** was smoking cocaine with somebody and died, coroners suspect. **Johnnie's** party pal may have panicked and tossed his body down the water-filled shaft.

"Last year, a man overdosed and his colleagues stuffed him in a suitcase, put him in an SUV and lit it on fire," Dr. Carl J. Schmidt, Wayne County's chief medical examiner. "The point is there are people out there like that. The way a member of society dies is a reflection of the way society lives."

His given name was **Johnnie** Lewis **Redding**. But his street name was **Johnnie** Dollar. He was described by people who knew him on the street as a consummate hustler, a pool shark, a block captain who liked a little liquor and a little cocaine. He took handouts and mission food, but he didn't walk around with his hat in his hand and he didn't get Social Security.

Johnnie, 56, painted houses. **Johnnie** hustled pool tables from Ann Arbor to southwest Detroit. When he was low on money, he would sort clothing at the Most Holy Trinity rectory for \$10. Sometimes, the church would give him charity bus tickets that he would turn around and sell.

"He didn't have to be out on the streets, but the street life is an adrenaline rush," said Dennis Mugridge, the church's outreach director. "If this was the 1800s, **Johnnie** would have been a mountain man."

Johnnie came to Most Holy Trinity four years ago asking for money to help pay for his pain medication after having all his teeth removed. Mugridge last saw him in November.

"He wanted bus fare to get out of town," Mugridge remembered. "I wouldn't give it to him. I regret it now."

A rough place

Detroit is a hard place to be homeless. There is little milk, little honey and little sun. **Johnnie** may have been frozen in the shaft for more than a month, but nobody knew he was missing except the homeless men who had been living next to the shaft, who figured someone else had called the authorities.

Johnnie moved around. When he grew weary of the street life, when his body began to shut down, **Johnnie** would go home to relatives and dry out. To get himself right, he liked to say. He stayed with his brother, Homer, in River Rouge. He stayed with his sister in Atlanta for six months last year and then, feeling the itch, he came back to Detroit in September and got lost again.

"He promised he'd be back," said his niece, Tanya Coleman of Atlanta. "I said, 'Uncle you ain't coming back.' He said, 'Yes I am. I'm just going up to get an ID then I'll be back, I promise.' I knew he wasn't."

So **Johnnie** came back to Michigan to get his driver's license straightened out, with every intention of returning to Georgia. But like a moth to the light, **Johnnie** gravitated to the corner near Happy liquor store on Fort Street, hanging around with his friends who call themselves the Bus Stop Boys. Wearing a trench coat and with his pockets bulging, **Johnnie** passed out \$10 bills to his friends and told them to buy themselves beer. "That's why we called him **Johnnie** Dollar," said Delaney Windom. "He was one of the good ones."

Johnnie Dollar did not have to be on the streets, said those who knew him. "It's the only place he could be hisself," Windom said.

That's one way to put it. "At some point in his life, he didn't want to work anymore," said his brother, Homer. "He got laid off from the steel plant about 15 years ago and that was it. But he wasn't homeless. Too many people loved him."

What homelessness is, is a matter of opinion. The Department of Housing and Urban Development defines it as anyone living in a shelter or on the streets. HUD estimates there are 700,000 homeless people in America, but federal dollars finance fewer than 200,000 beds. The U.S. Department of Education counts homeless children as those who live doubled up in another family's home or in motels. In 2007, they counted almost 700,000 homeless children, one-third living in shelters or outdoors. The Wayne County Medical Examiner considers a homeless person to have no permanent address — which includes **Johnnie**. Jerry Davis, one of the Bus Stop Boys, put it like this: "Homeless means nobody wants you no more. So you can't consider **Johnnie** homeless."

Except that **Johnnie** did consider himself homeless. He was given a meal on Oct. 25 by the Ark Foundation, an outreach program run by former drug addicts and homeless people. In exchange for the meal, he had to sign his name, age and address in a manifest. On line number seven, in shaky block lettering he wrote: **Johnnie Redding**, 56, Homless.

Homer almost cried when he saw **Johnnie's** signature. "I don't know why he said that. He was a person. He was a person. He was a person."

Perhaps 300 people came to **Johnnie's** memorial service Saturday, including Mimi, one of the Bus Stop Boys. It was paid for by an insurance policy left on his life by his mother, Orlene. She suspected something like this might happen, Homer said. She did not want her children drifting around the Earth in death. "She seen too much in life," Homer said.

In the end, **Johnnie** was buried in Westland in a box that was more expensive than anything he owned in life.

And back at his wigwam, the tenant opened the door a crack. "Nothing's permanent," he said. "We all end up in a box. What do you think this is?"

Johnnie, it turns out, did not live in the wigwam anymore, since the new man had claimed it while he was away. Finders keepers: That, too, is the law of the street.

So **Johnnie** built himself another abode of wood and tarpaulin in the culvert below. Near his pillow were two silk neckties and a book: "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

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