

BOY OF THE ' HOOD THE STORY OF JACUYA JACKSON: AT TOO YOUNG AN AGE, HE HAD TO WALK THE TIGHTROPE OF DETROIT'S MEAN STREETS

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At a time when black males are acknowledged to be **the** most endangered people in American society, **the** streets **of** cities such as Detroit are full **of** children like Jacuya Jackson.

They are born into a world they didn't make and challenged too soon to survive it. They crave attention, often by flouting authority.

There aren't many answers in **the** life story **of** Jacuya Jackson, a young man **of** some promise, some dreams, some good and, yes, some trouble. But Free Press Staff Writer Jack Kresnak, who specializes in juvenile justice issues, found many disturbing questions. When a child's hand reaches up, what happens if no one is there to grasp it?

He was born screaming for help.

The nurses at Henry Ford Hospital had seen it so many times before, **the** horrible wailing and trembling that usually meant **the** newborn was in agonizing withdrawal from street drugs that **the** mother had taken during pregnancy.

This baby's mother was Ovarietta (Red) Jackson, a brash- speaking 25-year-old who admitted being a longtime heroin and cocaine user.

The hospital sent her home, but kept **the** baby, whom Red had named Jacuya, after his father's nickname, pronounced "Jah- KOO-Yah."

Red, named for **the** tint **of** her hair, visited Jacuya every day for a week but got tired **of the** routine. He looked fine to her and she wanted him home.

So one day, she bundled up **the** baby and hustled him out, turning to tell a surprised nurse at **the** elevator: "Tell **the** protective services people to get with me over on Hubbell. That's where we'll be."

On that day in February 1977, little Jacuya Jackson escaped for **the** first time from a system that was trying to protect and help him.

It would happen again and again during **the** next 13 years, in what became a tug- **of** -war for **the** life **of** a **boy** , a struggle between society's frayed safety net and **the** tough streets **of** Detroit.

Caught in **the** middle, Jacuya Jackson would lecture his mother about using drugs, then peddle crack cocaine. He would hug a teacher, then scrawl "dumb bitch" on **the** librarian's door. He would appear to beat **the** odds, then go where **the** streets took him.

The struggle goes on every day for thousands **of** children like Jacuya. They are screaming for help, and then escaping from it.

A brittle beginning

James L. Jackson and Ovarietta (Red) Jackson were not really up to being full-time parents. They had **the** same last name, but were never married. Each had other children by other partners and their time together ended shortly after Jacuya's birth on Feb. 21, 1977.

James was driving a new Lincoln Continental Mark IV when Highland Park police stopped him in 1973 and found \$159,000 cash and 1 1/2 pounds **of** cocaine in **the** trunk.

The search was ruled illegal and Jackson, then 35, was not charged. But **the** Internal Revenue Service seized **the** money and he never got it back. He never saw much **of** Jacuya, either.

Red, in addition to her drug habit, had another addiction that caused her more trouble.

She stole things.

By **the** time Jacuya was 11, Red had been convicted **of** 14 felonies and four misdemeanors, mostly for shoplifting clothes.

"You have a very severe problem here, a mental problem," said one judge as he sent her to prison. "Actually, you really are what they call a kleptomaniac."

One night in 1970 when Red was locked up in Troy, she called her family to bail her out.

She found out her father had been stabbed to death by his girlfriend. For Red, it was **the** beginning **of** a long acquaintance with violence and death.

"My family, a bunch **of** them got killed," recalled Red, who was released from prison again last month. "Every time we turned around, all our friends was getting shot, all like drug-related things. Some **of** them were found in **the** alleys shot. One **of** them, he was trying to break up a fight and he got accidentally killed. He caught a bullet somebody else was supposed to catch.

"It was just like all **of** them were just dropping."

Red's mother, Sadye Jackson, knew about **the** streets. A soft-spoken woman whose greatest joy was singing on Sundays in **the** Ebenezer AME Church choir, Sadye saw **the** drug trouble that beset her two daughters and decided to take in Red's first child, Tanya, who was 9 when Jacuya was born.

Under Sadye's firm wing and **the** strong church influence, Tanya was blossoming into a happy, studious child who eventually would graduate from Michigan State University.

Sadye also took Jacuya into her duplex on Ewald Circle near Dexter. But he never took to her or churchgoing as Tanya did.

When Jacuya wasn't with his mother or grandmother, he could often be found at **the** home of Solon and Eloise Ingram, his mother's uncle and aunt. Having no children **of** their own, **the** Ingrams treated him like a son -- spoiled him, in fact.

The Ingrams gave Jacuya just about anything he wanted, including three bikes one summer after Jacuya's were stolen or wrecked.

But their attention didn't seem to make up for his missing parents.

Once, in first grade at Joffe Elementary School, Jacuya reached his mother, who had been staying with some drug-using friends, and made her promise to come see him perform a small part in **the** school play.

"I had promised him, 'Cuya, I'll be there this time,' " Red remembers. "He said, 'Please, Mom, promise?' I said, 'I promise you.'"

"I spent all day wondering how I was going to get to his little play. I called a cab and rushed over to **the** school and **the** school was locked. I pounded on **the** door and a lady came out and told me I was a whole lot late.

"When I saw Jacuya, I said I was sorry. I didn't know. He said it was OK and then he went outside to play, but I felt guilty about it."

Jacuya's records show he was a satisfactory student at Joffe and later Glazer Elementary, where Diane Claiborne, his fourth-grade teacher, remembers he was "always respectful **of** me -- and I can't say that about a lot **of** kids.

"He didn't live up to his potential," she said, "but he was bright. He could think."

Signs **of** trouble

Jacuya earned Bs and Cs during his first few years in school, but by fifth grade, **the** marks had begun to slip. He began skipping school and no one seemed to know where to find him.

Red went with Jacuya to one parent-teacher conference, where she remembers he complained about her "getting high" with her sister, Charlotte, two years older, and Charlotte's friends.

"I explained to him that some people have problems and, you know, they have to turn to something as a crutch," Red said. "I told him, 'I don't know if you understand, but I've had problems and I couldn't get counseling. I needed something to substitute for that. I can't really use that as an excuse either, but if it would make you feel better, I won't hang around with them anymore.'"

"So I used to sneak around," Red said. "He was mad at Charlotte for a long time."

Eventually, Red got a notice from Glazer principal Florence McMurtry that she was alerting school social workers about Jacuya as a potential problem before promoting him to middle school, a critical stage in youth development.

Educators say **the** middle school years are when children begin to assert their own personalities, yet are most susceptible to **the** influence **of** older, bolder kids.

Jacuya entered Longfellow Middle School in 1988, **the** same year Red entered prison for what would be her sixth and longest stretch -- 3-15 years for larceny.

Jacuya's behavior got worse.

He tested at average intelligence with good potential but got into fights with classmates, even teachers. He ended sixth grade with failing marks and 51 days absent.

On one progress report, school officials observed: "Will come to school every day if allowed -- does have a problem with in-school truancy."

Under behavior, it said: "Very poor -- very hostile to women -- very sneaky -- will never admit to being wrong -- seeks attention -- grandmother is not capable **of** handling Jacuya. He plays on her emotions and lies to her.

"Brings no books or supplies -- does nothing in class -- E average."

Almost all **of** a sudden, it seemed, Jacuya Jackson had more problems than promise.

The Dexter Avenue Boys

When Jacuya's sister went away to college on a scholarship, Sadye Jackson took in two **of** her daughter Charlotte's children: Latisha, then 14, and Melonye, 18 months. **The** grandmother was supporting **the** household with \$500 a month in Social Security, \$290 in welfare and \$100 in food stamps.

Many days, Charlotte would be there, too -- and that seemed to bring out **the** worst in Jacuya.

One time, Charlotte had saved \$1,250 to buy a used Chevrolet Citation, which she parked in her mother's driveway. While she was upstairs, she heard some strange sounds and looked out **the** window to see Jacuya and a couple **of** his friends jumping from **the** roof **of the** car onto **the hood**. They already had cracked **the** windows with a slingshot.

They didn't stop until **the** car was a total loss that had to be towed away as junk.

Then there was Aunt Charlotte's false teeth. She lost them, or so she thought until she offered a \$25 reward for their return.

"Jacuya said, 'If you give me \$50, I could find your teeth,' " Charlotte said. "I told him, ' **Boy** , I ain't gonna give you \$50, but I might as well buy a new set **of** teeth because you must know where they are."

Jacuya laughed and walked away. Charlotte never did find her teeth.

By early 1989, Jacuya had fallen in with a steady crowd: Ike, Orlando, James and Eric.

They called themselves **the** "Dexter Avenue **Boys** " and they called him "Coonya."

He was **the** group's funny man, cracking wise about **the** others or about girls, whom they called "skeezers."

"We'd go to **the** movies, **the** mall, Northland, Fairlane, everywhere," said James Hendricks Jr., now 16. "He had a high- top fade and we used to say he looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger. He'd say, 'I'm going to pump you up.' "

One **of the** group's hangouts was **the** Parkman Branch **of the** Detroit Public Library on Oakman Boulevard, a stately, historic building in a neighborhood with few other places for kids. Amid **the** sturdy bookshelves and thick wooden furniture, **the** Dexter **Boys** would throw basketballs, tease girls and badger other kids who were trying to study.

Alva Fuquay arrived there in March 1989 as head librarian. Jacuya's name was prominent on a list **of** troublemakers that she was given.

She met **the** Dexter Avenue **Boys** head on.

"I'd tell them, I'm not taking this shit!" Fuquay said, quickly adding that she had never used foul language until taking charge at Parkman.

At first **the** kids laughed, then they began to test her resolve.

She went to work one morning to find "Dumb Bitch" spray- painted on **the** door **of the** beautiful old library. She found out Jacuya had done it.

"I went right up to him and said, 'If you want to call me a bitch, call me a bitch to my face, but do not write on that door.'

"Jacuya liked me after that," Fuquay said. "None **of** them were bad kids. It's just that nobody took **the** time to talk to them."

She recalled Jacuya as **the** youngest and smallest member **of the** group, which was led by Eric Prewitt, an intimidating 16-year-old with a juvenile record for robbery and assault.

With Eric in **the** lead, **the** group would swagger through **the** neighborhood, proclaiming " **the** whole ' **hood** is ours" and chanting **the** lyrics **of the** latest tough-talk rap song.

Fistfights with groups from other neighborhoods were not uncommon. Fuquay said she even caught some **of the** Dexter **Boys** stashing handguns behind books in **the** library, although she and others say Jacuya never carried one.

Ike, who recently was released from a juvenile detention facility and spoke on condition **of** not being further identified, remembers getting caught once with Jacuya on rival turf across Davison Avenue. They had to fight **the** 12th Street **Boys** .

"Coonya wouldn't leave me," Ike said. "He was loyal. We all fought for each other."

Fuquay saw a lot **of the** Dexter **Boys** , who came to call her "Ma Qua."

She believes they were looking to her for something, maybe **the** "tough love" they weren't getting anywhere else.

'Another Homie murdered'

Eric was walking home from **the** Parkman library when he was shot and killed in June 1989 after an argument with a neighborhood woman and her son. Ike got to him as he lay on **the** ground.

"I asked him to get up," Ike said, "but he didn't say anything."

At **the** funeral home, Jacuya was stunned to see his leader in a casket, clad in his favorite black-and-red Michael Jordan sweat suit.

"Why'd she have to kill my man?" he wailed, over and over.

Fuquay said **the boys** asked her to come to **the** funeral.

"When I came over and started to walk up to **the** casket, I had all these big bullies hanging on me. . . . Jacuya held my hand so tight I couldn't leave."

After **the** funeral, **the** group drank beer from 48-ounce bottles, smoked marijuana and walked **the** neighborhood chanting verses from **the** rap "Dead Homiez" by Ice Cube, on **the** "Kill at Will" album.

"Another Homie got murdered on a shakedown

His mother's at **the** funeral having a nervous breakdown

Two shots hit him in **the** face from that blast

A framed picture and a closed casket

A single-file line about 50 cars long

All drivin' slow with they lights on

He got a lot **of** flowers and a thick wreath

What good is that when you're six feet deep?"

Jacuya said it was his favorite song.

Within a month, **the** group was back to cutting up at **the** library.

One day a fight erupted after a library security guard thought **the boys** were laughing at him. **The** guard threw a stapler, which hit Jacuya.

He fell, cracked his head on **the** concrete floor and was knocked out.

Fuquay called an ambulance and got Jacuya to a hospital, where X-rays showed a skull fracture.

He was sent home in a few days, but his friends and family said he was different, slower, walking funny and occasionally blacking out.

Special attention

Because **of** Jacuya's poor record, Longfellow School declined to take him back in fall 1989 and sent him to Winterhalter Middle School for seventh grade. In weeks, he was suspended for misconduct and sent to Westside Development, a middle school for troubled students.

Wilma Anderson, **the** school's veteran social worker, had seen and assessed hundreds **of** students. But she remembers Jacuya, **the** cute little kid "running up and down **the** halls, acting silly, popping people upside **the** head, just playing, like this was a playground."

"He had very poor interpersonal skills, a lack **of** ability to get along with others," she recalled.

"He used to do all kinds **of** stuff to get out **of** school -- just whine and cry, 'I want to go to sleep.'

"He just reminded me **of** a kid wandering through life. It seemed like he had built up in his mind that he was just a bad kid. His attitude was, if I'm bad, I'm going to be bad."

It was Anderson who finally sat Jacuya down to get some answers. She posed **the** questions and he scrawled replies on a piece **of** yellow paper.

"Who am I?"

"I am a bad little **boy** and I am trying to stop being a bad **boy** . I am specel to my mother and my father because they braut me in this wold.

"What do I want to become in life?"

"I want to become a police office for I can help percet my fellow citizens in need **of** help for they won't be afriad.

"How can I improve?"

"By staying away from a whole lot **of** trouble like when I get in trouble people say I bad so they think I am bad, I'll be bad.

"How am I killing myself?"

"Hitting people for nothing, breaking windows, shooting at people."

In a memo, Anderson advised teachers that Jacuya "is a very sensitive and intuitive youngster. He also has a very low opinion **of** himself and is accustomed to lying and using other forms **of** acting out to get attention as well as to relieve pressure.

"Jacuya, as many other students are, is convinced that he's not worth a diddly. Don't agree with him by your reactions. . . . When you just put him out or otherwise punish him, you are really rewarding and making sure you'll see over and over **the** same behavior you're trying to stop."

Anderson remembers asking Jacuya to make three wishes.

"A typical response from a kid is a million dollars, a status jacket with matching hat, their own place -- selfish things.

"But let me tell you about Jacuya. He said, 'I would wish for people to stop being hungry, that everybody take care **of** other people equally and that there be peace.'

"Jacuya Jackson was truly one **of the** most warm and sincerest people I have ever met."

The law steps in

In January 1990, Jacuya was charged in Wayne County Juvenile Court with assaulting a former girlfriend outside **the** library.

Sadye Jackson, his grandmother, gratefully accepted a referral for him from a teacher to a new Youth Assistance Program in **the** 10th (Livernois) Precinct. It offered individual counseling, group therapy, family therapy and a volunteer mentor, similar to a Big Brother.

Jacuya was **the** first kid to enroll.

"Jacuya was more extreme at a young age than other kids," recalled Anthony Carver, who set up **the** program. "He was just terrorizing **the** school by fighting. He was just completely unruly."

Jacuya's volunteer mentor quit after a while and no one else was available. Jacuya and Sadye attended a few family counseling sessions, then Jacuya started missing.

Sadye kept going, long after her grandson stopped.

On his own

Charlotte Jackson figures Jacuya was 12 years old when he left home after throwing a tantrum.

"He ran away," Charlotte said. "At age 12, he got his own apartment." Actually, Jacuya was set up in an apartment by a man he met through Ike. **The** man used kids to sell crack cocaine.

The flat was on Richton near Dexter, a section **of** Detroit so tough that Red and Charlotte would not venture there.

Sadye said Jacuya would show up at her house once in a while to let **the** family know he was alive, but he would not say where he was or what he was doing. She filed three missing person reports on him in February and March 1990.

Once, Jacuya was at Sadye's house when his mother called from prison.

He told her he was involved in drugs.

"You getting high, too?" Red asked him.

"No. Rolling, Ma," he answered, using **the** street term for selling drugs.

"Why you doing it?"

"For **the** money."

"Money! If it's money you want, I'll send you some."

Jacuya promised to give it up, but he didn't keep his promise. He went back to **the** flat and on April 22, 1990, sold two small packages **of** crack for \$20 to an undercover Detroit police officer. He was locked up in **the** Wayne County Youth Home.

Pondering Jacuya's future, Juvenile Court Referee Mary Ann Quinn received a report in July 1990 from Elias Friedenzohn, a psychologist who examined him at **the** court's Clinic for Child Study.

"Jacuya is a youth who is experiencing a great deal **of** psychological distress," Friedenzohn wrote. "Jacuya's profile suggests that he 'is screaming for help.' . . . Prominent among his problems is his significant amount **of** unmet dependency and nurturance needs."

Tanya, Jacuya's older sister, offered to take him to East Lansing with her, but Quinn said **the** youth needed constant supervision. She made him a ward **of the** state and he was sent to **Boys** Republic, a private agency in Farmington Hills that treats delinquents.

Encouraged by counselors at **the** agency, Jacuya wrote several letters to his mother in prison, including one he titled "Hang In There."

"I am trying to work out **the** things that I've been doing wrong and get my act together," he wrote. "I miss you a lot and I love you but I can understand why you're in there and why I'm in here for some stupid stuff."

"Ma, next time you come home we'll be together forever, no more **of** me dealing drugs. . . . I don't never want to see that stuff again."

Breaking free

Boys Republic gave Jacuya weekend passes home, where he complained to Ike, James and his other friends that his confinement was boring.

"I'm about to bust up from this place," he told Ike.

"You shouldn't do that cause that ain't doing right," Ike replied.

"I'll see about that," Jacuya said.

On a cold night in mid-January, Jacuya ran away from **Boys** Republic. He showed up at James Hendricks' door, shivering in a light jacket.

"How much loot you got?" James asked him.

"I only got a bone," a dollar, Jacuya said. "That's why I come over here."

James' mother called **Boys Republic**, which sent a counselor to retrieve Jacuya.

But a few weeks later, he was back in his old neighborhood, mumbling something to Sadye about not going back to **Boys Republic**.

He hung out with Ike and Ike's new friends D'Angelo Moore, 15, known as "Parkay," and Lamond Nicholson, 18, known as "Scrap."

On Monday, Jan. 21, Ike's mother drove Jacuya and Parkay to a barber shop at Dexter and Davison to get haircuts. On **the** way, they saw police arresting a car full **of** young people.

"I was preaching," said Ike's mother. " 'See? You all got to stop doing whatever you doing. Jacuya, it's time for you to go back to **the boys** home before something happens.' "

Then, she remembers, Parkay said something strange: "I think I'm going to get killed this week."

Face down on **the** floor

Parkay paid Ike's mother \$2 for **the** ride and treated Jacuya to **the** haircut.

Later that evening, **the** two stopped for a minute at Sadye's house, then bought some candy at a corner market and walked across Dexter and down **the** block to Apartment 304 in a large three-story complex on Ewald Circle.

Parkay and Scrap had been selling crack and having parties for a few weeks in a three-room apartment, which was bare except for a TV on an end table, a cheap kitchen set and a mattress on **the** floor.

Sometime after midnight, two men came over and asked to buy \$950 worth **of** crack, a big deal for **the boys** ' operation. Scrap left to use a phone downstairs to beep his dealer. He returned after a while to report that **the** page hadn't been answered.

The customers -- police have identified them as 21-year-old cousins Tyrone Franklin and Kenneth Lee Adams -- were not happy.

Franklin would later tell police that it was Adams who pulled **the** .45-caliber handgun from his jacket and made **the** three friends lie face down on **the** floor with their heads together. Two were stretched one way and **the** third lay opposite. Their pockets were looted **of** about \$40 cash and \$300 worth **of** crack.

Then Jacuya, Scrap and Parkay were shot with that big gun, one bullet each in **the** head. **The** slugs tore holes in **the** floor and **the** blood **of the** dying young men dripped through to **the** apartment below.

Ike came by a few minutes later to meet his friends. First he smelled **the** gun smoke, then he saw **the** bodies in **the** flickering light **of the** TV, a dark stain spreading beneath them.

"One was still alive; that was Coonya," Ike remembered. But by **the** time an ambulance got him to Mt. Carmel Mercy Hospital, Jacuya Jackson was dead, a month shy **of** his 14th birthday.

Mourning **the** loss

Adams, who had only been out **of** prison a few weeks when **the** shootings occurred, and Franklin were arrested by Detroit police within a few days. Their trial is scheduled to begin Monday on three counts each **of** first-degree murder.

Franklin told police they never had \$950 and intended to steal **the** crack if it ever arrived but Adams got impatient.

Ike couldn't attend his friends' funeral. Two nights after **the** killings, he was busted walking home from his girlfriend's house at 4:30 a.m. with several rocks **of** crack cocaine in his pockets.

Red Jackson was allowed to leave prison for **the** funeral under police escort. **The** Ebenezer AME Church on West Chicago fell silent as she walked up **the** center aisle to **the** shroud- draped casket, handcuffs dangling from **the** chain around her waist.

"My baby!" she wailed, again and again.

Wilma Anderson, **the** social worker who got a **boy** to spill his hopes and dreams onto a sheet **of** yellow paper, told everybody that Jacuya was not "just a little street punk."

"I can tell you that Jacuya was a very, very sensitive young man," she said. "We're mourning his memory, **the** loss. But Jacuya's been mourning his loss for a number **of** years -- **the** loss **of the** love **of** his mother and father. I'm not attempting to point **the** finger here. But selling drugs in **the** environment is not what his death was all about.

"Jacuya has been dying for a long time."

Getting Help

Despite evidence **of** a growing need, government support is shrinking for programs to help troubled children and their families. But there are some private agencies trying to fill **the** gap.

Here's a partial list:

- * **Boys and Girls Clubs of** Southeastern Michigan, 894-3320, 1-10 p.m. weekdays.
- * Young Men's Christian Association **of** Metropolitan Detroit, 962-6126, 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. weekdays.
- * Wayne County operates 21 Youth Assistance Programs, including six in Detroit. Children can be referred to **the** program by police or teachers, or brought in by parents.

Participation is free. Call 494-3035, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. weekdays.

Caption: Photo JOHN A. STANO

: Jacuya Jackson, surrounded by friends, gets ready to blow out his candles on his 8th birthday. **The** party was at **the** Detroit home **of** his grandmother, Sadye Jackson. In late 1990 at age 13, Jacuya stands outside **the Boys** Republic, a private center for delinquents in Farmington Hills. He wrote letters to his mother from **the** center. Ovarietta (Red) Jackson, Jacuya's mother who recently was released from prison, had been convicted **of** 14 felonies and four misdemeanors, mostly for shoplifting clothes, by **the** time her son was 11. She recalls **the** violence and death she has encountered: "Every time we turned around, all our friends was getting shot." When Alva Fuquay became head librarian at **the** Detroit Public Library's Parkman Branch in 1989, Jacuya's name was included on a list **of** troublemakers. "None **of** them were bad kids.

It's just that nobody took **the** time to talk to them," she said. Jacuya spends time on **the** beach with his cousins, Melonye, left, and Latisha. Jacuya and both girls, who are Charlotte Jackson's daughters, lived with Sadye Jackson, their grandmother. Solon Ingram, left, spends time with his young nephew. Ingram and his wife, Eloise, treated Jacuya like a son because they had no children **of** their own.

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