

BELOVED FATHER, FIANCE, SON - WHEN THE DRUG TRADE TAKES A YOUNG MAN, GENERATIONS ARE LEFT TO GRIEVE

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HOMICIDE NUMBER: 154

Victim:: **Michael McGill**

Black male, 23

Date: May 14

Location: 3747 Tuxedo

The little boy scoots off the chair and shuffles around the desk in the Homicide Unit, venturing into the world of death, leaving tiny footprints on the cold tile floor. Up high on a metal desk, tucked inside a thin, growing file, there is a picture of his daddy.

Growing comfortable in this strange place, the boy leaves his mother and plays with a piece of paper and then tugs on a telephone cord. All around the room, amid heavy black trash cans and simple green chairs, there are grown-ups, men and women dressed up fancy like they are in church.

And then he screams for no reason.

Tasha Roebuck picks up her son, this 1 1/2 -year-old ball of energy, and comforts him. Michael grabs for a stapler and Lt. Linda Vertin, a homicide detective, moves it out of his reach without thinking as she continues the interview.

"The medical examiner will tell us some facts, some times," Vertin says. "They can't tell us the exact time of death, but they'll give us a window."

The boy doesn't pay any attention to the adults. How can a child understand any of this? How his 23-year-old father, **Michael McGill**, went to the corner to meet somebody and never returned; how he was found dead in a vacant house that police say is used for smoking crack; how his mother will go to the morgue in less than an hour to see the body.

No, he doesn't understand. But he's learning from his surroundings, the same way he learns on the playground or in the front yard or in the streets, accepting all the possibilities and limitations, soaking up information, following a path only he understands. He walks around the office, looking for something to play with.

"Do they know what happened?" Roebuck asks. She longs to learn the details. Was it a single shot? Two shots? What type of gun? Violence is such a constant in some neighborhoods in Detroit, in some lives, that the detail of each death is the only thing that separates one murder from another.

"That's what we are trying to figure out, hon," Vertin answers.

Roebuck and **Michael McGill** had one child, who was so big at birth - 8 pounds, 8 ounces - that everybody called him Fat Fat, a loving term that continues to this day, even though he has thinned out and is starting to sprout, his head topped with a thick, wild Afro.

"How did he get shot?" Roebuck asks. "They haven't told me."

She wears dark blue jeans and a gray T-shirt that says "Love is war." She loved everything about Michael: how he cared for their child, changing diapers and feeding him and dressing him and pushing the stroller, carrying a diaper bag on his shoulder - "How many guys would do that?" she asks; how he took everything in stride; how he said prayers with his child at night; how he had dreams. Michael and Tasha did everything together - they'd play dominos and cards and video games. They planned to get married in 2005 after she turned 21.

They wanted to have a huge family, a sibling basketball team - four boys and a girl.

"We know he was in an abandoned house," Vertin says. Her tone is flat, no emotion. She's done this kind of interview countless times, trying to squeeze information from the family of a victim. "We know he was shot. He was inside the house, on the landing that comes down a stairway. There is usually no activity there. The neighbors said the house has been abandoned for seven years and once in a while, people go in there and smoke their crack."

Fat Fat goes down on his hands and knees and looks under Vertin's desk. Will he follow in his father's footsteps or create his own path in life? It comes down to choices. Either the violence continues, spinning out of control, passed from father to son, a legacy of death, or it comes to a stop. Michael disappeared at 3:30 p.m. May 4. After receiving a phone call, he ran out the door.

"He said he was coming right back," Roebuck says.

She is certain he was lured out of the house to be killed. He didn't take any keys, and they had plans to go out to eat later that night. After he disappeared, Roebuck and her mother called the police, hospitals and the morgue so many times for so many days in a row they were told not to call anymore.

Michael was found 10 days later inside the vacant two-story house on Tuxedo near Dexter, lying on the wood floor. The brick house has a boarded-up picture window but the front door can be pushed open with a strong shove.

A neighbor cuts the grass and trims the weeds.

"He doesn't hang in vacant houses," Roebuck says. "He wouldn't go, even if it's a spot. You know how some guys go into a vacant house and open up their little set-up shop? No, he wouldn't go in there."

"OK," Vertin says.

Vertin asks if Michael sold drugs.

"He didn't sell Ecstasy," Roebuck says. "He didn't sell it for a long time. The last thing he sold was dope."

"He didn't sell from abandoned houses?"

"No, anybody he sold to was on the phone," Roebuck says. "It was: 'Meet me here or meet me there.'"

Police say drugs play a part in more than 50 percent of the murders in Detroit. Murder does not usually happen as a result of someone being high. Rather, it is from the business of drugs - buying and selling, protecting turf, raising money.

"He was such an easygoing person," Roebuck says. "He can laugh with just about anybody. He can sit with just about anybody, different groups of people. He was a good father, he was there from Day 1. In the hospital. Everything. He was there for his birthday, Christmas. Easter. Birthday. He was there. If he thought he was in danger, in any type of way when he left, he wouldn't have gone in."

Michael was careful because danger was all around him. In a three-week span this spring, he was the third person murdered from his neighborhood, including one of his best friends, Fat Fat's godfather. Three people. From three streets that surround the house where Fat Fat lives.

Michael was raised to be careful. "Don't trust your own shadow," his father, Lawrence McGill, had told him. "That's as close as you can get. If you don't trust your shadow, you don't trust anybody."

Roebuck is convinced Michael was set up.

"I agree with you," Vertin says. "It's somebody he knew. Somebody he trusted. He owed somebody some money, or he extended somebody or pissed somebody off."

That's the culture. Earlier this year, in a different murder, a man pulled out a gun, pointed it at a friend and pulled the trigger, saying: "Sorry, man, it's just business." Another person in the car got out and ran, later telling the story to police.

Roebuck puts her head in her hands and closes her eyes. They were trying to get out - that's the part that really hurts, the part that doesn't seem fair - trying to escape. They were looking for a new place to live and start a new life. She and Michael had saved up some money and got some moving boxes, stacking them against a wall in their house.

Police say that is common. Many try to use drug sales as a way to get some quick cash and get out, to become legitimate.

"Did he have a temper, honey?" Vertin asks, sitting behind her desk. Her tone now is calm, compassionate. She can relate to Roebuck on one level, feeling alone and helpless against uncertain violence. Vertin's fiancé is a civilian contractor in Iraq, and one of his coworkers was recently killed.

"Did Michael get angry quickly?" Vertin asks.

"No, he wouldn't even get angry with me," Roebuck says. "I could front him in front of his friends, and you know a man, he doesn't like to be fronted in front of his friends. And he'd just look at me and laugh. He'd say, 'I'll be home later, I'll be home later.' "

Roebuck pauses, shaking her head: "He didn't have to sell drugs."

Michael had every advantage: He was smart and went to high school. He was raised in a two-parent family, and he had anything he ever wanted. He was the kind of kid who should have survived.

"Why did he sell?" Vertin asks.

"He kind of followed the group, kind of ran with the street, the thug image, I don't know," Roebuck says.

It didn't come naturally to him. He lived the life. Accepted it. Grew comfortable. And became trapped.

"He was never a big dealer," Roebuck says. "He never sold weight, just nickels and dimes."

She leans down and starts to cry.

Fat Fat looks at his mother.

"Come on Fat Fat," Roebuck says, picking him up and holding him tight, not so much for her child but for herself.

The first words Fat Fat said were: "Daddy. Daddy. Daddy." He was always a daddy's boy. Michael used to come home late at night and hold his baby, after doing whatever he was doing, out working, selling nickels and dimes, whatever it was, whatever it took to survive, and then he'd dance with his child in front of a bright light, making long, fleeting shadows on the wall.

Roebuck leaves the Homicide Unit and goes to the morgue with her mother, Narra Crutchfield, and Michael's father. Roebuck steps to the front desk.

"Your relationship is?" asks the woman at the front desk.

"He is my son's father," Roebuck says.

"And your relationship?" the woman asks Lawrence McGill.

"He's my son," he says. McGill, 66, is retired from Ford, where he did a little bit of everything in the factory. He moves slowly, like his soul has been stunned. He wears a windbreaker and a leather baseball cap.

They stand in the lobby, waiting to see the body. It has already been identified from fingerprints.

Crutchfield doesn't want her daughter to do this, to see the body in this condition, but Roebuck won't listen. Roebuck wants to see her man, to give him one last hug.

Fat Fat is wired, moving quickly, burning off a sugar buzz. The lobby is a magnificent playground for a toddler, so big and bright, with so many couches and chairs and possibilities.

"Come here," McGill says to his grandson.

When he looks at Fat Fat, he sees his own son, the way he grins, mischievous and knowing.

"Say to me, 'That's my daddy's grin!' " McGill says, forcing a smile.

What will happen to this family tree, with roots that once felt strong but have been ripped from the ground? Why does a grandfather survive the streets but his son comes up dead? And what will happen to his grandson?

When does it end?

The three adults talk about funeral arrangements.

"How are we gonna pay?" Roebuck asks.

"We don't know yet," Crutchfield says.

"We gotta get a casket," Roebuck says.

And they need to get a cemetery plot.

Nobody has money for any of this.

A door opens slowly - a spooky, creaking grind - and a worker from the morgue leads Roebuck and McGill into a bright room. Roebuck doesn't know what to expect. Will she get to hug him? Will it be like what you see on television? Like on "CSI" or "Law & Order" with Michael lying on a cold metal bed under a white sheet or in a bag?

Crutchfield doesn't want to see him this way. Her relationship with Michael was just starting to get real, just starting to feel like family, stretching across racial lines, for she has white skin and he has black. Michael had just recently started calling her "Old Bird," street slang for Mom. "He didn't want to call me Mom and make it feel like I was taking the place of his mom," she says.

Michael's mother died of a heart attack in 1996.

So Crutchfield stays in the lobby, holding her grandson, little Fat Fat.

Roebuck and McGill are ushered into a room like a doctor's waiting room, with comfortable chairs, brick walls and purple carpet. It's not what they expected. The air smells stale, like a hotel room.

Under a counter, a foot above the ground, there is a computer screen set into a cabinet.

Roebuck looks at the screen and sees a picture of a young black man.

"Oh," she cries.

She leans forward, studying the image of a man, lying in the morgue, only his shoulders and face revealed.

Is it her boyfriend?

She can't tell. He looks so bloated and swollen. She inches closer to the screen, bending over, holding the cabinet to keep herself from falling on the ground.

McGill steps forward, leaning over Roebuck, peeking over her head, with his hands on his knees. He lets out a sigh of anguish.

It's Michael, his only son.

Suddenly, he feels all alone. This is the worst moment of his life. "They took out my heart," he would say later. "It took all the life out of me."

"Is that him?" McGill asks, not wanting to believe.

Roebuck cries harder.

"Can you tell?" McGill asks.

"Uh huh," she says. "It's him."

She starts to sob.

"Where was he shot?" Roebuck asks. The details. She wants the details.

"I don't really know," an investigator from the morgue says. "I didn't look at that part of the report. Let me see if I can find out."

He leaves and then returns.

Roebuck doesn't move. She stays bent down, holding the countertop, staring at the screen for more than 30 seconds.

"It was a gunshot to the head," the investigator says.

Roebuck cries harder, unable to move, still locked on the screen: "Look at him!"

"We will contact the funeral home," the investigator says.

Roebuck pulls herself up, goes into the lobby and falls into her mother's arms.

Crutchfield holds her daughter and her grandson. Always, this is how it seems to end. Young men die and grandmothers are left holding up the children and their children's children.

"Nobody knew where he was," McGill says to nobody in particular. "Nobody had heard from him. And he never misses Mother's Day. Even though he was 23, every Mother's Day, he would come to hug me. And on Mother's Day, he didn't show up. Nobody had heard from him."

They walk to the car and the sun is bright. Too bright. Almost painful.

"It didn't look like him," Roebuck cries.

She cries so hard she starts to cough and gag.

Fat Fat doesn't show any emotion. He's too young to understand. But he sits in the back of the car, riding away from the morgue, watching through the back window, listening to the cries, soaking it in, learning from it.

"They took his daddy!" Roebuck screams. "They took his daddy!"

Epilogue

The case is still open and the family is paralyzed by fear, not knowing why Michael was killed.

"We want them caught, but we don't want to die in the process," Crutchfield says.

McGill doesn't plan to investigate on his own: "It's in the hands of the Lord," he says. Roebuck and her mother are scared because they don't know if they are in danger. After a reporter visits them several days in a row, they are concerned because they hope it doesn't send the wrong message through the neighborhood. They hope nobody thinks they are talking to the police. And there's no telling who is watching.

"We are very afraid now," Crutchfield says. "These people are playing for keeps. People are dying."

They hear gunshots all the time. "AK47s," Crutchfield says. "Bazookas."

They hear cars screaming around the corner and cop chases. "It's every day," Roebuck says.

But they live in a house with bars over the front windows and that makes them feel safer. At the wake, Crutchfield heard a story that would be funny if it weren't so sad. "One of the other guys who hangs around with Michael was locked up in jail on something totally separate," Crutchfield says. "His mother came over to give condolences. When she heard everything that's going on, she said she's not getting her son out of jail. He's safer there. I don't blame her."

"I'm not gonna be here too long," Roebuck says.

Getting out, that's the only way she thinks she can protect her son.

Fat Fat is getting bigger every day. He likes to shoot baskets on a plastic hoop, and he often sits and holds a picture frame and kisses a photograph of his father.

For weeks, Roebuck couldn't sleep. All her plans have vanished. "Michael wanted to go to school for home improvement," she says. "Then, he wanted to open a clothing business."

Michael was going to start a line of clothing and call it Fat Fat, named after his son. "He wanted to put his son's footprints on the clothes," she says.

That was going to be the logo.

The footprints of a child.

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(SIDEBAR)

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Open Arms is a nonprofit organization that helps children and adults grieving for loved ones. More than anything, Open Arms needs male volunteers to work as counselors and mentors.

"Women tend to volunteer more, but we are desperately in search of male volunteers," said Gwendolyn Pettway, a clinical supervisor. "We could really use men who could give up three hours a week to come and help facilitate a group, to get our young guys to talk about death, to be present and explain things from a male perspective."

Many of the children who go to Open Arms have lost someone to murder. "It's such a bigger problem than we realize," Pettway said. "It's not just the child. If that child goes to school, it affects the entire class and teacher. Our program is designed not just to deal with children, but the teachers and parents."

The program provides free counseling for children and adults.

For more information about Open Arms, go to www.stjohn.org/openarms or call 313-921-7983 anytime.

Donations can be mailed to Open Arms, 11148 Harper Avenue, Detroit, MI 48213.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

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 violence continues. Through November, there were 1,279 shootings and 341 murders.

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 the special series that continues today. Staff writer Jeff Seidel and photographer Eric Seals spent the last six months traveling with homicide detectives to crime scenes, watching 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.

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Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

Tasha Roebuck, her mother, Narra Crutchfield, and her son, Michael, embrace in the Wayne County Morgue after confirming that a body was that of **Michael McGill**, the boy's father, who had been missing 10 days. McGill's father, Lawrence McGill, is in the foreground. The morgue is not what the family expected. Lawrence McGill and Roebuck viewed **Michael McGill** by means of a video image. The screen is set so it's eye level for people sitting on the couches.

Lawrence McGill holds a picture of his dead son, **Michael McGill**, and his grandson, **Michael McGill Jr.**, nicknamed Fat Fat. The abandoned home on Tuxedo near Dexter in Detroit where **Michael McGill**'s body was found. Tasha Roebuck and Lawrence McGill react after they view an image of Michael McGill's body at the Wayne County Morgue. COMING SUNDAY: Vernita Robbs parks her van on a gravel road near a branch of the Rouge River and gets out her tools. Today, she feels lucky. She is certain that she will find her nephew's body. A few hours later, she drives around the neighborhood putting up flyers about the case.

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