

MAN DIES AS 4 HOUSES SET ON FIRE - OFFICIALS SAY BLAZES ON DETROIT'S EAST SIDE WERE RELATED ARSONS

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Elcy Solomon's block wasn't always like this.

She remembers a vibrant street full of close-knit neighbors when she bought her two-story home 32 years ago **on** the 8700 block of Knodell, nestled **on** Detroit's east side near Detroit City Airport.

On Monday, she peered from her front porch across the street to the four **houses** that burned overnight -- acts of an arsonist. A 43-year-old **man**, whom she knew since he was a child, was killed in one of the **fires**.

"It was nothing like this," said Solomon, 62, looking out at the charred clothing and glass that littered the street. "It's gone to the dogs. I never thought I'd say it, but maybe it's time for me to leave."

Twice, Solomon woke early Monday to **fire** engines: first at 3:30 a .m., when the trucks extinguished two **fires** at vacant adjacent **houses** at 8703 Knodell and a duplex at 8709/8711 Knodell.

The **fire** trucks were back at 5:30 a .m. pouring water **on** 8753 Knodell, which was vacant, and 8765 Knodell, where Dwayne Ward died. Ward and his mother recently had been evicted from the **house**.

Ward could be heard yelling for help, firefighters said. He ran upstairs **as** the **fire** spread and was found dead in a bedroom of apparent smoke inhalation.

Ward's mother, Estell Ward, 79, said she lost the home after financial problems pushed her to fall victim to predatory lending in early July. She then moved in with a friend.

But her son, who had lived there since he was 2, couldn't let go of the home.

"When the people came there and **set** me out, he was determined to stay," she said. "I said 'Dwayne, get out of that **house**.' But he wouldn't give it up."

On Saturday, Dwayne Ward promised his mother that he would move into a nearby YMCA, where he had stayed before. But he must have still been staying **on** Knodell, she said.

Detroit **Fire** Arson Section Capt. Mike Markowski said someone doused the inside of the **houses** with a liquid accelerant before setting them ablaze. All four **fires** appear to be related, he said. The Detroit Police Homicide section is investigating.

Georgia Johnson, who has lived **on** the block for 41 years, didn't expect to get any sleep Monday night.

"I'm very nervous and very upset about what happened," she said. "We know these **fires** were **set** . We don't know why. Do we have arsonists over here?"

Estell Ward, who moved into her home in 1960 and raised four children, said the overgrown, vacant lots used to occupy nice, family homes.

Now, when **a house** goes empty, she said, drug dealers take it over.

"I used to sit **on** my porch late at night, early in the morning and it was safe," she said. "Now, there are dope **houses** up and down the street. **As** soon **as** someone moves out of **a house** , that's **a dope house** . The dope boys run the neighborhood now."

Estell Ward acknowledged that, **as** the neighborhood changed, her son changed and developed **a** drug problem, but said he wasn't **a** violent **man** .

Michigan Department of Corrections records show he was convicted of assault with **a** deadly weapon and served five years' probation.

Just **as** she remembered **a** friendly Dwayne Ward coming over to borrow **a** cup of sugar at age 10, when the neighborhood was safe, Solomon now pictures him **as a** grown **man** , high **on** drugs and harassing passersby. Yet she said, "I still cared about him."

Still, **as a** mother, Estell Ward grieves.

"He was upstairs crying for help," she said. "It hurts me so bad to think of that."

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Caption: Map Detroit Free Press

Dwayne Ward, 43, who yelled for help died of smoke inhalation.

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