

LAW OF THE STREET - OVERWORKED POLICE CAN'T BE EVERYWHERE, SO HIS FAMILY HUNTS FOR A MISSING MAN

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The windows are rolled down and the air smells like dead dogs rotting in the woods.

Vernita Robbs parks her van on a gravel road near a branch of the Rouge River and gets out her tools - shovel, ax, pick and metal detector.

Today, she feels lucky. She is certain she will find her nephew's body.

A cloud of mosquitoes guards the entrance to a small patch of woods and the ground is a snarl of weeds.

Robbs pulls her socks over the bottom of her pants legs and sprays herself with mosquito repellent. She's gone through two cans in the last two days.

For the last two months, she has searched for **Dwan Stowers**, 24, who was last seen May 3 in Detroit. She assumes he is dead. After he went missing, his family plastered the area with posters, on telephone poles and in stores.

The Homicide Unit of the Detroit Police Department investigated the case for several days - at one time, three detectives worked together to solve it - but they couldn't get enough evidence to convince the prosecutor's office to sign an arrest warrant without a body.

So his disappearance remains unsolved. **Dwan Stowers** is missing and presumed dead, but he is not counted in the homicide statistics. Police do not believe the case is tied to drugs.

It is the middle of June and the file sits under a pile of other cases on a desk in homicide, a situation that happens more often than not when leads run out and a case goes cold. With the spike in murders in Detroit in the first six months of the year, the Homicide Unit has been overwhelmed.

And now, on this hot, humid summer morning, **Stowers'** family has been forced to look for him on its own.

"It's real hard, depressing," Robbs says. "I know he's rotting somewhere."

The desperation hangs on her face. She's trapped inside a life of violence, an enormous problem that is hard to comprehend. But after you walk into the woods with her and peek inside this world, after you step through the weeds and start to see how many people are carrying guns, after you witness the frustration in everyday living, after you see how people have been pushed to the limit - you start to understand why it continues and why it is so difficult to stop.

Sources have told police that the body was buried in a place where they will never find it. But Robbs won't give up because somebody called her with a tip. "Look in the woods by 6 Mile," the man said.

It seems promising.

"My great-nephew was out here and he saw some kids and they said they throw bodies all up and down this river," Robbs says. "They said, if you can get up and under that bridge, you can see the bodies. But we can't get up under there because you have to have a rowboat or something."

Robbs pulls out two surgical masks. Throughout the woods, there are dead pit bulls, bred for illegal fighting. This is where some of them end up when they lose - dumped in the woods. Most of the dogs lie in the open, covered with flies and maggots. The scent of rotting flesh is so strong it smells like a mass grave in a war zone.

Robbs has light brown skin, almost caramel, and blond hair and dark eyebrows. She gives one of the masks to Ann Major, who puts it over her mouth and nose. Major, 45, who lives in Detroit, is **Stowers**' godmother.

Robbs and her family have searched for **Stowers** for six consecutive weekends, 10 hours every Saturday and Sunday. They have done it so long, it has its own code name. They call it "Going out into the field."

"Sometimes, we go every day," Robbs says. "But mainly, it's all day on Saturday and Sunday. All day. Maybe, if there was a whole lot more of us, we could do more."

A few times, they have rounded up several friends and family members, a present-day posse, but for the most part, it's Robbs and whomever she can grab.

"You can't get nobody to do nothing," Robbs says. "They are all scared of mosquitoes. They all said there was something wrong with me. There's nothing wrong with me. I ain't never been scared of it."

Robbs walks into the woods. "There's a dead dog over here," she says. "We've been out here smelling this for a whole month."

They approach the dog but take another path toward a branch of the Rouge River. They've searched these woods so many times that they have created their own paths through the weeds. One time, Major thought she found a body in a plastic bag. She stabbed at it with a shovel and it was soft, but when she opened the bag, she found another dead dog.

But it's not just the dead dogs. They also have to worry about the live ones. A few days ago, a pack chased them out of the woods. "But we kept going," Robbs says.

She waves a metal detector across the ground. **Stowers** has a metal rod in his leg from a car accident and Robbs hopes the metal detector can find it. For several weeks, she rented one, but the cost was starting to add up so she decided to buy this one for \$490. She figures it will be cheaper.

"He had a metal bar from his knee to his hip," Robbs says. "They said this metal detector will even pick up the bullets."

As Robbs sweeps the metal detector back and forth, it beeps. Major digs into the loose earth, but she doesn't find anything but worms.

Robbs glances around the woods. Shafts of light cut through the branches. She has trained herself to look for flies swarming over mounds of dirt, believing it will indicate the area surrounding a rotting body.

"We are looking for evidence," she says. "We are not just looking for his body. We are looking for anything that will help this conviction. I imagine it's a hard case without the body."

Police say they try to get information from family members, but they never encourage them to investigate on their own because it could put them in danger. And it might hurt a case in court. Robbs could contaminate a crime scene, allowing a defense attorney to raise questions as to whether she planted evidence.

But the Homicide Unit is so busy that Robbs says she feels like this is her only option. Nobody else is looking right now. Police believe **Stowers** was shot. In one sense, he is a stereotypical homicide victim in Detroit: 8 out of 10 murder victims are shot; 8 out of 10 are male and almost 90 percent are black.

But this case is also unusual: Most of the time, nobody makes any effort to hide the body.

Robbs goes to another spot and the metal detector beeps.

"It's not staying on," Robbs says. "It's got to stay on."

"Right," Majors says.

"It stinks right here, though," Robbs says.

They find a mound in the shape of a body, covered with weeds. It's been several months since **Stowers** disappeared, so they figure the grave will be covered with weeds.

The metal detector goes off. "I hope we don't dig up somebody else," Robbs says.

"I know that's right," Major says.

She takes a break and Robbs jumps on the edge of the shovel, driving it into the hard ground.

But they don't find anything.

They walk to the river and look up and down the banks. The water gurgles slowly, and they figure a body wouldn't move very fast. It would still be nearby.

"We have done been everywhere. That's the tripped-out part," Robbs says. "I don't think they threw him in the river. I think, like they said, they buried him."

They turn and follow another path.

"I don't feel they are gonna carry him way up here," Robbs says.

She has trained herself to think like a killer. Where would you bury a body? How far would you take it? **Stowers** was a big guy; how many people would it take?

They get back into the van and drive up and down the streets near the house where they believe **Stowers** was killed. They come to a field, surrounded by woods.

"We didn't go through there, did we?" Robbs asks.

"Yes, we did," Major says.

"With a metal detector?"

"No, not with the metal detector."

They walk across the field, about 200 yards from the road, to the tree line.

"There's an opening right there," Robbs says. The field is probably too big for somebody to drag a body across it, but she figures somebody could have driven a car across the field to dump the body in the woods.

The metal detector starts to beep.

Major digs.

Nothing.

Robbs jumps back.

"Oooh ohh oooh, that mosquito done eat my eyeball up."

They walk down another trail and find nothing but an old picnic table.

"Looking keeps you occupied," Major says. "You aren't waiting around, wondering for the news that day. It does give you some type of comfort and we are not giving up. We gotta keep going. We gotta keep doing what we doing. I just feel that one day we will find him."

They walk back to the van and somebody comes out of a nearby house.

"What's going on out there?" a man asks.

"I'll give you a flyer," Robbs says.

She points to the pictures of the alleged suspects. "They buried him in this area," Robbs says.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says. "I hope you find them guys."

They get back into the van and drive up the road. In many ways, this is one of the hidden gems in Detroit - a pocket of wilderness along a gurgling river. But in Robbs' eye, it's the perfect place to dump a body. They've been up and down just about every street in this area. Robbs figures she has spent more than \$500 on gas, driving around in this 2001 Chrysler Voyager. Whenever they get a chance, they search backyards and garages, trash bins and vacant houses. "We spent days, going up each and every block," Major says. "We take our time and drive slowly. We talk to the neighbors. We pass out flyers. We are putting them on posts and stores. We take them to the mall, gas station, everywhere where somebody can see it."

Robbs wishes the detectives could stake out the suspects, but she understands they don't have time to do that.

"I believe the detectives don't have enough manpower to be following one of them around," Major says. "They don't have enough manpower or resources to really work. Then, with crime in the city of Detroit so high, they have so many cases, it's really hard to put as much attention into one case. That's why we, as a family, are doing all we can to help assist them so they can help us. Anything we uncover or find out, we give it back to them."

They are trying to get ready - mentally and emotionally - for the horror of finding a decomposed loved one. "I know it's probably going to be hard," Robbs says. "But to me, I don't care."

"I know it would affect us for the rest of our lives, but that's not what we are worried about," Major says. "We want to find **Dwan** so his mother can have closure, because she isn't handling it well."

"A lot of people are scared of dead folks," Robbs says. "I know I'll be sick, I'll be off of work for a while. I'll have to get my nerves back together, but I don't care. Then again, I pray that I don't."

Driving past the house of one of the alleged suspects, Robbs slows down and looks out the window.

"They have been in there," Robbs says. "They got all their mail out of there."

"They sure have," Major says.

Robbs studies the house, noticing something else: "The windows have been pulled up some more."

They keep driving, looking for clues.

"If we can't find him before the winter break, I know that when hunting season comes, hunters find a lot of bodies, but we are hoping that we will be able to find him before that," Robbs says.

They turn into an old cemetery and park amid the tombstones. They walk to the back of the cemetery, and look in a ditch, but can't find anything suspicious.

So they are off again, putting miles on the van. They park next to an abandoned house with an industrial-sized trash container out front.

Robbs and Major enter the house, careful when using the stairs, because the wood looks rotten.

Nothing.

Outside, Robbs goes through a pile of trash and finds bits and pieces of a car that was chopped up into one-inch squares, but it's impossible to tell what kind of car it was. It might have been the car that took **Stowers** away. It's the same color.

They know it's dangerous, walking into abandoned houses and poking around trash cans. "We pray and take God with us, and we do what we gotta do," Major says. "You have to stay prayerful."

And if that doesn't work, Robbs has the next best thing: She brought along a gun. Just in case.

Violence has been a constant in Ann Major's life. She has lost both her sons to violence - one was murdered and the other is in prison, convicted of first-degree murder in an unrelated case.

"The situation was very similar," she says of her 18-year-old, who was killed Nov. 18, 1996.

"One of his children's mothers called and said he is missing. I got suspicious. I called his friend and he said he hadn't seen him.

"They took him out into a field on Marcus and Georgia and they shot him 11 times and left him there. By the grace of God, they didn't dispose of the body. Some drunks were coming past at 7 o'clock in the morning, going to the 7 o'clock liquor store, and saw him and called the police."

Major helped the police investigate the murder. She suspected that one of his friends was involved and she found his home address and where he worked.

"The boy called me Momma," Major says. "I pretended that I didn't know what was going on. I was pretending that we weren't accusing him, because he had moved. I got his address and his job. I was laid off and I told him that I needed a place to go and be quiet at, at his house. When I got all the information, I went into the neighborhood and started talking to people and they said how he was bragging about it. I turned it all into police. They went after him."

He was convicted.

"We never could figure out the reason why he did it," she says.

Robbs has also been affected by violence - it's hard to find many in Detroit who haven't been. She saw her brother killed in 1984.

"Everything is friends, so-called friends," Robbs says. "Friends killing each other."

"They don't know how to resolve their problems without violence," Major says.

It's well after noon, but they don't stop to eat lunch. They just drink lots of water so they don't get dehydrated.

Driving around the 6 Mile area, Robbs thinks back to the abandoned house, where they found bits and pieces of a car.

She wants to work the neighborhood and find out who is chopping up cars, because she has a hunch that's what happened to the car that took away **Stowers**.

"If they can dispose of a car like that, I mean, cut it up to little bitty pieces ..." Robbs says.

Robbs stops her van and hooks up with her niece, Talisa. They are putting up new posters, this time in color. The family has produced a series of posters that have grown in sophistication and accusation. They have posted more than 1,500.

The first batch was straightforward, black and white: Missing person. **Dwan Stowers**. Height 5-8. Weight 220. DOB 5/5/80. It reads: "Last seen on Monday, May 3. He was last seen in Detroit in the area of Plymouth and Steel. He was driving a 1986 Burgundy Toyota Camry. If you have any information, at all, please contact Gwen **Stowers**, Vernita Robbs."

The latest batch includes the name and pictures of the suspects, naming the person they believe was the shooter.

Robbs stops her van next to a telephone pole that used to have a poster on it. Every time she puts up a poster, somebody takes it down.

"They don't want nobody to see them," Major says.

At Foley and Littlefield, Talisa pounds a new flyer into a telephone pole. They put up another poster, two blocks from where the suspects once lived.

Robbs hasn't talked to the police lately. "They keep saying there is nothing they can do," she says.

But she's done just about everything else. She has written letters to the state attorney general, the United States Attorney's Office, "American's Most Wanted" and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"But nobody called me back," she says.

In the middle of the summer, at the same time Robbs is looking for the body, there are several high-profile crime cases around the country. The media is fixated on the Laci Peterson murder trial and the Kobe Bryant case.

In Detroit, somebody shot nine people at the Freedom Festival fireworks, which became a top priority. There were news conferences and intense media scrutiny.

But those are the exceptions. For the most part, the Detroit Homicide Unit has only a skeleton crew to investigate the skeletons - the everyday murders. It's not like television. Cases don't get wrapped up in an hour. In Detroit, if the detectives can't get a confession or get somebody to tell them who did it, most of the time it is extremely difficult to close a case. And the cases pile up. Detroit averages a homicide every day. Besides investigating current murders, the 43 street detectives must spend time in court, fill out endless paperwork, cover three shifts and work on old cases. The unit solved fewer than half of its cases in the first six months of the year.

In the middle of July, a man calls Robbs and tells her to look under a certain porch.

A few days later, on July 28, she gets a similar call from a woman who says she has information about **Stowers** being buried under the porch.

"You need to check under there," she says.

Robbs doesn't recognize the voice. The person sounds like a young girl.

"No, I haven't been under there yet," Robbs says, growing interested. The brother of the main suspect used to live on that street until a month ago.

"Well, you need to go check the porch," the girl says, "the secret passageway under the porch."

Robbs starts to get excited because she has heard other clues suggesting **Stowers** is buried under a porch.

"My brother-in-law talked to a crackhead who was walking up and down the street and he asked him if he knew anything and he said, 'They shot this guy named Dino over here. They killed Dino. He over here somewhere.' "

She figures the guy just got the name wrong. Dino and **Dwan**.

Police use the same techniques, talking to hookers and people on the streets. The ones closest to the street always know what's going on in a neighborhood.

"I'm focusing on porches now," Robbs says.

On July 30, Robbs rounds up four of **Stowers** ' cousins and some of their friends. They meet at a home in a leafy subdivision in Southfield. In her trunk, she has three shovels, a rake, hoe, ax and spike.

"I'll be glad when it's over with," she says.

Robbs leads a caravan to the house and parks in front. They've been keeping an eye on the house, and think the residents have moved out. Three of the cousins go under the porch and start digging.

There is a lingering sense of danger: This could have been a setup. Perhaps whoever killed **Stowers** is fed up with all of those posters and wants to get Robbs and her family out in the open to kill them in a drive-by shooting.

Ever cautious, Robbs tells a couple of the cousins and friends to sit on the porch at a nearby house, on lookout. If anything bad goes down, they are going to give a signal.

Robbs walks toward the house, carrying a plastic bag. Inside, there's a .380 pistol. For protection.

She moves the metal detector under the porch and it beeps. The dirt is soft, as if it had been recently filled in. As they dig through the first layer of dirt, they find several roots that have been recently cut. Again, it seems like a good sign.

"Do you see it?" Robbs asks. "Ain't it soft?"

"Too soft," somebody says.

"Do you see the lump?" she says.

When she looks at the ground, it looks like the shape of a body. They break the white wood lattice that wraps around the porch to make it easier to dig. A board under the house looks like it is covering the opening to a passageway. "Look at that wood," Robbs says. "There ain't nothing back there?"

One of the cousins has a long stick. "Take that thing and stick it in the dirt as far as it will go," Robbs says.

But they don't find anything. Robbs walks across the yard and goes into the backyard of another house. "Hey, anybody live in this house?" Robbs asks. "There is a back porch on it."

It seems promising. They didn't find anything under the front porch. Unwilling to stop, they go to the back and start digging.

Somebody drives by in a car and guns the engine. It roars loudly.

Salvador Ware, 24, one of **Stowers** ' cousins from Detroit, jumps and Terrance Robbs, a 24-year-old cousin from Oak Park, tries to be reassuring: "Don't worry. I'm watching. I got a good eye."

Robbs looks at the ground and sees holes and mounds where a body could be buried. She walks across the yard again, searching through some weeds, holding the metal detector. She goes to the backyard and stands over a hole about the size of a man. "Somebody been digging right here," she says. "Do you think they dug him up?"

They start to dig. Again, they find roots that were recently broken.

"It's big enough to put a man in there."

The area is just about right - 2-feet-wide and 6-feet-long.

Robbs goes through a list of possibilities: maybe, he was here and they moved him; or maybe, this is where they got the dirt to bury him someplace else.

Quan Thomas, a 28-year-old cousin from Detroit, digs into the yellow clay. "He's been missing for a while, man," he says. "If they have him here and then relocated him, the roots dried out long enough to say it's been done. It's all the way dry."

While they search in the backyard, digging holes, the rest of the neighborhood goes on without noticing. An ice cream truck goes by, and kids are playing out in the street.

Robbs studies depressions on the grass she thinks look like tire tracks. She figures somebody killed **Stowers**, drove into the backyard and buried him right here.

"Whatever they did, they had to back that car up," Robbs says. "You see what I'm saying, up in the yard? Do you see what I'm saying? Through that opening right there."

Shawn Thomas, 30, of Detroit, can see it, too.

"See how the grass just lays back," Shawn says. "And that car looks like it backed up and stopped right there."

"Right," Robbs says.

As they talk, they start to sound more like real police detectives. Detectives often bounce ideas off each other, tossing out theories.

The more they talk, the more energized they become. Seeing possibility.

So they dig some more.

Terrance Robbs is digging and the others are watching him. "A little less lip and a little more digging," Quan Thomas says.

Vernita Robbs studies the ground and sees some beetles.

"Don't beetles collect near a dead body?" she asks. "Beetles go around dead bodies."

Somebody agrees: They saw it on "CSI." The television show has sparked interest in police work, but it has hurt the police department in other ways. A few years ago, nobody understood DNA evidence. But now, juries want more than a confession and evidence. They want the DNA evidence that links somebody to a crime.

Under a brick, they find a white larva that wiggles like a worm and Robbs asks, "Do those go around dead people?"

The cousins stop working, checking out some more white larvae. She's impatient and snaps them back to work: "Come on, you all, why are you all diggin' and playin'? He's right there."

After an hour, a neighbor walks up to see what they are doing.

"Are you looking for a body?" he asks.

They nod.

Robbs quizzes him on when the alleged suspects moved. "I didn't notice," the neighbor says.

Nobody ever seems to notice anything.

Nobody wants to get involved.

One of **Stowers'** friends gets another idea: they should look in the house, in case somebody buried the body in the basement or left behind some evidence.

There is an open window to the basement. One of the friends slides into the house and comes up the stairs to open the front door, using his shirt tail to grip the door handle, careful not to leave any fingerprints.

He steps outside and pulls out a gun. Robbs pulls the gun out of her bag and hands it to one of the friends.

A couple of the friends go inside, each holding a gun, drawn and ready to fire, in case somebody is inside. In that moment, in their eyes, it's a perfectly natural thing to do.

They don't take time to consider the ramifications: What happens if there is somebody inside? What if that person has a gun? Are they prepared for a shoot-out? Are they prepared for the consequences? What if somebody ends up dead? If there is a murder, this is the moment that will be debated by lawyers, cops and a jury, trying to measure intent and motives. The courts are filled with these cases. Robbs stays outside, standing in the backyard. About 10 seconds pass and Robbs watches a red car with two older white guys go by slowly. A four-door car? White guys in this neighborhood?

"Cops," Robbs screams, from outside. "Get out of there."

They rush out of the house, careful not to leave fingerprints. And they walk back to the curb. Everyone is sweaty and tired and angry. And once again, they have failed to find **Stowers** . What more can they do?

As they load up the vans, one of the friends lets out a sigh. He is certain there are people who know where the body is buried. He knows who they are. How can he get them to talk?

"Maybe it's time to kidnap somebody," he says.

It's hard to tell whether he's joking.

Of course, that would be wrong. Of course, that would be against the law, a horrible, reprehensible thing to do. But in their eyes - in that moment of hopelessness, after you have smelled the dead dogs and your back is sweaty and tired from digging, trying to find a rotting corpse; when you are all alone and it doesn't seem like the cops can help; and you have already crossed a line, after entering a house with guns drawn; and your life has been sucked into a world where the rules are different, where everything is spinning out of control, the guns and bodies and threats and danger, with the frustration building, and no end in sight; in this place where it seems the only answer to end the violence is the threat of more violence, the idea of staging a kidnapping, the threat of doing something more, an eye for an eye, whatever it takes - it starts to sound perfectly natural, the only option left.

Contact reporter JEFF SEIDEL at 313-223-4558 or seidel@freepress.com. Contact photographer ERIC SEALS at 313-223-4414 or seals@freepress.com.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Anyone with information about a crime in metro Detroit can call 800-773-2587 anytime. You will be given a secret identification code, and police will never know your name.

"We work as a buffer between the anonymous tipster and law enforcement," said Craig Yaldoo, the president and CEO of Alliance for a Greater, Safer Detroit, which runs the hot line. "If there is good information, based on one of the tips, the tipster is paid a cash reward."

The organization has awarded \$56,750 since September 2001. The money comes from private donations.

"We are really focusing on trying to bring the homicide rate in the city of Detroit down by cleaning up some of the old unsolved cases," Yaldoo said. "We've put together a response team to start paying more attention to the tips that come in about homicide."

Yaldoo, a former prosecutor in Wayne County and state drug czar, said the community should be outraged about violence. "It's a shame that we are turning our backs on so many young men and women, and it's something we are going to regret years from now," Yaldoo said. "We are at a crisis stage. We have violence that is erupting. We have to get people to rise up against the violence. We are just so frustrated with the apathy with this issue. It's sickening. It's a tragedy."

The organization will be renamed Crime Stoppers 1-800-Speak Up on Jan. 1. "We voted to change our name to start focusing on the murders," Yaldoo said. "We are desperately seeking board members who have the passion to help lift this organization, so we can solve more cases."

Tax-deductible donations can be mailed to Crime Stoppers 1-800-Speak Up, 200 Renaissance Center, Suit 2653, Detroit, MI 48243. "We need donations," Yaldoo said. "We are trying to build a reward fund and we need volunteers to help with the data input of the tip information."

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Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

Many dead dogs are dumped in the woods near McNichols and the Rouge River, where Ann Major, left, and Vernita Robbs search for **Stowers'** body, so they wear protection against the stench. Vernita Robbs tacks up a missing-person notice near where her nephew **Dwan Stowers** was last seen. Salvador Ware, left, and Terrance Robbs, both holding shovels, dig under a porch, looking for the body of their cousin, **Dwan Stower**.

Inside Squad 8 at the Detroit Police Department, Vernita Robbs, right, talks with Homicide Detective Miriam Stevenson about her missing nephew. Detective Marian Stevenson heads to the crime lab with evidence in the **Stowers** case, including a bucket with traces of chemical solvents, a bloody rug and mops. Ann Major and Vernita Robbs head out with a shovel and metal detector into a field on the west side. **Dwan Stowers** had a metal rod in his leg from a car accident.

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