

COVER STORY

# what killed DANIELLE

By Paul Bass

**O**n the first Thursday night of her first February, Danielle Monique Taft sat in a stroller in her grandmother's living room on the first floor of an Orchard Street tenement. A bullet from a 9 mm semiautomatic, one of at least 14 fired by someone she didn't know, flew through the shattered glass of the apartment's front window. It ripped into her skull, right above her eye.

Her mother was in the bathroom, smoking a cigarette. Their clothes—mother's and daughter's—were packed, ready for a cab that was already an hour and a half late to bring them across town, to an apartment in a somewhat safer neighborhood.

Unlike the cab, the ambulance arrived promptly. Like the cab, it was too late to save 7-month-old Danielle's life.

The gun that fired the bullets came from a private home in Hamden, police believe. They believe a burglar stole the gun. Rather than protect a middle-class homeowner from criminals, the gun ended up on the street in New Haven's black community. The semiautomatic ended up in several different hands, and it shot more than just Danielle before police retrieved it.

A week after the shooting, a small part of Danielle remained zipped up in a small bag with a floral design. Danielle's mother, Shirley Troutman, carries the bag with her the way other women carry cosmetics in a purse. The bag contains Danielle's favorite toy—a plastic pretzel—and the beads Danielle wore in her hair at the time of the shooting.

Folded up inside the bag is also a T-shirt, the one Shirley wore when she ran out of the bathroom, grabbed Danielle, and discovered her baby's head ripped apart. The shirt still has the baby's blood stains on it.

"No one," Troutman says, clutching the shirt, "can ever make me wash this shirt again."

**A**fter Danielle Taft suffered the final, deadly moment of violence in her life, she became a household name in New Haven. People's attention focused on the "Who" question. Who would do such a thing? Who killed Danielle?

As of presstime, police were closing in on three young men they believe were responsible for the killing. They believe that one of the three shot up the apartment in revenge for a fight earlier in the day involving Danielle's 16-year-old uncle.

In the end, who killed Danielle may prove a relatively simpler question than the "What" question: What killed Danielle?

To people who believe the answer is "a bad neighborhood," the answer is "a bad neighborhood."



loved Danielle and want to make sense out of her murder, what killed her was more than a bullet.

It was a culture of violence fed by drugs, by factory closings, by absentee slumlords, by strains on family inherited from generations of dependency and lack of opportunity, by a tolerance and even promotion of guns as an acceptable tool for confronting fear.

That culture, and the indifference to it from both within and without, has been slowly killing thousands of other black children in New Haven. Danielle was introduced to that culture even before she left her mother's womb. She lived it every day.

Danielle knew not just violence, but joy, too. She had more nicknames than some babies have outfits. She had two extended families worth of admirers who showered her with love. She ate as voraciously as she grinned. "She has no cry," her grandmother would say. The baby even smiled in her sleep.

The joy Danielle knew makes her death even more tragic to the people close to her. It's why, for instance, Shirley Troutman and Danny Taft are willing to talk

candidly about their daughter Danielle's short life, to relieve for a stranger the greatest pain a human being can feel, the pain of watching her or his own baby blown away. They want the community to understand what killed Danielle—to stop other children from being killed, too.

## Palm Sunday Dinner

When Danielle let Shirley Troutman know she was on the way, Shirley had only a few months to prepare.

Shirley discovered Danielle's presence in her womb almost a year ago, on Palm Sunday. She and Danny were over at her mother's house for a holiday dinner.

"Danny made a ham-and-cheese sandwich for me with lettuce and tomato. My mom was making a ham dinner and macaroni and cheese. I said, 'There's something floating around in my stomach.'"

She called everyone into the living room to take a look. Shirley's belly had grown quite a bit recently. She says it never occurred to her a baby was growing in there. "I used to be huge in high school. My cycle was all messed up, anyway."

Shirley had wanted to have a baby for eight years, since finishing up Hillhouse. She tried and tried, with different guys, but no luck. A few months earlier, she had run into Danny on Winchester Avenue, near the Elm Haven projects. She hadn't seen much of him since they grew up in the old Elm Haven high-rises, one floor apart: "I used to look at him a lot, but he never knew." On this afternoon he was driving his truck home from a roofing job. She was stopping by the corner store. Older than when they lived a block apart, Shirley had lost her weight. Her face had grown into a woman's, with soft features. She hadn't outgrown the look of delightful mischief in her eyes. "I asked him for a cigarette. He asked me to come in the truck. And that was it."

Now, on Palm Sunday, Danny was hovering over Shirley's stomach on her mother's couch. Something was definitely moving in there. They could see the baby kicking. "We were so happy."

They celebrated. Then Shirley thought about all the cocaine she'd been doing the past few months that this baby had been growing inside her.

"I bugged out," Shirley recalls. "Oh my god—I was pregnant and I was doing this. I went right to the hospital."

It turned out Shirley was already into her third trimester of pregnancy. That meant that even before Danielle the fetus had a fully formed brain, she, too, was taking in cocaine.



Shirley Troutman and Danny Taft leaving their daughter's funeral.

When a pregnant woman takes cocaine, she decreases the blood flow to the fetus, which in turn cuts off needed oxygen. Yale obstetrics professor David Jones likens it to forcing someone's head under water. How much damage you do depends on how much they end up having to hold their breath. In the long term, a pregnant mom's cocaine use can leave a child with permanent brain damage. That damage doesn't usually show up until kindergarten or first grade, according to Jones.

In the short term, cocaine use can force a woman to deliver too early, which in turn can cause a host of problems, from brain damage to death. Luckily for the Troutman-Taft family, the folks at the hospital found that Danielle seemed healthy. Shirley maintains she instantly kicked her coke habit.

"Had as I wanted Danielle, I was willing to jump over backwards," she says. How did she do it? "I stopped being around people who were doing it. No one can make you stop. It's all in your mind. I had to want to stop, because of Danielle. She changed my life in so many ways."

On Independence Day, when the contractors started, Danny and Shirley had a fight over when she should go to the hospital. They were too mad to speak. But by the time Danielle appeared at 3:15 the following morning, Danny was there at Yale-New Haven to cut the cord.

The baby was 6 pounds, 2 ounces, and just fine. Nothing about the delivery stands out in the mind of the delivering doctor, Carol Kandall. In fact, Kandall has no recollection that she delivered this baby.

Kandall spends part of her time seeing middle-class patients at her private 2 Church St. South office, part of her time seeing impoverished clients at the Hill Health Clinic. In her 14 years at Hill Health, Kandall says, she has had plenty of patients like Shirley, people she never gets to know. The economics of any large medical institution require many doctors to see the same client. Plus, even though pregnant women from poor neighborhoods often have the most health risks, ranging from drug use to violence inside and outside the home, they don't always seek prenatal care until late in the pregnancy, Kandall points out.

"It has to do with the fact that your mind is elsewhere. Violence is such a part of their lives. These people have such difficult lives, health care becomes a low priority," she says.

"It's very scary. We live in a country that expects the medical system and the legal system to solve a violence problem that society looks the other way at. We're in a society that says it's OK to assault people. It's OK to take drugs. It's OK to take advantage of people who are littler than you are. We're looking at this from the wrong end of the gun. Literally."

Shirley proudly took Danielle home. Home isn't one particular place for

Shirley; it's a series of family members' and friends' apartments all over town. At the time of Danielle's birth, she lived home at 810 Orchard St., the apartment rented by her mom, Charlene. Most of the following months, though, Shirley says, she and Danny and Danielle lived across town in Fair Haven, in Shirley's apartment on English Street.

As on Orchard Street, you don't

**"He told me that it was my responsibility to see what I could do to help mankind. It was not his."**

have to go far to purchase cocaine on English Street. Dealers openly flash packets at suburban drivers two blocks west, on Brown. Two blocks east is the Quintapace Terrace housing project, another popular spot for suburban shoppers making a quick stop off I-91. But unlike Orchard Street, English

Street is a relatively safe, in parts even pretty place, to raise a child. A two-block-long greenway across the street from the houses offers an inviting daylight play area, except for the broken glass. A larger expanse of green spreads out on the other side of Crown Avenue, next to a grade school. It's a nice field to play in, when nobody's firing guns by the projects at the other end.

### Christmas Dinner

Danielle was accustomed to receiving presents by the time the family gathered at Charlene's Orchard Street apartment on Christmas. People were always dropping money or toys in her hand. Danielle was the biggest present of all, for relatives on both sides of the family, plus close family friends who came to call themselves Danielle's cousins. They giggled at the smiles she beamed their way. They laughed at the way she pulled Shirley's braids. And they regaled her with nicknames. Her grandma called her "grandma." Shirley called her "mommy" and "my little Porcupine." Shirley's sister started rhyming one day—"Danielle, Welly, Pelly." "Pelly" stuck. Say that name, and you could count on that little head popping up in recognition.

The biggest present of all was for Shirley. "If you didn't see me, you didn't see Danielle," she says. "We were a package deal. If I was going across the street, she was with me, in my arms."

Once the Christmas dinner dishes were put away, Shirley and Danielle settled down for the evening—and stayed for weeks.

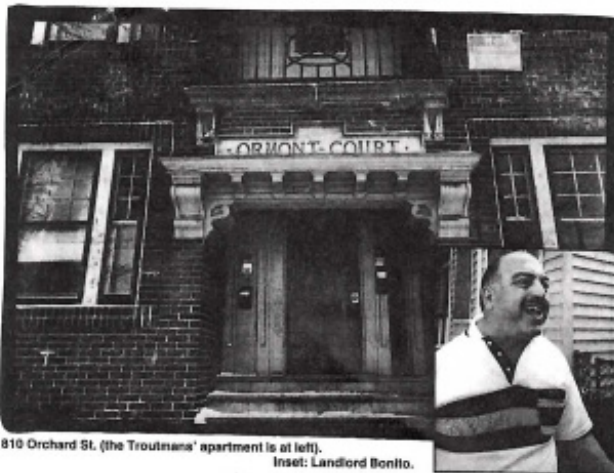
The three-story, 12-apartment brick building has a name, Ormscot Court, etched in stone above the doorway. Built in 1920, the Ormscot has never, according to city records, had a major remodeling. But by the 1960s, when thousands of people still turned out rifles at the Winchester factory two blocks east, stable families continued to fill the building. Odell Cahoon, who grew up across Dixwell Avenue, remembers Ormscot Court as quiet, in good shape, like the whole area. He remembers visiting friends in the building.

Now, as the lieutenant in charge of the Dixwell neighborhood community police station, Cahoon has his cops visit the building to make drug busts. It's a known shooting gallery, he says, a place where addicts shoot their works.

Charlene Troutman knew that already. She was used to sweeping up the needles in the hall, according to Shirley. She spent more time, though, worrying about keeping the building's rodents and roaches out of the apartment where her granddaughter was now staying.

Not too many families live in 810 Orchard anymore. At least one family which does left a note for the mail carrier to "please ring bell when leaving mail," rather than risk having, say, a

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810 Orchard St. (the Troutmans' apartment is on left).

Inset: Landford Bonito.

## DANIELE

check plucked out of the abused boxes. The largest family name writes on the front door is The Ville, the neighborhood drug gang which spray painted its moniker to leave no doubt just who controls a block where nobody seems to play by the rules.

Byron and Melissa Schmidt don't play by the rules. They live in Guilford, a community as racially segregated as Orchard Street. For years, they also owned and rented out three large white apartment houses at the other end of the block—and allowed the houses to become unlivable fire traps. When enough tenants or squatters tumbled the apartments, the couple, rather than refurbishing rent money into keeping the buildings safe, let the trespassers take over. New Haven had to sue them to take control of the destroyed edifices once the Schmidts stopped paying taxes.

Five years ago, before the buildings became what government terms "unfit for human habitation," Elder Theodore Brooks, pastor of Bethel Heights First Pentecostal Church, the block's only stable property, wrote to Schmidt. Please take care of your buildings. Brooks wrote; they're dragging down the neighborhood.

Byron Schmidt wrote back, according to Brooks. "He told me that it was my responsibility to see what I could do to go help, not that it was not his."

Reached last week by telephone Schmidt said, "I'm very concerned about the family on Orchard Street and what happened to them." He said he couldn't say anything else because it was a "bad time to talk." He failed to return subsequent calls.

After Brooks' letter, the Schmidts eventually stopped trying to fill the apartments. One of the buildings caught on fire. Dealers and squatters kept damaging them further, while using them as a base of operations.

Finally, the city government has started taking over the buildings. The city sold one of the buildings so far to Brooks' church, which is gradually trying to restore the block.

The owner of Charlene Troutman's building at 810 Orchard, Benjamin Bonito of Hamden, doesn't play by the rules, either.

Bonito owes the city \$159,418 in unpaid back taxes on the many run-

down buildings he rents to government-subsidized families all over town, including \$8,542 on 810 Orchard, according to New Haven tax collector Sal Calderone. That's money the city could have used to, say, hire more cops and building inspectors to start enforcing rules in neighborhoods like Downtown. Or the city could have used the money owed by slumlords like Bonito to keep down taxes, so that more responsible property owners could afford to maintain their buildings better.

Bonito does insist that his tenants play by the rules, according to Shirley. She says her mom, whose rent was paid largely by the state Rental Assistance Program, wanted to move because of how dangerous the building was, but Bonito wouldn't let Charlene out of the lease, according to Shirley. "He wouldn't let you break your lease. And he was quick to evict you" if any problems arose, Shirley says of Bonito. "If he'd let her move, Danielle would still be here."

On the other hand, Charlene could always call on Bonito for favors, Shirley says. "If she was having a problem with the state," he would make a phone call, and the rent check would come. Or he'd drive Charlene on an errand.

Charlene, reached by telephone last week at Gaylord Hospital, where she's recovering from bullet wounds she, too, received in the Feb. 3 shooting, said she doesn't wish to speak with the press.

Bonito, usually a loquacious, smooth-talking sort, also refused to discuss 810 Orchard last week. "I'm not answering questions on anything right now," he said. The last time he publicly answered questions, two months before Danielle Tift was shot, was in federal court. He was charged with bribing a city official in order to obtain more poverty-housing money. He was found guilty. Now he might go to jail.

He won't be charged with the crime of "economic violence." But slumlords like Bonito and the Schmidts are indeed endangering the public on streets like Orchard, and contributing to the physical violence amid which children like Danielle grow up, says Mustafa Abdul-Salaam. Pointing fingers at slumlords doesn't absolve individuals of personal responsibility. It does make those lives harder to live responsibly, says Abdul-Salaam, who grew up in the area and now runs the New Haven Family Alliance, which works with troubled families in poor

neighborhoods.

"It breeds the kind of environment where there are no rules, no laws," Abdul-Salaam says. "It makes the kind of a statement that human value is of no concern here. There isn't a statement that what's important is people."

The decline of Orchard Street mirrors the results of a study of urban neighborhoods nationwide by University of Chicago sociologist Douglas Massey. His 1993 book *American Apartheid* detailed how segregated black neighborhoods have been less able to cope with the loss of factory jobs because leaders, the middle class, and the real estate industry have all abandoned them. So building owners can't afford to sell or invest in declining properties even if they choose to. The neighborhoods lack a healthy mix of families working in different kinds of jobs, to absorb the economic hit of one industry's layoffs. Poverty becomes congregated in one area, with welfare dependency, drug use, and violence feeding off each other.

"As the level of violence rises in a neighborhood, people have reason to act more violently to protect themselves," Massey says. "It all results from segregation and social disinvestment in segregated people."

Orchard Street—with the Winchester arms plant shrinking its work force from 15,000 to under 1,000 over the past few decades, with banks reluctant to invest money, with whites willing to visit only to buy drugs or to collect inflated government rent checks which they won't plow back into repairing the building—fits the profile so completely that an author like Massey couldn't have made it up.

### Moving Day

Charlene might have been stuck at 810 Orchard, but not Shirley. On Feb. 3, she decided to move back to Poir Haven, with Danielle, but not father Danny. Shirley and Danny had been squabbling about, among other things,

allowing grandma Charlene to watch the baby at times. One of those arguments occurred a few weeks before the shooting, at 3 a.m. Shirley and Danny headed for a nearby after-hours liquor joint. Shirley hit Danny with a pole. The cops showed up, then filed warrants for the couple's arrest. Shirley and Danny stayed away from court, and from each other.

Danielle, meanwhile, was thriving. She had grown to a chunky 20 and a half pounds. "She used to finish off a bottle in 30 seconds," Danny recalls, laughing. A month earlier she'd started eating table food, chicken, eggs, especially Cheese Twisters. "Man, you give her one of those," Shirley says, "and she'd devour it." Her first teeth was coming in.

She was congested a lot, too. Earlier on the Feb. 3 Moving Day, Shirley had taken Danielle to the doctor to find out why. The doctor said the baby had asthma; it runs in the family, according to Shirley. So she brought home a humidifier with a saline solution.

That same day, Shirley's 16-year-old brother Richard, who also lived in the Orchard Street apartment, was arguing with three friends. They were arguing over money. Police believe the argument had to do with a drug-related debt.

Charlene threw the kids out of the house. They continued, and escalated, the argument one block away. One of Richard's friends starting fighting with a boy named Arthur, Shirley says; then another friend, happening to drive by, left his car and joined in. "My brother never fought," Shirley maintains. "The person [the fighters gauged up on] said he'd be back."

"Do you think he'll really be back?" Shirley asked, when Richard returned and reported the threat.

That night, around 9, Shirley called a cab to bring them to English Street. Around 9:20 she turned on the arthra mist for Danielle. They waited and waited in the living room for the cab. Finally Charlene walked several blocks, past the burnt-out Schmidts tenements, past the dealers on Henry Street, to the public phones at Goffe Street park, to call again. She doesn't have a phone in her own apartment.

Shirley wanted a cigarette. Because of the baby's condition, she says, she waited until Charlene returned. When she did, close to an hour and a half after the first call to the cab company, Shirley went into the bathroom. It up,



755 Orchard, a Guilford couple's gift to New Haven.

then heard the gunshot.

He came back, Shirley realized. He brought some friends.

She ran out of the bathroom, grabbed her baby out of the stroller she was sitting in a few feet from the window. Besides Danielle, the bullets struck Charlene twice, in the back. Charlene, who's 44, survived. The doctors say the shooting may have left her partially paralyzed for good.

Danielle wasn't so lucky. The an-

balance crew rushed her to Yale-New Haven Hospital, her third visit there in less than a year. At 10:55, Danielle was pronounced dead on arrival.

She probably never felt any pain from the deadly shot, guesses H. Wayne Carver, Connecticut's chief state medical examiner. "The damn things are so fast. You're causing all sorts of mayhem to the nervous system. The ability to perceive is blacked out before there's any perception" of the pain.

The community's nervous system, meanwhile, very much feels the pain every time a gun enters it, legally or otherwise, Carver says.

"The more bacteria you have in the water system, the more people get diarrhea," he says. "The more guns that are in a system, the more people are going to get shot. And they're getting shot a lot."

### The Rally

Three days later, much too soon to make sense out of their personal grief, Shirley and Danny agreed to help the community make sense of the shooting. Community leaders, tipping into outrage over Danielle's murder, called a rally right in front of 810 Orchard to call for gun-control legislation. Most familiar with the ways of the street than of civic crusades, never ones to stand beside mayors or preachers or Congresspeople before TV cameras, Shirley and Danny huddled together on a cold Sunday afternoon, in front of cameras, reporters, neighbors, strangers, and added their wounded voices to the gun-control chorus.

Shirley listened to the fiery speeches. Then, speaking quietly, she took her turn. She made a quick plea for justice. Briefly speaking to reporters afterward, she pleaded for gun control.

For the moment, at least, the message was heard throughout the state. Gun control was the central theme of just about every TV and newspaper report. Three days later, in Hartford, Gov. Lowell Weicker called for a moment of silence during his media-saturated annual State of the State address, in memory of Danielle. Then he called for channeling the state's outrage over the shooting into passing this session's gun-control proposals.

Weicker said the same thing two years ago when a stray bullet at a daylight shoot-out hit Cesar Sandoval, a 6-year-old-boy who happened to be riding on a New Haven school bus. Remember Cesar, Weicker said, and pass the bill. By the time the PRA lobbied and the bill came before legislators, people forgot Cesar. That particular proposal died during the 1992 session.

It did pass in 1993.

### The Funeral

When Danielle herself faced the public later in the week, her presence silenced any discussion of the pros and cons of gun control, of urban disinvestment, of the violent trappings of the drug scene.

She lay in an open white coffin below the altar of Brooks' church, next door to 810 Orchard, for an hour before her Thursday noon funeral.

Pentecostal church tradition calls

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# DANIELE

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for open casket at all funerals—except the funerals of babies. Usually the Protestants dispense with church services at all, preferring to simply gather at the grave site for a brief interment. Unless the family requests otherwise. The Trustees requested otherwise. Elder Brooks didn't ask them why. If they had wanted to explain, he says with a shrug, they would have.

Above Danielle's coffin, behind the altar, a sign spelled out a four-word slogan from the word PUSH: Pray Until Something Happens.

Below, Danielle lay somewhat squeezed inside soft white bedding, with her eyes closed, the skin by the left eye stretched back together. She had reached the age, seven months, when parents learn to cope with scars on their babies' skin. It's always painful. Once the baby can start to move herself, crawl, pull herself up on chairs or small tables, the thrill of freedom leads her to explore everywhere she can, to try to climb where she perhaps can't quite yet climb, to poke into corners with sharp points or hard objects. Inevitably, she falls, over and over, invariably, her perfect, soft, smooth, vulnerable skin tears. Unless she's overruled, she doesn't notice. Her parents do. The slightest safest cut can danger than if their own arm had been slashed and bleeding. For a while. But the skin grows back fast. It rarely leaves a scar. The face returns to its pristine state, until the next fall.

Danielle's eye, by contrast, was stitched back together by human hands, not by the natural healing process. So you could see the stitching. Skin would never grow over it. The stitching what made her look a little bit like a doll, a viciously attacked and thrown away doll, but not enough of a doll to enable the viewer to forget that this was a human being who would never breathe again, who would never crawl again and cut her face trying to stand, who had all the love and life squeezed out of her the way dolls are squeezed to elicit a recorded sound.

Charles, brought to the church from Yale-New Haven, was wheeled up to the open casket. She had her first look at the baby since the previous Thursday's shooting, and her last look, and she broke down.

Then, with the casket shut, the hundreds of well-wishers filling the pews, Elder Brooks worked his way slowly into the sermon he'd wrestled with for a week. He struggled not so much with the message as with the form, with how to say what he needed to say with the utmost precision. He knew his words would be heard beyond the confines of his church. He wanted them to be understood.

He wanted people to think about not just who killed Danielle, but what. Maybe this killing will shake the community into stopping violence, into stopping the production and distribution of assault rifles and handguns, into supporting decent housing and decent jobs for people who live and toil in despair, Brooks said. Maybe.

"But I see tomorrow the same senseless thing going on and on again," he said.

His words, so deliberately delivered at first, began rushing out. Every sentence or two Brooks drew a quick, loud breath before racing further forward.

"God is saying to us: You all don't give a good lousy-f--- about nothing but yourself! Every time you walk these streets somebody is out to de-

stroy you. They have bulletproof vests to protect them."

Ultimately, bulletproof vests won't protect them, or their community, any more than guns will. Brooks hunched into the refrain of his sermon, the two words he said God had planted in his mind two nights earlier, during prayer, to frame his message so people would understand it.

"How long?" Brooks thundered. "How long are you gonna risk it? How long?"

"How long? How long are we gonna allow this to continue? How long? How long?"

Three young men belted out of the pews, in disgust. They stood shivering outside on the front steps, lighting up cigarettes and cursing Brooks, imitating his loud breaths, while the pastor inside continued asking how long.

Asked what Brooks said that triggered their anger, the three young men couldn't quite say. "He just rhymin'!"

After a while, it became clear. Like everyone else, they were really angry about Danielle's death.

They turned out to be three of Danielle's "cousins"—not blood relatives, but friends of the family who loved to visit and bring her presents.

"She was a golden child," said one of them, revealing a golden tooth. "She was never beaten. She never yelled."

"Why God didn't protect that little baby?" demanded another. "I wanted to hold her that day. But she had asthma. And I was smokin' a cigarette." By the time he had finished, Danielle and Shirley had left the apartment they had all been visiting.

### A Day for New Vows

The next afternoon, Shirley and Danny hauled inside an apartment in the low-rise Elm Haven public-housing apartments. They laugh often in remembering how they met, remembering how Danielle loved when Danny stroked her chin, remembering their \$50 bet before she was born over her gender.

The apartment belongs to Danny's mother, Emma. It's one of several apartments they're staying in these days. They're staying together now. The tragedy, they say, made them realize how petty their arguments were. Since the shooting, when you saw Shirley in public, you'd see Danny, not Danielle, hanging onto her, keeping her strong.

Outside the biggest blizzard of the year is burying the project in a blanket of virgin snow. Inside it feels like the South, the heat is so strong. Danny's trying to figure out how he can make it out of town today to see his dad, who couldn't make it up to Danielle's funeral.

Directly across the street awaits a huge vacant lot where six high-rise public-housing towers once stood, including the building where Danny and Shirley grew up one floor apart. Shirley lived there until the late '80s, when the government tore the towers down. In doing so, New Haven and the

federal government admitted failure in making the beloved, white-and-criminated towers fit for human habitation. New Haven and the fish pretty much admitted failure, too, in trying to figure out how to help ease into the mainstream black, single-head-of-household families accustomed for decades to receiving government checks, accustomed to living amid violence.

What's it like for a child to grow up in that world? The best evidence stands across Webster Street from where the high-rises once stood: a mural on the wall of a now-abandoned parochial school. Elm Haven kids painted the mural in the late '70s as part of a government program designed to keep them busy while introducing them to

We're looking at this from the wrong end of the gun. Literally."

art during the summer.

You can pass by that mural a dozen times before getting the message. In one corner of the mural the sun shines over a mansion and two other homes on a green hillside. That's what you notice first. Then you notice children skipping rope.

On closer inspection, you notice the rope-skippers playing inside an apartment building. The passersby look glum, beaten. Flames rage from the windows of an apartment building; a woman cries for help from the fourth floor. Welcome to Elm Haven.

The bucolic mansion scene is actually peripheral to the action, off in the distance. It is the Elm Rock neighborhood, nicknamed the "Yale ghetto." Professors and graduate students live there.

To hear Danny and Shirley talk, though, the high-rises sound far different from the conditions of despair depicted in the government reports leading up to their demolition.

"They were a lot of fun," she says. "There was always a lot to do," he says. Kids were always around.

"Back in those days," Shirley says, "you could have a fight and live. Now they might have a gun."

Today, Shirley and Danny, at 26 and 30 years old, seem to fight to live. "I'm gonna have another baby," Shirley says. She doesn't mean she's pregnant now. She means she's trying.

Danny's 7-year-old daughter Laverda perks up. "I hope it's a girl." Laverda was close to her half-sister Danielle, and seems to smile as much as everyone says Danielle did. Laverda was in on the \$50 bet that Danielle would turn out to be a girl.

Shirley hopes to have a girl, too, she says. "I'm going to name her Danielle."

Shirley vows to stay off cocaine, too. She still has "urges," she says, but she sounds confident.

Grandma Charles has made some vows, too, according to Shirley. Charles vows to walk again. For the granddaughter she watched die.

Once she's out of the hospital, she also plans to move from Orchard Street.

Beverly Gage helped research this story.

### Rebuilding

**B**razil Heights First Pentecostal Church is in the process of buying vacant townhomes on the block of Orchard Street where Danielle Monique Taft was shot to death. The church is renovating them and taking control of whom it rents to. The church needs money, as well as volunteers, for the effort. To contribute, write to the church at 806 Orchard St., New Haven, CT 06511; or call Elder Brooks at 787-3393.

By Paul Bass

# "It's In Your Blood"

The Gunowner Whose 9mm Killed Danielle Taft Speaks Out

Harry Gilbert bought a gun because, he said, he feared he might have to use it on New Haven's streets. As a technician for National Guardian Security Systems, he makes many late-night visits to New Haven to fix people's burglar alarms, to help them feel safe. He wanted to feel safe, too.

As it turns out, he hasn't yet had to use the gun.

But Gilbert's gun did end up being used on New Haven streets. In the killing of a 7-month-old Danielle Taft. Someone else pulled the trigger. Someone Gilbert apparently never met. Someone who bought the gun from yet somebody else, who stole the gun from a safe inside Harry Gilbert's Hamden house.

Gilbert says he feels sorry for little Danielle. He doesn't feel guilty, in any way responsible.

"It's unfortunate. The crime itself, it was a mindless crime," he said in an interview at his home last Thursday afternoon.

Guns, and the notion of what constitutes public safety, have played a role throughout Gilbert's adult life. Gilbert, a polite, friendly man in his mid-40s, didn't seem particularly fazed with the incident and at first declined to speak about it. Throughout the conversation, he stood in the hallway of his apartment in the three-family house, keeping the apartment door closed and the conversation out of the earshot of his young son in a Barney T-shirt who played in the kitchen. Police sources told the *New Haven Register* that the son had previously shown the gun to a neighborhood kid who later returned to steal it; the son had apparently found a key to the safe where Gilbert stored the gun.

A two-year stint in Vietnam as a Navy SEAL sparked Gilbert's interest in guns, he said. "Occasionally" he shot at



Rather than protecting the life of the Hamden man who bought it, a 9 mm handgun ended up killing a 7-month-old New Haven girl. Above: 7-month-old Danielle in an open casket at her funeral earlier this month.

people during his duty, he said.

Back home, some fellow Navy vets introduced him to a local shooting range. He enjoyed it. "It's in your blood," he said.

What's the attraction?

"People get a lot of pleasure out of shooting guns, your own personal satisfaction in the skill of doing something well," he said. He compared the satisfaction gun handlers feel with the way "some people collect baseball cards."

"When you start buying guns," he said, "you don't stop with just target practice. You get into personal protection."

When Gilbert got into personal protection, he purchased two handguns at a

store outside the region: a Browning

*"When you start buying guns, you don't stop with just target practice."*

Wren and a Walther's PPKS .380-caliber automatic.

He said he doesn't need the guns for protection living in his Hightop Circle

neighborhood, an out-of-the-way, racially integrated, working-middle-class stretch of Hamden. True, in summer you can hear gunshots in the distance, from New Haven's Brookside projects. But those projects are down a wooded hillside, a barrier that Gilbert says keeps the two worlds safely apart. He doesn't worry.

He does worry about traveling through poorer New Haven neighborhoods at night, said Gilbert, who is white. As a technician for National Security for the past 13 years, he has spent about half his time on jobs in the city. The emergency calls can come any time at night.

Despite the risks, Gilbert said, he

likes the job. He appreciates how, in occasional times, burglar-alarm work has remained steady.

"Crime pays for some people," he said with a chuckle. "If you're in some businesses, it's good business."

Crime was good business, at least temporarily, for the 15-year-old Hamden kid who broke into his house and stole his gun then resold them on the street. Eventually, though, Hamden cops arrested the 15-year-old and his alleged cohort. By that time, though, the thieves had already sold the guns.

They sold one of the guns, the Browning 9 mm, to someone who resold it for \$200 to a member of a violent New Haven drug-dealing street gang called the Fifth Ward, according to an arrest warrant filed in court last week. That member of the Fifth Ward gang used the gun in at least three shootings, one of them the murder of 7-month-old Danielle Taft, according to the warrant.

To some, the deadly history of the gun belies arguments popular among gun owners that gun keep law-abiding people safe from criminals rather than feeding more violence. It also supports gun-control advocates' arguments that gun owners contribute to the bloodshed on urban streets, even if they live in suburbs and don't commit crimes themselves.

To Gilbert, the incident doesn't implicate him at all or call into question his views on guns.

"It didn't change me overnight," he said. "But I haven't decided whether to buy another one."

Police, meanwhile, still haven't tracked down Gilbert's other gun, the PPKS .380. Like the Browning (brand and, unlike, say, a pilfered Topps 1981 Pete Rose or a 1964 Mickey Mouse baseball card—this source of personal satisfaction might not turn up until somebody else gets killed. ■

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By Paul Bass

# How Danielle's Block Fell Apart

Orchard Street landlords tell their side

Byron Schmitt says he knows what killed 7-month-old Danielle Talt last month.

"Her death," Byron Schmitt says, "can be traced to poor decisions made by her family."

Schmitt says he knows what did not kill Danielle Talt: economic violence.

You can evict Byron and Melissa Schmitt for feeding delinquent on that subject. The Oakland couple owned four large apartment houses on the block of New Haven's Orchard Street where a general contractor, Danielle Talt, died on Feb. 3. Talt didn't live in one of the Schmitts' buildings. They had nothing to do with the alleged dispute over drugs that police say led directly to the shooting. But some people familiar with the neighborhood have noted that despite the limited choices

families face within an economically devastated community like Orchard Street, in part thanks to actions by people outside Orchard Street: the loss of manufacturing jobs, for instance. Realizing financial institutions' professionalization of gains. And the decline of absentee-owned buildings like the four abandoned, burnt-out, trashed hulks the Schmitts once owned.

Listen to our story, say the Schmitts, and the reality of life on Orchard Street becomes more complicated than that.

They also became frantic landlords of a new state housing effort called RAP (for Rental Assistance Program), designed to ease welfare families into self-sufficiency. A RAP outreach worker found the Schmitts the first landlords in town to agree to rent to struggling families thanks to the program's focus on screening and hook-up social work.

State funds were some problem. Twelve new kitchen sinks disappeared from one Orchard Street building in a single weekend. The Schmitts arranged for linking, battered women to enter

They enjoyed sitting on the sheep at work breaks, giving neighborhood kids sandwiches and tomatoes.

Then, as they were finishing up the fourth and biggest Orchard Street house in 1988, came a triple whammy:

• **Changes in the RAP program.** The state legislature, feeling financial pressure to stop housing homeless families in ludicrously expensive motels, forced RAP to lower its standards and pour all welfare families into the program. Still screening closely, the Schmitts nevertheless found themselves with some troublesome tenants. Some trashed apartments. Meanwhile, RAP was late with rent checks.

• **New rolling back banks and insurance brokers.** Actors raised their insurance bill just on three of the

help from the notorious Kensington Street International (KSI), forced its way into the Orchard Street buildings to set up shop. The Schmitts say they worked with police to keep annoying members, but the same doles, or new ones, would simply reappear, intimidating single moms in the buildings to allow them to operate out of apartments. Eventually, the Schmitts say, the gang looked a bunch of the mums, who stopped caring for their kids. Out of pity for good tenants who feared what was happening in their lives, the Schmitts say, they allowed people to break leases and move to less drug-infested Schmitt-owned properties elsewhere in town. No viable tenants wanted to move in. Buildings once 100 percent rented became two-thirds vacant.

"This crack business was so powerful. There was so much money involved. We were powerless to stop it," says Byron.

Before 1989 ended, the Schmitts declared bankruptcy. For another year they tried to reorganize, make the business work. In 1990 the bank got a court order taking control of the building. The Schmitts were barred from the premises. They lost their last New Haven business.

"We weren't saints. We were doing a job. And we were helping people," says Byron, who's 42.

"I don't believe in gouging. But if you can't make a profit, who's going to do it?" asks Melissa, 44. "The client? Let's look at their record."

Or the record of privately-owned homes on Orchard Street. Danielle Talt

properties, questions how powerless the couple was in the face of the crack trade. "No one can force their way into anyone's home or apartment if you have screened these people and they're good people."

Not so simple, says Bruce Blake, who placed 1,000 RAP families into homes over four years on a contract with the state.

"When you screen, you're limited as a landlord. You can't screen for friends or relatives," says Blake, who now works for the not-for-profit Christian Community Action agency.

"We use all 100 quick to verify the landlord," Blake says. "They [the Schmitts] did an exceptionally fine job of trying to screen tenants and make repairs. They were an asset to the community. They were among the best; they weren't in it for a fast buck. They got caught by the economy."

But the economy is the issue, responds Mustafa Abdul-Salam, who works with troubled families in neighborhoods like Dorell as the head of the New Haven Family Alliance.

"Money was flowing the Sids. It wasn't families like Danielle's that benefited. They went backward. He [Byron Schmitt] got rent money. He made money off the backs of poor people."

Abdul-Salam says he understands the Schmitts' plight. As a landlord himself, he understands the difficulties problems like crack present, he says.

But he questions why someone like Byron Schmitt can understand the many forces that led him to fail as a landlord, but not the same forces that lead a family like Danielle Talt's to fail.

"Bank parties the Schmitts, a 24 and Danielle's family) are trying to get the rent out of life they can," Abdul-Salam says. "You have people who make bad choices in all segments of society. If you have more resources, you have more room for error."

In the case of Danielle's family, a 7-month-old died. The family—especially the mother—has been blamed by people all over the region who read in the papers about how the killing had some connection to drugs.

Meanwhile, says Abdul-Salam, "I don't think [Schmitt] is going to be on welfare." The Schmitts did lose their savings. Byron had to start over professionally. Byron's still in construction. After working three years for Yale professor Edward Zigler, the acknowledged "father of Head Start," Melissa took a management job in the Yale medical school cafeteria. The Schmitts even lost their home. They now live in an apartment in Oakland.

## Fun & Repair

They tell the story with the aid of Polaroid snapshots, letters from tenants and businessmen, and a few tears.

The story begins in the mid-'80s, when they were still living in central New Haven. Byron had inherited a love of woodworking from his father, Melissa had to paint, decorate. Together, they caught the spirit of investors buying rundown properties in tough neighborhoods with a mind to fix them up, make some money, provide decent housing in the process.

"It was fun. It was exciting," Byron recalls about competing with other property owners to snap up new buildings on the market.

The Schmitts found they were good at the job. Their hobby turned into a full-time business. By the late '80s they had acquired 14 properties, mostly in the Dorell and Hill neighborhoods. They acquired enough money to fix up their own new home in live it, in Madison.

The 14 properties included four



MATTHEW GALE PHOTO



The Schmitts. "We weren't saints, we were doing a job. And we were helping people." Inset: One of their buildings today.

agency help, to helping one tenant deliver her baby when the father refused to come to the hospital. At one point, when janities were throwing their needles out a second-floor window on Orchard Street, the other tenants made enough of a fuss that the janities ceased to pick up after themselves.

All in all, though, the Schmitts say, they liked their tenants. And they were proud of the complete makeover of unlivable cruises into good-as-new apartments with new bathroom fixtures, updated walls, new storm windows and vaults, new outdoor vinyl siding.

Orchard Street buildings from \$5,000 to \$25,000 in one year—then dropped the policy altogether. The Schmitts eventually found another, less protective policy for \$26,000. Meanwhile, their bank, soon to go out of business amid convictions of its officers for fraud, scrounged the last \$40,000 of a construction loan because of pressure from regulators to abandon risky neighborhoods, the Schmitts say.

• **And crack.** Especially crack. No longer were landlords dealing with a few lawless junkies or drunks. A drug gang, whose surviving members would later

lived in a building owned by Ben Bonito of Hartford, like other Bonito buildings, this one was in barely fixable shape, plagued by drug-dealing. Bonito no longer comments to the press now that he's been convicted of fraud in connection with his dealings with a poverty housing program.

Or look at the four houses the Schmitts used to own. Within months of the bank's takeover, they became as rundown as before, trashed, partly burned, inhabited only by dealers and spacers.

## Room for Error

Elder Theobald Brooks, whose Bush Heights First Pentecostal is trying to buy up and renovate the former Schmitt