

August 13, 2005

latimes.com : National News

Single page Print

COLUMN ONE

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial

■ An abandoned building is now the Wall of Sorrows, a memorial to young victims of violence. A struggling Ohio city wants it razed.

By P.J. Huffstutter, Times Staff Writer

EAST CLEVELAND, Ohio — Before her shift at McDonald's, Cathy Thomas makes her regular visit to a decaying building.

The sidewalk out front crumbles under her feet. The two-story building, stuck between a liquor store and a weed-choked church, sags from neglect. Shards of glass frame the back upstairs windows, revealing rooms with burnt floral wallpaper and rusted pipes. Most of the first floor has been covered in whitewashed plywood.

ADVERTISEMENT

Kids can jump at every opportunity to learn!

Click here for ideas from Harcourt Assessment!

Harcourt
harcourtassessment.com

The empty structure once was home to vandals and drug dealers. Now it offers solace to Thomas, whose daughter's name — Janette L. Willis — is written on the front of the building in 3-inch-high black letters.

Willis is among about 1,000 children and young adults who have died violently in Cuyahoga County since 1990 and whose names have been posted across the building's exterior.

The bereaved call this the Wall of Sorrows, a gathering place for mothers and fathers, aunts and cousins, school pals and other loved ones of the dead. When community activists first came here about three years ago, they had the names printed onto vinyl sheets that they nailed to the plywood.

Then, Thomas and hundreds of others came to leave their handwritten marks on the plywood boards. Over time, the names, along with messages of longing and hope, have covered nearly all of the building's first floor — about half a block long and more than a story high.

Today the building, on Euclid Avenue less than a mile from City Hall and police headquarters, is considered by many to be hallowed ground.

"The soldiers have their Vietnam wall," said Thomas, 45, who added her daughter's name in 2002. "The Jews have their Wailing Wall. This is ours."

But the wall may not be around much longer. Last month, the council voted to tear down the building as part of an effort to raze condemned properties and sell the land to developers. City officials believe an empty lot will help the community far more than a wall of names. A demolition date has not been set.

Thomas and others like her, members of a group called Survivors/Victims of Tragedy Inc., are petitioning to hold a vote to rescind the City Council's decision. They said they had gathered several hundred signatures.

"We've just started," said Judy Martin, whose 23-year-old son was fatally shot by a carjacker in 1994. "We're not

PHOTOS



NATION

A Decrepit, :
The [Your H
'Then the Fi
War Messag
FDA Increas

MOST E-M.

Tabloid's De
Schwarzene
When you're
Thank Heav

going away. If we have to chain ourselves to the wall, we will."

The fight to save the wall, members of the group said, is a battle to preserve memories of their children.

Standing in front of the wall, Thomas reaches out and touches the hodgepodge of scribbling, where names and benedictions bleed into one another. Some names are spray-painted in black, curly letters. Others, written in ballpoint in a shaky hand, have faded with weather and age.

Scattered around the names are mementos that loved ones have left to honor the dead.

Plastic flowers surround painted portraits of young men and women in graduation caps. Thumbtacks and tape hold up photocopies of prom pictures. Faint lines of eulogy have been squeezed into every spare inch, reminding the world that "Uncle Bones" rests in peace and "Wild Bill" feels no pain.

People have left pleas to help uncover leads in unsolved crimes or for witnesses to come forward. Community activists and families of missing children took over the building's northeast corner, covering it with about 100 fliers. Some cases date back more than 10 years.

"Please help us find Kim," one reads. "She might still be alive."

Thomas gently brushes a smudge of dirt off her daughter's name and fluffs the plastic nosegays that are taped near her picture. The fingertips of her left hand caress the letters.

Keeping one hand on the picture, Thomas bends her head, closes her eyes and begins to pray.

At the turn of the century, industrialists and financiers flocked to this suburb's lush parks, building so many Romanesque mansions in one part of town that it became known as Millionaires Row.

CONTINUED
1 2 3 4 5 next >>
Single page




If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints
Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | Privacy Policy | Terms of Service
Home Delivery | Advertise | Archives | Contact | Site Map | Help



ADVERTISEMENT



YOU COULD SAVE \$719 through the Auto Club.

August 13, 2005

latimes.com : National News

Single page Print

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial

Page 2 of 5

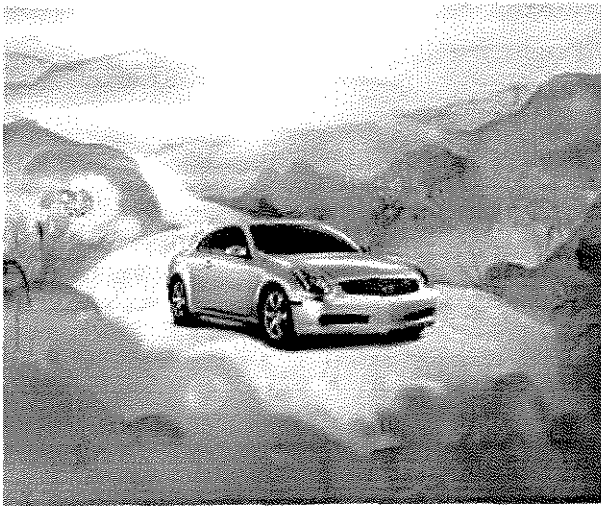
<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>

PHOTOS

Today — decades after many white residents fled and manufacturing jobs headed overseas — East Cleveland (pop. 27,000) is largely filled with hollowed-out buildings that the city can't demolish fast enough. It has the highest crime rate per capita in the greater Cleveland area. Education officials have called its school system one of the worst in Ohio. The median household income is about \$20,500, according to the 2000 census, and 55% of its residents age 16 and older have a job.

Its city budget is so lean, officials don't have the staff to collect back taxes.

ADVERTISEMENT



"The city is broke," Mayor Saratha Goggins said. "We can sell an empty lot. We can't sell the wall."

The wall evolved out of community outreach programs in the 1980s, run by the nonprofit group Black on Black Crime Inc., to decry violence in East Cleveland.

Community activist Art McKoy worked with grieving parents, who visited high schools to speak about their children's deaths. Martin, 57, whose living room houses her son's wrestling ribbons and football trophies, talked about the sorrow of having to rely on friends to plan the funeral. She lives in the nearby suburb of Euclid, about a 10minute drive from the wall.

Delores Walton of Cleveland, 73, couldn't stop crying when she read poems written about her 15-year-old grandson, Sanchez Cox Jr. The teenager, who also lived in Cleveland, was shot to death in 1993.

stories of slain relatives.

Afterward, students approached the speakers to share their

"What struck me is that here were these young people, talking about death in such a matter-of-fact way," Martin said. "And the people they were talking about dying were so young. We started wondering exactly how many young people had died."

Martin and others who had lost loved ones began researching stories on area homicides. She collected grim statistics from the county coroner's office: In 2000, 16 young adults and children were stabbed to death; 56 died of gunshot wounds.

Martin next led an effort to compile the names of everyone 25 and younger who died a violent death from 1990 to 2002. "Once we had the names," McKoy said, "we started looking around for a place to put them, a place where everyone in the community could see — and couldn't ignore the problem."

The building at Euclid and Page avenues seemed ideal. It would grab the attention of anyone who traveled along the town's main thoroughfare. Plus, it was an eyesore: By covering up the ramshackle building with plywood, "at least we wouldn't see the scorch marks anymore," McKoy said. "Anything we did to it would make it look nicer than it was."



NATION

A Decrepit, :
The [Your H
'Then the Fi
War Messag
FDA Increas

MOST E-M

Tabloid's De
Schwarzene
When you're
Thank Heav

In 2002, volunteers boarded up the building, tossing piles of garbage and human refuse into the structure before barricading the doors. Then, they began putting up the names. The black script was so small, visitors had to squint to read it.

Most of the names are those of African Americans. Most were killed either here or in poor enclaves of Cleveland.

As more youngsters died, relatives came with pen and paint and added names to the urban mural. Some were white. Some were killed outside the county.

But race and location of the crime didn't matter to families wrestling with their sorrow.

Eudice Margolis Tracey's daughter, Amy Silberman, was on vacation in New Orleans in 1994 when she was shot in a crowd. No one was ever charged with the crime.

"I live here, so that counts," said Tracey, 70, who has a home in the nearby suburb of Shaker Heights. "I'm part of this community. This is my shrine too."

When Thomas first came to the wall, there were so many handwritten tributes that she barely found enough room for her only child. Janette, 18, was stabbed to death in East Cleveland by a jealous boyfriend in November 1993.

Thomas found a spot near Martin's son, Christopher Lee.

The two women met at the wall and slowly built a friendship over conversations of loss and their understanding of each other's pain. When Thomas attends parole hearings for her daughter's killer, Martin is the one who drives her to Columbus.



CONTINUED
<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>
Single page



If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints
Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)





August 13, 2005

latimes.com : National News

Single page Print

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial

Page 3 of 5

<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>

They've made three trips far.

Martin has also befriended Juanita Freeman, who added her 6-year-old grandson's name to the wall a couple of years ago. Jamario Freeman disappeared in the summer of 1997. The police found the child curled in the backseat of a car, burned to death.

ADVERTISEMENT

Juanita Freeman's son, Donta Steward, used to come to the wall to pray for his nephew. In 2004, Donta was killed in a drive-by shooting. He was 19. After the funeral, Freeman found an empty spot on the wall and added his name and photograph, next to Jamario's.

Many who come regularly said they preferred to visit their loved ones at the wall.

"At the cemetery, there's just dirt, just grass," said Freeman, 58, who lives in Cleveland. "Here, my babies aren't by themselves. Neither am I."

Such public murals have been around for decades but often are smaller, said Joseph Sciorra, an urban folklorist and author of "R.I.P.: Memorial Wall Art." With drug-related violence in the 1980s leading to an increase in violent deaths in the inner cities, such walls became more like large bulletin boards.

"People have always felt the need to gather and express their loss and attest publicly to the violence happening in their community," Sciorra said. Because of that need, they "created a community of the living out of the community of the dead."

Like other memorials, the Wall of Sorrows is left undisturbed. No one defaces it with paint. No one takes anything off it. No one bothers the visitors.

"We don't need to guard it," McKoy said. "You'd have to have a death wish to disrespect it."

When Thomas finishes her prayer, she opens her eyes and realizes she isn't alone.

Across the street, groups of young men hang out in an empty lot, playing cards and tossing dice. Wads of cash pass from

PHOTOS




NATION

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial
The [Your H...]
Then the Fi...
War Messag...
FDA Increas...


MOST E-M...

Tabloid's De...
Schwarzene...
When you're...
Thank Heav...



KAISER PERMANENTE.

More benefits
for less than you
might expect.
Preventive care.
Hospitalization.



KAISER PERMANENTE.

hand to hand.

Standing a few feet to her left is Martin.

They chitchat about work, gossip about neighbors and commiserate about financial problems. Although Thomas has moved to Euclid "to escape some of the memories," she continues to work in East Cleveland and considers herself part of the community.

All the while, Thomas' hand never leaves her daughter's picture.

It's a favorite moment: Janette is smiling in the school photo and wearing her favorite gold dangling earrings. Sun and rain have faded the photograph's edges, turning the tips of the girl's curly hairdo a light shade of gray.

"That girl always had her hair done, just perfect, and her makeup done up," Thomas tells Martin, with a laugh. "If it wasn't done just right, she'd do it all over again. It took that girl forever to get out the door."

Martin replies, with a grin: "My son was handsome. Aren't our kids gorgeous?"

She points to the picture of her son on her T-shirt: a 6-foot-2 young man, with broad shoulders and a cheeky grin, in a football uniform.

Thomas' smile quickly turns teary. "I miss her. Even now, after all these years, I miss her so much, it makes me ill."

Martin grabs Thomas' hand and tells her, "Squeeze my hand. Squeeze it hard, until it hurts."



SIGN UP N

CONTINUED

<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>

Single page

Los Angeles Times Enjoy seven-day home delivery for as little as \$2.50 a week. [CLICK HERE](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

PRODUCER

Which seat fits you best? HANDS-ON Intensive Workshops
New York, Hollywood, London, Disney, Harvard & Princeton Universities, Paris, Florence

New York Film Academy WWW.NYFA.COM

August 13, 2005

latimes.com : National News

Single page Print

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial

Page 4 of 5

<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>

PHOTOS

The two women stand there, silent, squeezing each other's hand for several minutes.

City officials said they were sympathetic to the families. They acknowledge the comfort the wall offers. They have suggested the families remove the plywood boards and relocate them to another site — one a bit less noticeable.

ADVERTISEMENT



There's an empty building available. It's tucked behind a carwash. But the city can't afford to help pay for the move or the new installation.

"This is not the history that we want to be selling to investors and developers," said City Councilman Gary Norton Jr. "Death is not what companies want to see."

For Thomas, the thought of the wall being destroyed — or having it hidden away — is a cruel one. The easy camaraderie among the families would fade, she fears, because fewer people would come to visit. She also wouldn't have a reminder for her 10-year-old godson, Jamel Booker, of why he needs to stay in school so someday he might escape the poverty of his neighborhood in East Cleveland.

As Thomas and Martin chat on the sidewalk, Jamel tugs on his godmother's shirttail. He points to her watch. It's time for her to go to work and for her to drop him off at day care.

Thomas and Martin hug and exchange goodbyes.

Jamel studies the wall, reading messages and picking out ages. From his numerous visits, he's so far counted three 10-year-olds and more than 120 kids who were younger than he is when they were killed.

Thomas takes his hand. The two walk to the car.

"You know why we come here, Jamel?" Thomas asks.

The boy nods.

"To never forget Janette," he replies.

She died before Jamel was born. He's learned about her here, crouched on the sidewalk, listening to the stories and studying her picture.

If the wall is torn down, Thomas said, "it would be like Janette dying all over again."



NATION

A Decrepit, :
The [Your H
'Then the Fi
War Messag
FDA Increas

MOST E-M

Tabloid's De
Schwarzene
When you're
Thank Heav

(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

City at a glance

Population: 26,652 (down 2.1% from 2000)

Area: 3.1 square miles

Median age: 33.9 years



CONTINUED
<< back 1 2 3 4 5 next >>
Single page

 Enjoy seven-day home delivery for as little as \$2.50 a week. 

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints
Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)





August 13, 2005

latimes.com : National News

Single page Print

A Decrepit, Stirring Memorial

Page 5 of 5

<< back 1 2 3 4 5

Median household income: \$20,542

Median home value: \$67,700

ADVERTISEMENT

Kids can look for every opportunity to learn!

Click here for ideas from Harcourt Assessment!

Harcourt www.harcourtassessment.com

Race:

Black: 93%

White: 4%

Latino: 1%

Mixed race: 1%

Native American: 1%

Education:

High school graduate: 33%

Less than high school: 31%

Associate's degree/some college: 27%

Bachelor's degree or higher: 9%

Sources: U.S. Census, city-data.com

<< back 1 2 3 4 5

Single page

PHOTOS



NATION

A Decrepit, :

The [Your H

'Then the Fi

War Messag

FDA Increas

MOST E-M,

Tabloid's De

Schwarzene

When you're

Thank Heav

Los Angeles Times Enjoy seven-day home delivery for as little as \$2.50 a week. **CLICK HERE**

Ads by Google

Beautiful Asian Singles

Meet Singles in your Area for Free Find Photos, Profiles, Chat & More!
www.friendsand.com

Complete Your Bachelor's