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Research and News

Drugs in The Blood

C. Wright Mills approached the study of society and its problems from two distinct levels: the personal level and the larger social level. In LeBlanc's article, she discusses the impact drugs have had on the personal life of an addict named Drew and his friends and family in Brooklyn, New York. When sociologists do an in depth case study, they learn a great deal about one individual which provides a qualitative look into the social problem. List the personal factors in Drew's family and community that contributed to his drug use. How would you explain Drew's life from a differential association perspective? How would you explain it from a labeling theory perspective? Describe Drew's overall experience from a conflict perspective. If Drew raised his own children would he be the father or just "like friends?" Why? Would his children do drugs? Why or why not? In this very personal account do you see any evidences of the larger social picture which LeBlanc used to context Drew's experience? What are they?

Drugs in The Blood

By Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

Drew can't remember the first place he lived, an abandoned house on Cedar and Evergreen in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where he and his parents and four brothers squatted with three other families for a few years after he was born. There was room for everyone, unlike the dark apartment -- just blocks away -- where Drew lives now with his siblings and his father, Cuba, 68. His mother, Tata, 44, is currently in residential drug rehab, via prison. Drew, 15, leaves his cramped apartment early and usually stays out late. He's always looking for something to keep busy, something -- anything -- to do. Boredom leads straight to Dodworth Street.

In 1986, when Drew was born, crack was thriving on Dodworth, which had already had a good, long run with heroin. Tata was young, swamped by too many children -- after Drew, she gave birth to a daughter. Tata and Drew were both growing up, and he had lots of physical energy, just as she did.

On Dodworth Street, where everyone hung out, Tata started dealing. Drew and his siblings played amid all the action, like the other children. Kiddie pools lined the sidewalk in the summer. Drew and his brothers badgered Tata for her seemingly endless supply of \$1 bills.

"There was always something to do, even if it was a boring day -- play tag in the buildings," Drew remembers. He initiated projects -- making clubhouses in the empty tenements, starting games of crate basketball. Tata loved riding bikes with her sons. "That was her thing," Drew says. He built ramps that she flew over. Neighbors called him Little Tata.

Tata was arrested occasionally, but she never stayed in jail for long. Then she started using crack herself and landed real time. In 1993, when Drew was 6, she was sentenced to three years in state prison. Cuba tried to rein in the family, which now included another baby, but he was also using. Drew started missing school.

Without Tata's income, the family struggled. Cuba did what he could -- washing cars, cleaning cages at the pet shop, repairing refrigerators. Drew and his brothers helped. When Cuba didn't have anything for his daughter's 5th-birthday party, Drew and his brothers collected enough for soda and hot dogs and rolls and blocked off both ends of Dodworth. Someone brought out a barbecue. A few times, Cuba bused the family upstate to see Tata. Drew and his mother didn't talk much; action was always their bond.

Drew's oldest brother died in 1995 -- after he reportedly witnessed a murder, he was beaten,

then tossed off a roof. Until Drew was taken to the wake, all he had been told was that his brother was in the hospital. Around this time, Drew began rescuing wounded dogs and nursing them back to health. His favorite, Warrior, had been hit by a car; another puppy had been buried in a pile of garbage by its mother for protection after it had been blinded by a rat. He housed the strays in an abandoned building on Dodworth. He taught the dogs tricks once they got strong enough.

Drew spent whatever money he could scrape together on the dogs rather than on new clothes, which he could have used. When his father replaced the family's hot plate, Drew lugged the old one to the abandoned house and prepared hot meals for his brood -- Roxy and Soldier and Lucky; Diamond, Bruno, Sheeba, Tyson and Nasty and Grimey; Princess, Nigel, Isis, Three-Legged Chester, Mook and Head. Drew worked hard for the money to feed them, doing the work that found him: cleaning empty lots, sweeping sidewalks and twice -- at the behest of a neighbor -- puncturing car tires.

Drew was 10 when his mother returned home in 1996. After a brief stint as a bicycle messenger, Tata went back out onto Dodworth. This time she wasn't dealing to make money and using drugs to party; she was dealing to earn enough money to use. Cuba had a heart attack, stopped using cocaine and started using heroin. Drew tended his dogs.

Cuba straightened out when social-service agencies threatened to break up the family; Tata's decline continued. Drew's best year rose from the crisis and is Tata's happiest memory: when he was 12, he lived with her brother in the Bronx and attended class regularly for the better part of an academic year, something he had done only twice before. But then the uncle started drinking, and Drew came back to Bushwick. He could not manage the routine on his own. "Every time I got into school, I got nervous, and I gotta leave," Drew says.

Drew sometimes hung out with his mother, who was managing a crack house on Dodworth. Tata gave Drew drugs to hold. Little kids didn't do time for possession; parolees did. "I didn't know what to do with it, but I knew it was money," Drew says. "Her and me." Tata's example taught him the business. "I learned how to watch out for the cops," Drew says. He took crumbs of drywall from the abandoned buildings and boldly sold it as crack. When the angry customers returned, Drew and his buddies ran. The dogs continued to hold Drew's attention until he started smoking weed. By 14, he was dealing intermittently.

Drew traversed the same haunts that Tata had mastered as a peripatetic young mother, providing for her family. "She showed me how to be streetwise," Drew says. Both mother and son were on the run this past spring: Tata went AWOL from a court-ordered drug-treatment program, while Drew was avoiding the authorities for his chronic truancy; he has completed a total of four years of school. Tata skulked around the tiny neighborhood, occasionally badgering Drew to give her drugs on credit. He refused. He's learning the hard lessons well, although it's difficult to say what comes from Tata and what's a result of having to survive the street. Of his mother, he says, "I charge her interest so she won't bother me." She says, "We're more like friends than mother and son." He hides his stash in the trunk of an abandoned car in an empty lot, Tata's graffiti tag still visible on a nearby wall.

In May, one of Drew's friends was shot by a rival dealer, and Dodworth quieted down. Tata was picked up by the authorities in June and was put back in rehab. Shortly after, Drew got picked up on the truancy charge and, for a time, attended school, after which he worked briefly for a woman who hires local boys to do construction work in the neighborhood. Drew loved it. It was man's work -- demolition -- and he liked making money and learning new things. But the job dried up in August, and he returned to Dodworth, where he now works for the same dealer Tata did, standing on the stoop where Tata once stood.

To break up the boredom of his days, Drew sometimes hangs out in a third-floor apartment in the same building where his mother once rented a room. The apartment is barren: a card table, a few chairs and milk crates, some mattresses, a TV and a boom box. The kids listen to music and fantasize and gossip and play-fight and beat up on Pillsbury Doughboy, the neighborhood's fat kid. Drew pulls the boy's elbows back and shouts: "Chicken wing! Chicken wing!" Or Drew

leans out the window and looks down over the street. He says, "I like to be here to observe everything that's happening."

Not much does. Each morning Drew passes by a mural he painted in a community arts project when he was younger. The children were asked to draw what they'd like to become when they grew up. There were a fireman and a nurse (one girl drew herself pushing a shopping cart); Drew envisioned himself as a Los Angeles Laker, dunking the basketball. He doesn't reveal that kind of optimism anymore, although he encourages it in little kids. "Mostly everybody I hang out with is older than me," Drew says half-proudly. "Everybody my age -- I don't do the stuff they do. They want to go play. I want to go hang out." Hanging out sometimes means passing time in the shade of the awning of the bodega on one end of Dodworth, playing dice and listening to the improbable sex escapades of men three times his age or smoking blunts in the back seat of his boss's car.

The abandoned house on Cedar and Evergreen where Drew's life began no longer exists; even on Dodworth, there are few abandoned houses left. The shell of the one where Drew used to keep some of the dogs recently sold for \$240,000.

Drew gets high more often now, smoking haze. Dodworth has its cycles: haze is an old-school drug, repackaged -- weed laced with PCP. "What happened?" Drew asks. "I used to say I wasn't going to do it; now I regret what I said 'cause I feel like a hypocrite. 'Cause I said that, and I end up worse than everybody else."

"More or less, same thing I've done, same footsteps," Tata says about Drew. "That's what's in the neighborhood. That's all that's out here," she adds plaintively.

Some mornings, Drew fixes his little sister her hot cereal for breakfast. She is 8 and chubby, keeps herself occupied inside. She's not like her mother or Drew -- the type to strike out for adventure. She accompanies her father on his errands and medical appointments or does headstands off the couch so that she can watch Jerry Springer upside down or reads and rereads her favorite book, "Green Eggs and Ham." She keeps it on a shelf near the dusty set of encyclopedias. Sometimes her father takes her to the swimming pool or her big brothers take her outside. She loves Drew. "He takes me out to the park to play basketball," she says. "He's a good brother."

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