

## As ever, awash in violence

COLUMN ONE

*Guns and drugs plague New Orleans, perhaps worse than pre-Katrina. One man from that world is dead, another accused of killing him.*

February 15, 2007 | Richard Fausset | Times Staff Writer

THERE was talk, after Hurricane Katrina, about fresh starts for the people who had been mired in trouble here before the storm. Such talk wasn't enough to keep Mandell Duplessis away from home.

He was a seventh-grade dropout who had been dealing drugs since he was a teenager. Floodwaters destroyed his apartment and sent him packing for Atlanta.

But Duplessis, 24, could not resist the lure of the only hometown he had ever known. He would rap about it later, in recording sessions captured on a demo CD:

"Stressing on the phone with FEMA for hours

"While Nagin on TV, talking 'bout he need manpower

"I gotta head back to the N.O.;

"A-T-L too slow..."

He had partners in Dallas, he boasted, who could get him Ecstasy at wholesale prices. His shout-outs were to his old New Orleans haunts; his line of work was never in question:

"I'm a Einstein when it come to movin' that coke..."

So home he went, about two months after the storm, to his old turf, and his old career.

Months later, Duplessis was dead. He was found fatally shot Aug. 4 on the steps of a trailer in the working-class neighborhood of Gentilly. It made for a minor post-Katrina story, but a depressingly common one in a city with a homicide rate that was the highest in the nation in the last six months, and about 15 times the national average.

Like many of the residents swept up in New Orleans' latest wave of violence, Duplessis was young, black and versed in the drug trade.

So, too, was the man police accused of pulling the trigger, a convicted drug dealer named Garelle Smith. Though apparently strangers, their life stories were remarkably similar.

Both were products of a city plagued by deep-rooted problems that the flood could not cleanse away: neighborhoods awash in guns and drugs; an older generation laid low by the first wave of crack cocaine; a dysfunctional criminal justice system hobbled by reluctant and frightened witnesses; and, for many hardened youth, a belief that the only way out was the Hail Mary pass of a rap career.

And yet both men also seemingly shared a yearning to return to the world that made them, no matter how dangerous it was before the storm, or how ruined it seemed afterward.

Police, who had been looking for Smith for a month, finally found him Jan. 18, dismantling a barbed-wire fence ringing the abandoned and flood-damaged St. Bernard housing projects. The fence was up because housing officials plan to tear the complex down -- not only because it was damaged, but because it was considered dangerous, a failed social experiment.

To Smith, 25, it was also the place where his grandmother had raised him.

LIKE many American cities, New Orleans was hard hit by the introduction of crack cocaine in the 1980s, and Duplessis considered himself a victim: "I'm representing for the '80s babies brought up in the struggle," he rapped.

His mother was one of countless New Orleanians who spent a few blurred years addicted to crack until she found religion in 1993. Today, Nadine Finister, 46, tells her story, and her son's, with the same unvarnished candor Duplessis brought to his music.

"I ain't gonna sugarcoat it," she said. "He wasn't no saint. But what gives you the right to take another person's life?"

Duplessis was Finister's only child, the fruit of a doomed and fleeting relationship with an Air Force man whom she briefly married. The father supplied his son with a surname, but Finister said he was never involved in his upbringing. The young Duplessis was best known around his 7th Ward neighborhood as one of his mother's clan, and the kids took to calling him "Fenny."

His mother loved him, but she was too strung out to raise a child. So Duplessis moved in with his grandparents when he was in the second grade. They were working people, and their house was comfortable and cheery, on a block of pastel-painted cottages that resembled a box of petit fours.

This was the heart of Gentilly, historically home to many Creole families whose French surnames -- Duplessis among them -- had been on the rolls of New Orleans' working and middle classes for generations. Many were artisans -- bricklayers, masons and roofers -- who were fiercely proud of the city they helped build.

But by the early 1990s, neighbors felt trouble creeping onto their streets. A new, hard-living generation was making its presence felt, dealing drugs and exchanging gunfire. They were the children of broken families, a failed educational system and a gnawing poverty that settled over the city in the 1980s, when a key part of its economy, energy, had been hit hard by plunging oil prices.

Duplessis' mother sent him to a Catholic grade school until her drug habit ate into her finances. So he started sixth grade in a public school system that was considered among the nation's worst. Two years later, he dropped out.

Soon he was dealing in the streets. Finister thinks something snapped in her son when his grandfather, his only real father figure, died in 1994. Duplessis, in his songs, described a different kind of epiphany, one sparked by the sight of a friend from the 'hood who had acquired a slick new car.

It was "a whip [that] looked like a space shuttle," Duplessis rapped. "I knew right then my whole focus in life was to hustle."

When he moved into his own place, drugs paid his rent. They paid for expensive sneakers, a fancy GMC Yukon Denali truck, and for the upbringing of the daughter he had fathered with an estranged girlfriend.

The street life also landed him in trouble: When he was 17, he was sentenced to three years' probation for crack possession. Other arrests -- on suspicion of aggravated battery, armed robbery, weapons violations -- did not result in convictions.

When the hurricane bore down on New Orleans in August 2005, Duplessis had been out of school for more than a decade, yet he had never really held down a legal job. When he returned to the devastated city, his family thought, briefly, that might change.

He was living in his grandmother's government trailer, in the front yard of her flood-damaged home. She was back in the parts of the house that were habitable, and he was helping her fix up the rest. Soon he started picking up drywall gigs for money, and for a while, he thought about going into business for himself. He even had a batch of business cards printed up.

But one day on the job, his boss, angered with his poor handiwork, tore up a wall Duplessis had just completed. Duplessis bristled at the insult, abruptly quit, and returned to the streets.

BEFORE the flood, Garelle Smith had been arrested, then released, in connection with two murder cases in a city where a study by the local Metropolitan Crime Commission found that as few as 12% of homicide arrests resulted in incarceration.

"Like most murder suspects in New Orleans, [he] had not even gone to trial -- let alone prison," an editorial in the Times-Picayune stated.

Neighbors said Smith's father wasn't around much. Nor was his mother, Lynette K. Smith. She was arrested numerous times, and sentenced, in 1994, to two years in prison for crack possession and theft, court records show. The task of raising Garelle and his two sisters fell to their grandmother, Theresa.

The St. Bernard projects were about a mile from Duplessis' grandmother's house, just across the London Avenue Canal.

But here there was no pastel paint. The massive complex, which dates to the 1940s, is a maze of pitched-roof brick apartment buildings divided by narrow grass courtyards. More than 1,400 units were crammed onto about eight city blocks -- an intense concentration of poverty and, to a distressing degree, crime.

In 2002, there were 13 homicides in the St. Bernard projects, according to the local housing authority. The next year, there were 12.

Smith's first arrest was here, in 1998. Police had seen him dealing drugs in a courtyard near his grandmother's second-story apartment. When they caught him, he was armed with a loaded pistol. Smith was sentenced to five years in prison. He was 17.

Like Duplessis, Smith would be arrested for other crimes involving weapons and drugs that never held up in court. Unlike Duplessis, Smith would make the pages of national rap magazines -- though not for his rhymes.

Police suspected him of murdering two rappers in late 2003, but both cases fell apart. One of the victims, James Tapp, was a former convict who was gaining nationwide fame under the name Soulja Slim.

The other, Spencer "Funk" Smith Jr., who was unrelated, was a lesser-known rapper who was killed in his truck in the St. Bernard projects. That case was dropped because a key witness never appeared in court.

It is unclear where Smith was just after Katrina, when the London Avenue Canal breached, sending water coursing through Gentilly and the St. Bernard neighborhood. The water around his old building rose as high as 9 feet, and it stood for days.

According to police, Smith reappeared nearly a year later at a government trailer four blocks from Duplessis' house.

It was the middle of the day. The neighborhood was a ruin of abandoned houses; only a few residents had returned. Police said a number of men broke into the trailer and forced three people to lie on the floor while they searched the place for drugs and cash.

Duplessis showed up and knocked on the door, apparently unaware of what was going on inside. The men ordered him on the floor, police said, but he fought back. Authorities say that Smith shot Duplessis dead on the trailer's wooden steps. Police found drugs in the trailer. They said the assailants took off with the cash.

SMITH was arrested in the St. Bernard projects while a group of residents and outside activists were staging a high-profile reoccupation of the complex. In a federal lawsuit, housing rights lawyers have argued that the poor have a right to return to St. Bernard and three other projects that are slated for demolition.

Retired postal worker Jesse Smith, no relation, has lived in the neighborhood since the early 1950s. He had a lot of friends in the projects, and he is sympathetic, to some extent, with the arguments of those law-abiding residents who wish to return.

But he also heard about Garelle Smith.

Who, he wondered, would filter out the young men here who do the dealing and the stealing and the killing?

"There was definitely a bad element in there," Jesse Smith said. "As it went along, the hoodlums just took over."

Nadine Finister's worries are more pressing.

Garelle Smith was one of four men arrested in connection with her son's slaying.

The district attorney recently declined to seek charges against the other three men, although they are still being held on suspicion of other crimes, according to a spokesperson at the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office.

Prosecutors would not comment on an ongoing investigation, but Finister said they told her that key witnesses were not cooperating. She fears the case is falling apart -- the way the Soulja Slim case fell apart, and the Spencer Smith case, and all those other murder cases that never seem to go anywhere in New Orleans.

She wonders whether Garelle Smith will be released again.

"It's hard to say if they're going to be able to hold him," Finister said.

As she waits for justice, she drives around the blighted city listening to her son's CD. His voice reminds her of the good boy she knew -- the one who loved his grandmother, respected his elders and tried to keep the drama of the street away from his family.

She is not proud of the drug references, but she is proud of his smarts and his flow. In one verse, he compares himself to Jesus, predicting his return "on the seventh day" with a big haul of cocaine that will keep his people nourished "with water and bread."

Duplessis was enough of a poet to find the remaining weaknesses in the comparison:

"But moms wasn't no virgin and pops wasn't God

"And this ain't Jerusalem

"New Orleans, Louisiana -- downtown, 7th Ward."

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