

## CORONER'S INQUEST

## A downward spiral, a marginalized life



**CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD**  
cblatchford@globeandmail.com

I never understood what "marginalized" meant. Now I do. It means juggling the arrival of the cockroach inspectors with trying to get help for the young son who has been an eyewitness to murder.

It means filling out forms (for counselling for that boy, for an apartment transfer, for repairs to your unit, etc.) until your eyes bleed, waiting lists for almost everything, and enduring the scrutiny of a whole flock of helping professionals, some better than others and all working under tightened budgets and rising case volumes, who seem to hover invisibly above you.

It means always walking the line, whether the one between asking for a hand up while maintaining a sliver of dignity or the one between being careful to say enough (so the agencies and social workers know you're really in trouble) but not so much that they are compelled to move in and take your kids.

Diane Anderson, the single mom dead at 35 in the Dec. 22, 2007, house fire that also killed two of her five youngsters, was black, poor and living in an aged Toronto Community Housing complex in the Jane Street-Finch

Avenue West area of Toronto, where she paid about \$420 a month in rent and struggled to swing it.

For many years, she managed admirably, raising her children to be good kids, keeping her townhouse clean. She was filled with a sense of fun and a spark.

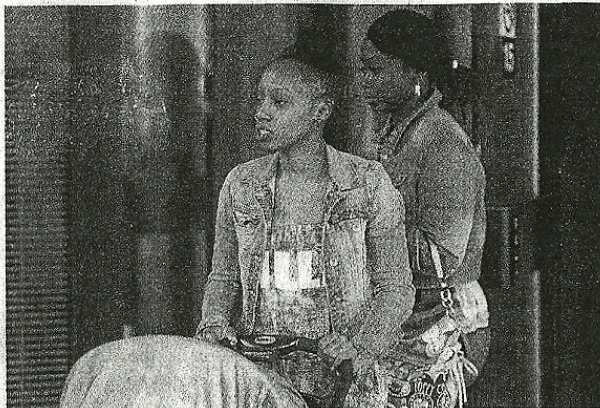
The coroner's inquest that is now examining the three deaths is, despite itself really, also examining Ms. Anderson's life. It was the very definition of quiet desperation.

Many of her remaining hopes appeared to rest with a man named Leroy Whittaker, one of the three fathers, all in one way or another absent, of her kids. He was the man whose murder, on July 30, 2005, her 10-year-old son witnessed.

As a Toronto District School Board social worker who later counselled Ms. Anderson's son testified on Thursday, "She was hoping they would be able to leave Ontario housing [as it used to be called], get married and be with Leroy. She had hopes for her children, that they would be in a better environment."

Mr. Whittaker was by the sounds of it the best of a rather sorry lot.

Her kids all liked him; he appears to have contributed financially to the family, buying the kids clothing and meals out, and he was somewhat gainfully employed. As the coroner's jurors have heard, he ran a stall, selling Jamaican goods, at the local mall on weekends, and he was a small-time marijuana dealer. He had an



Diane Anderson's daughter Leisha leaves a coroner's inquest into her mother's death on Monday. KEVIN VAN PAASEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

entrepreneurial instinct.

But in February, 2005, Mr. Whittaker and Ms. Anderson had a fight, he punched her in the eye, and a neighbour, at Ms. Anderson's frightened behest, called Toronto police. Mr. Whittaker disappeared for a time, but eventually turned himself in and was charged with assault, an allegation that was unresolved at the time of his death.

Natalie Persad, a bright and capable young woman who was then a child protection worker with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, got the referral. She went to see Ms. Anderson and the family the next day. Ms. Anderson seemed to be coping, as she so often did: She would end the relationship with Mr. Whittaker, she promised; she was sad and disap-

pointed by what had happened, as were the children; she appeared to bear him no malice.

Ms. Persad didn't know Ms. Anderson was already pregnant with a little girl that she and Mr. Whittaker had named Beautiful, a baby stillborn the day of Mr. Whittaker's funeral.

A couple of days later, Ms. Anderson phoned Ms. Persad, asked for some help, was referred to two agencies. (As one observer noted, even the best agencies seemed to refer Ms. Anderson to someone else. She was on a referral-ground.) The mom's willingness to call her reassured Ms. Persad; she closed the file.

At some point between that assault and his slaying just months later, Mr. Whittaker gave Ms. Anderson an engagement ring.

Her oldest daughter Leisha has testified about it: "The day she got engaged, she came home so happy. She called everyone, telling them about her big ring."

The reconciliation was on. On July 30, Mr. Whittaker was at his apartment. With him was Ms. Anderson's son; they had worked the stall that day. The boy was dozing on the couch when two men knocked on the front door; Mr. Whittaker went to answer it. The men fired three times, and he was shot in the head.

Mr. Whittaker wasn't the intended target. As Detective Sergeant Joel Kulmatycki, then on the Toronto homicide squad, told the jurors, "The offenders were overheard saying they had shot the wrong person."

Thus began Ms. Anderson's spiral: She had a badly traumatized little boy who needed help; a dead fiancé; a dead baby; a broken heart that extinguished her lively spirit.

The next two years must have been a blur — one day, feeling strong, she would phone the school to fill them in or call for help, the next, she would drink and not even be able to answer the phone. One day she would manage to complain about the roaches; the next, when the pest-control guys showed up, she hadn't cleaned the cupboards so they could do the work.

And then just before Christmas one night, she fell asleep on the futon, drunk, a couple of the kids grabbed her lighter, and the little house exploded in flames. She had been marginalized to death.