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Boy was twice a victim — of lead, then violence

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Although Freddie Lewis was a likable kid with an easy smile, he would sometimes break into a vacant, disconnected gaze.

"Freddie was very quick with a hug," said social worker Michele Pietragrome. "But you had to check in with him now and then to see if he was listening. I'd say, 'Freddie, are you with me here?'"

"In retrospect, I know that he was listening but he was probably struggling with what he was hearing."

Frederick W. Lewis Jr. was 12 when he was shot to death last summer on a Rochester street, the victim of a crack cocaine dealer who mistook him for someone who had just robbed a drug house. His murder touched a nerve in a community that lost eight children younger than 18 to homicides in 2005.

But the untold story of Freddie is that he was one of at least 24,000 Rochester children victimized over the past 12 years by lead poisoning — a pernicious malady that research suggests can lead to irreversible neurological disorders, multiple learning disabilities impulsiveness, and, some say, contributes to violence and high homicide rates.

A city law that takes effect Saturday is aimed at making 35,000 rental properties as safe as possible from hazards caused by chipping and peeling lead paint.

Although a national consumer group says the law makes Rochester one of the few cities nationwide to aggressively battle lead, the law comes too late for children like Freddie, who have continued to be poisoned for nearly three decades after lead paint was banned.

"It's almost like a death sentence for their success," said Dr. Richard Kennedy, a family care physician who treated Freddie the last four years of his life.

No one can say with certainty that Freddie's lead poisoning led to the hyperactivity, impulsivity and poor performance in school that dogged him throughout his short life. Nor is there any evidence that it contributed to his murder.

But professionals who were familiar with Freddie — and others like him — say he epitomized a public-health epidemic that has been ignored because its victims are often poor minorities and its symptoms are often attributed to other overwhelming problems in the environment in which they're raised.

"My biggest concern is that we always find kids like Freddie after the fact," said Dr. Robert S. Chavkin, Freddie's former physician at Anthony Jordan Health Center. "I think as a public health policy, we need to decide that when people move into older (pre-1978) houses, that they get checked first before they bring children in. Unfortunately, for Freddie and a lot of other kids, that was not done."

Freddie's mother, Aldreana McKnight, has begun volunteering for Rochester's Coalition to Prevent Lead

Poisoning in the hope that other parents will watch for lead-paint hazards in their homes and telltale signs of lead poisoning in their kids.

"I don't want any other parents and children to go through what we went through," she said.

Signs of trouble

Freddie, born on Aug. 23, 1992, was the fourth of McKnight's five children. For the first four years of his life, he lived in a rented two-family home at 166 Champlain St., on a dead-end stretch of the street two houses from the rear of School 2.

"As far as we could tell, he was perfectly fine in terms of development and behavior," Chavkin said. "That lasted until about 13 1/2 months."

Like many young children, Freddie was fascinated with his mouth and what would fit into it.

"Crayons, crackers, dust, whatever was in the ashtray, stuff like that," McKnight said.

But the boy was also ingesting lead through chipped and peeling paint in the century-old house and lead-tainted dust that drifted from windows when their painted surfaces rubbed together as they were opened and closed.

A routine blood test disclosed that the level of lead in Freddie's blood was 22 micrograms per deciliter. Although the level was too low to require treatment, it required follow-up tests and mandated the notification of the county Health Department.

The Health Department examined the house in February 1994. Health officials had been there twice previously — in July 1991 and in December 1992, after Freddie's older sister also tested high for lead levels. The girl now lives with her father and McKnight no longer has access to her health records.

The 1994 inspection, which mirrored the previous inspections, disclosed the presence of chipping and peeling lead paint on interior trim, windows and porch columns. The county ordered the violations to be corrected within six months.

Retests were done in February 1995 and January 1996. Each time, new cleanups were ordered.

A critical point

By the 1995 inspection, however, Freddie's lead levels had reached a critical point. After creeping up gradually, they reached a peak of 57 micrograms per deciliter in late February 1995; he was admitted to Strong Memorial Hospital for chelation — an intravenous attempt to flush his system of as much lead as possible.

The levels of lead that trigger treatment have moved downward over the years as researchers have learned more about the effect of lead on children's neurological development.

As a young physician in Baltimore, Chavkin, who is now retired, routinely saw children with levels twice that of Freddie.

"When I started practice, 50 was the upper limits of normal," he said. "Freddie did not have the acute lead poisoning that we used to see in Baltimore — kids having seizures or going into comas. He had troubles, but it was nothing like it might or could have been. But definitely, 57 is considered distinctly abnormal these days."

Indeed, lead levels in the house — and in Freddie's blood — were so high that a lawsuit brought by McKnight against the home's owner was settled for \$138,633 only six months after it was filed, and eight months before Freddie was slain. Under a clause in the settlement, McKnight will receive regular payments from an annuity beginning in August 2010, when Freddie would have turned 18.

McKnight's lawyer, Neil J. McKinnon of the Buffalo firm of Lipsitz & Ponterio, said he believed the landlord's home-insurance carrier settled quickly because of the high lead levels and evidence that remedial work was bungled, causing Freddie's lead levels to soar.

"In this particular case, I think he (Freddie) had re-exposure," McKinnon said. "I don't believe they did the abatement correctly. If you don't do it correctly, it's like asbestos abatement: you can make it worse because you're putting dust all over the place. I think that's what happened to Freddie."

Joseph R. Malone of Parma, who owned the home when Freddie and his family lived there, didn't respond to requests for comment.

Although the settlement won't benefit Freddie, lawsuits against landlords who allow hazardous lead paint conditions can help provide for children when they have trouble functioning as adults, said lawyer Stephen G. Schwarz of the Rochester firm of Faraci Lange.

'Awareness better'

"The awareness in the city has gotten better," he said. "This is a completely preventable problem, if parents were more aware and if landlords were more aware of what could happen to them if they don't take precautions. If they don't, that's where the legal system can provide a strong deterrent." Although no one keeps figures on the number of lead-poisoning lawsuits filed in Monroe County, filing them got easier in 2001 when the state Court of Appeals overturned a local appellate court ruling that limited lead-poisoning lawsuits to cases where plaintiffs could prove that a house tested for high lead levels when they lived there.

When Freddie was 4, his family moved to another home at 573 Maple St. Although his lead level had dropped, his new home was tested in 1997 and 1998 when his level stayed above 20 micrograms. It, too, was contaminated with lead above safe levels.

As a toddler, Freddie was impulsive and hyperactive. Although his behavior frustrated his mother, she thought it was normal. "He was a little boy, doing what little boys do," she said.

But Dr. Kennedy believes Freddie's lead levels had taken their toll — not only in his hyperactivity but in his school performance.

"He couldn't understand things that were age-appropriate, and he couldn't speak very well," Kennedy said. "The presumption is that lead contributed to this, but there's no proof of that."

In elementary school at School 17, at 158 Orchard St., Freddie had trouble understanding directions, was at least one grade level behind average, and sometimes was aggressive to other students, said Pietragrome.

"He was a sweetheart in here (the social work office)," she said. "We would play games with the other kids and he enjoyed them. There's a way to win with dignity and there's a way to lose with dignity and Freddie had that."

He was prescribed a form of Ritalin for his hyperactivity and hated to take it but consented because he knew he needed it, his mother said.

"I was so proud of him," McKnight said. "He told me, 'Mommy, I'm going to stop being bad. I want to be good. I don't want to be bad.'"

But Freddie sometimes missed his morning dose before school.

"When that happened, I'd pop him in my car and take him home so his mom could give it to him," Pietragrome said. "If he didn't get it, there was no way to deal with him the rest of the day."

School employees worked hard with Freddie, particularly after he was diagnosed with a learning disability in the fourth -grade. His major problem: an inability to process what he had learned, which physicians say is a classic symptom of lead poisoning.

'A kid who tried'

"He was a kid who tried, but he didn't have the skills to stay on track without support," Pietragrome said.

In June 2003, as Freddie was finishing the fourth grade, his older brother, Calvin Bryant Jr., was shot to death outside their Maple Street home. When his mother learned that Freddie had overheard the voice of the killer and

identified him as a friend of his brother's, she moved across town to escape possible retribution.

It was there, four blocks from their new home, that Freddie was shot to death on July 8, 2005. Police say the slaying wasn't connected to his brother's death.

Had he lived, what would Freddie's future have been like?

"That's a little hard to answer," Chavkin said.

"I would anticipate that with his cognitive abilities he would have been somewhat limited. He probably would have problems focusing with his attention span. I doubt, for example, that he would have gone to college. How well he would have held a job would have been hard to say. If he had run-ins with the boss, he could easily lose his cool and lose his job."

Pietragrome, however, believes Freddie's outlook would have been more positive, had he continued to receive the support he needed.

"Freddie had as much potential as anyone," she said. "People with learning disabilities go to college, go on to have careers. It really would have been up to Freddie to have made things happen in his life."

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What's next

Lead paint in deteriorating urban housing has taken its toll on thousands of Rochester children over the past half century. Next Saturday, the city will begin a targeted campaign against lead paint in rental properties, 28 years after the government banned the use of lead paint.

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