



# The other side of the tracks

In a troubled neighbourhood, residents strive to turn death into life.

by Barbara Woolsey

It was no secret to Shawna Oochoo when her sister started to become a ghost. It was the distant look in Kara Oochoo's eyes, the weight she lost. She was sleepy from the methadone, indifferent from the anti-depressants. But it was the tracks across her delicate arms that revealed prescription pills were no longer Kara's drug of choice. She was still beautiful, a finalist in a local modelling competition, someone who could go anywhere and get along with anyone. But there were demons chasing her – a family history of physical and sexual abuse and addiction. Shooting cocaine kept her one step ahead.

One evening in 2004, Kara got high with a friend in the basement of her home in North Central Regina. Suddenly he hit a bad trip, holding Kara, her mother and daughter hostage with a knife. Kara was the last to go free before help arrived.

He went to jail. Kara turned to the needle.

A few days later she was found hanging, dead at 22.

Over the next few years, sister Shawna watched at least nine more friends take their own lives, each one suffering from either addiction or grief. An epidemic was rising. Was anybody counting the deaths or reading the obituaries? Who would be the next to take a last breath? The losses were silent and quick, like modern warfare.

Another day, another death in the neighbourhood.

Squeezed between the CN and CP rail tracks, North Central rose out of the open prairie in the mid-1880s to accommodate European settlers. It was a middle-class district for industry and service workers through much of the 20th century, and was gradually pulled into the heart of the growing city of Regina. Residents weren't wealthy, nor were they impoverished. The neighbourhood had parks, grocery stores and more churches than schools. Husbands went to work and mothers stayed at home to raise the kids.

In 1963, Rod Ash was born to one



Photo by Noah Wernikowski

# The other side of the tracks

of these families. His family of seven lived in a two-bedroom house on the 1100-block of Retallack Street. Rod's father earned a modest living working construction, putting in long hours to pay down a mortgage.

As a kid, Ash played kick-the-can and hide-and-seek, weaving in and out of neighbours' backyards. The children held regular street hockey tournaments in neighbourhood intersections. In the winter he went ice-skating with his friends at Grassick Park, returning home with frozen feet. Seconds later, he would be bawling in pain, calf-deep in a kitchen sink of warm water.

He loved the neighbourhood. In the early Eighties, Rod bought his first home in North Central and started his family there.

A few years later, Doreen Lloyd, a single mother of two and high school dropout, moved to the city from Sedley, a farming community 53 kilometres south-east of Regina. At 28, she was already a repeat victim of sexual abuse and an alcoholic since her teenage years.

It was 1985. There were no gangs, and youth prostitution was only just emerging. For the most part, North Central was a pretty quiet place. But in both Lloyd and the neighbourhood, cracks were beginning to show.

She struggled to be a parent, go to school and work, all while trying to hide her addiction. One night in 1990 she caved, downing a bottle of pills and writing a suicide note to her kids.

She survived. Co-workers urged her to check into a treatment centre. There, she learned the power of group therapy and counselling to heal old wounds.

She came back into the neighbourhood clean and sober.

Around the same time, Rod Ash, now 25, moved out of North Central for good.

**T**he streets were changing. As the rural economy collapsed, rural dwellers like Lloyd flooded into the city. At the same time, amendments to the Indian Act lifted restrictions on the mobility of status Indians in 1985. People began arriving looking for a better future, but

found only some parts of the city were open to them.

In 1991, Shawna Oochoo's mother and her four children, including Shawna and Kara, moved to North Central from Gordon's First Nation, in a last-ditch effort to escape an abusive father.

Shawna, nine, and Kara, 11, had the freedom to come and go as they pleased, as long as they came home before their mother did from work. Sometimes that wasn't until three or four in the morning. The sisters quickly became friends with other kids growing up in the 'hood' who were also feeling lost. An apartment suite – abandoned by drug addicts who had skipped town and left everything – became an escape from the problems at home. By age 13, Kara was working the streets to make money to feed her sister.

That's when the drugs started: first marijuana, then hallucinogens like acid and mushrooms. Shawna and Kara became frequent users, loyal to one of the city's most dangerous gangs. They also became mothers, both before turning 18.

After Kara's death, Shawna turned to cocaine for support. The high was instant, euphoric and seemingly the answer. But it always faded away. Shawna would go on to attempt suicide multiple times.

"The funny thing is, we were always taught never to hurt anybody else," remembers Shawna. "But we were never taught not to hurt ourselves."

Until 2000, prescription drugs controlled the inner-city streets. Injectable shots of Talwin and Ritalin, known as 'poor man's heroin,' were cheap and popular. T&R's, as the mixture was called, were later forced off the streets by morphine and cocaine, which gave a longer high. Local gangs engaged in turf wars to see who could move the most for the lowest price.

Around the same time, methadone clinics were introduced by local health authorities to ease the stress of withdrawal. But combined with other drugs, including 'bad shots' laced with rat poison, methadone could be deadly, too.

By then, Doreen Lloyd – still clean and sober – was known as an auntie of the streets. She had obtained a social work degree and was working with community-based organizations in North Central, teaching self-esteem and life skills like money management and problem solving.

It was a busy time. She ran programs back-to-back. Yet every graduation was followed by a funeral for at least one of her students.

In 2007 an article published in Maclean's magazine named North Central 'Canada's worst neighbourhood.' The community uproar against author Jonathan Gatehouse was deafening. North Central residents were outraged. Politicians promised improvement. The city had been besmirched.

## "We were always taught never to hurt anybody else. But we were never taught not to hurt ourselves."

"Am I going to give up? No," Mayor Pat Fiacco told the Regina Leader-Post. "I'm not going to let one guy who doesn't know Regina at all, the real Regina, destroy our efforts. As a matter of fact, we're going to work even harder now. And shame on Maclean's magazine."

Lloyd, however, was ecstatic.

"I was going, 'Right on,'" she recalls. "While everyone was trying to do a cover-up and a smooth over and saying," – her voice drops to a whisper – "'it's not that bad.' I was thinking, 'It's about time.'"

Lloyd became resource facilitator at the North Central Community Association in 2008. Since the article, there has been progress, but a lot of things haven't changed. Poverty is the wall. North Central's median household income is just over \$25,000, half the city's average. Thirty per cent of the area's residents depend on government assistance and only 34 per cent have completed post-secondary schooling, compared to 59 per cent in the rest of Regina. Overall, unemployment sits around five per cent for the entire city, but North Central's rate is estimated to be four or five times higher. For aboriginals, the unemployment rate is three times higher than non-aboriginals. They are, by far, the fastest growing demographic in the city, with the lowest life expectancy. Seventy-one percent of aboriginals living in Regina are under 35; only two per cent are 65 or older.

And every time a new helping program gets off the ground, it seems to Lloyd that its funding disappears within months.

In North Central, there are 90 agencies working to address social issues in the area, all vying for the same government dollars. They live from project to project. Not one is able to provide long-term solutions and programming to their clients.

The worst part is that it's easy to live comfortably in almost any other Regina neighbourhood without ever understanding these problems exist.

In 2009, Rod Ash – now Sergeant Ash of the Regina Police Service – came back to North Central, not to live, but to oversee the community cop shop. By then, crime in North Central overall had significantly decreased since 2000 – down almost 23 per cent – but crimes against people, like assault and robbery, had increased. The drug trade sits at the centre of the problem. According to Ash, overdoses are more common in North Central than the rest of the city and there is a higher rate of domestic disputes, often substance-related. The most hardcore junkies will shoot anywhere from 15 to 20 times a day. Track marks can abscess, leading to blood and bone infections, and overdose and organ failure are common.

Needles are a constant worry for officers, because of the disease that can spread from a single pinprick. Seventy-nine per cent of HIV cases in Saskatchewan are a result of injection drug use. In a recent survey, almost half of a group of Regina drug users admitted to sharing needles, syringes or injecting equipment in the past six months.

Of Ash's family of seven, not one still lives in North Central. His father was the last to go, forced by his children to



leave the family home in 2005 after a murder occurred down the street, followed by another across the alley. The Ash children feared the area was no longer safe for an elderly man living alone.

On patrol, Ash drives by the old house often, at first out of curiosity, now out of habit. The way he remembers it is not how it looks today – spray paint scrawled across the garage door, which is barely hanging off its hinges.

“I remember putting in that door,” he says. “It was me and my brother, and it was freakin’ cold out. We got Dad a brand new garage door with an opener and he said he didn’t need it. But he was happy as hell to get it.”

For years Doreen Lloyd, the auntie of the streets, has struggled with the question of how to change the system. For too long she has grieved with families in the area; she has helped some families for three generations now.

A recent study revealed that residents living in six low-income neighbourhoods in Saskatoon, Regina’s sister city to the north, were over 14 times more likely to attempt suicide and three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts. Children aged 10 to 15 in these neighbourhoods were twice as likely to be depressed and 19 times more likely to be using marijuana. A similar study was commissioned in Regina, but has yet to surface. Lloyd is tired of waiting. The wait-list for drug and health assessments by local health authorities is two months long and she’s sitting on the back-end of another axed program, fighting for funding instead of being out in the community.

## “People are dying. People need help.”

However, Lloyd has a plan. She wants to force public attention on the area’s problems by compiling the number of premature deaths in North Central over the past 10 years, from causes like drug and alcohol overdose, homicide, suicide and diseases like HIV/AIDS and diabetes. The statistics will be compared to numbers throughout the rest of the city, also taking into account demographics such as income, gender and race. The project is being spearheaded by the community association Lloyd works for and the University of Regina’s Community Research Unit.

“I want it done fast,” says Lloyd. “Let’s get the ball rolling.”

Counting premature deaths in North Central is no easy task. With so many residents moving back and forth between reserves, records are scarce. Across the neighbourhood, there are couch-surfers living with anywhere from 10 to 15 people in one house. How to track people who have no address?

As well, the community is wary, still wounded from the last time its sores were exposed. Even the head of Lloyd’s community association isn’t convinced that counting the dead is a good idea. “I’m not sure if it will help North Central,” says Tom Wright, North Central Community Association president. Pointing out problems might help in the long run by revealing areas that need to be addressed, he says, but “you can also take (the project) as a negative in that it focuses on North Central in a negative fashion, saying there are all these negative things that are happening in a greater proportion.”

Responds Lloyd: “By no means am I trying to paint a bad picture. I’m just trying to address that there are problems in this neighbourhood we can’t ignore

anymore. People are dying. People need help.”

Against all odds, some do get the help they need. Shawna Oochoo is now 27. Gangs and drug use are part of her past. She’s in a treatment centre in Fort Qu’Appelle, determined to get healthier and stronger.

“I’m breaking the cycle of suicide,” says Oochoo. “I’m here to be a positive role model for my daughter and my niece, who my sister left behind. I’m trying to instil change.”

She hopes to see a North Central that is better for generations to come. Likewise, police sergeant Ash longs to see the neighbourhood transform back to what it was like during his childhood. Through the work of people like Doreen Lloyd, he believes things are improving.

Lloyd’s research assistant completed a preliminary report in March 2011, after meeting with 14 community-based organizations. Each organization confirmed that premature death was a real problem. All agreed the deaths needed to be tracked. The findings could help change the neighbourhood, but not overnight. At 53, Lloyd acknowledges significant change likely won’t even happen during her career. She no longer lives in North Central. Returning to her rural roots, when the day ends she finds peace and solace in a country home just outside Regina. The inspiration to keep driving back to the city every morning comes from the faces of her children and grandchildren but, most importantly, from the community. As a recovering addict, she feels a kinship with North Central’s people.

“I live for today,” she says. “I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. A lot of these people are in the same boat.” 🐦