

A Rochester policeman shot him as he ran

Why Todd Novick fled is a mystery

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Todd Novick died homeless – but in a way, the streets of northwest Rochester were the closest thing he had to home.

The victim of a police killing on Christmas Eve morning, Novick lived a complicated life. Family members said the deck was stacked against him from the start, a context familiar to many in one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city.

Court records give a dozen addresses for Novick over the last 25 years. They're houses with warped door jams and broken doorbells, almost all of them within a mile of Lyell or Dewey avenues.

Sometimes he was staying with friends or family members whose lives were precarious in the same way as his. Sometimes the addresses he listed were places where he hadn't lived for a long time, the best a man in dire circumstances could offer.

Novick was good at fixing things and worked on and off as a mechanic, according to his brother-in-law, Justin Wright. He was married but had no children.

He also struggled with drug addiction for most of his 46 years. That trouble led in turn to a lengthy list of charges related to theft, usually stealing things from cars.

"He was a normal guy who just got a really bad hand in life," Wright said.

Stopped on street by Rochester police, then shot as he ran

Novick was killed the morning of Christmas Eve by a Rochester police officer. The officer, responding to a call from a concerned resident, was speaking with Novick and two other people on Murray Street off Lyell Avenue when Novick suddenly began to run.

The officer gave chase. As Novick was running, he pulled a realistic-looking Crosman C11 BB gun out of his pocket.

The officer yelled for him to drop the gun then quickly fired five times, striking Novick once in the back. He was pro-



Anthony Hall, CEO of Community Resource Collaborative, speaks outside Rochester City Hall on Friday. JUSTIN MURPHY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

nounced dead shortly thereafter.

Investigation into shooting by Rochester NY police

RPD, the Police Accountability Board and the state Attorney General's office will conduct separate investigations, as is customary when police shoot someone fatally. The officer's name has not been released.

There are many unanswered questions, and Novick's death means those involving his state of mind will linger forever. Why did he run? Once he was running, why did he pull the BB gun from his pocket? Did he think the officer would shoot him while he ran away?

"There's a lot of things we don't know," Rochester Police Chief David Smith said. "This (video clip) is three seconds. It's going to take months to unravel and put together the minutiae of this."

Victim of NY police killing was running away

At a press conference, Smith claimed that a person running away with a gun in hand is not fleeing but rather "trying to obtain a better tactical position."

Wright dismissed that theory. Novick had spent enough time around the po-

lice, he said, to know he couldn't win a gun fight with them.

"I know 100% he wasn't trying to harm that officer," Wright said. "But at the same time, I see where the officer is coming from. The gun looked like a gun – I get that."

"I don't know that I'd wait for the person to turn around either if I were them."

Lyell Avenue area hurt by history of racism, systemic lack of funding

Residents and community leaders in the Lyell-Otis neighborhood took the news of the shooting with a sense of weariness.

The half-mile radius around Murray Street in particular is riddled with drugs and other vice industries.

During the city's mid-century heyday, Lyell Avenue was the heart of a thriving Italian community, with scores of factory and industry employers within walking distance.

By the time Novick was born in 1977, though, both the demographics and the economic landscape were changing. Jobs disappeared, public and private investment declined and quality of life measures – housing, health, public safety, education – followed.

The census tract surrounding Murray Street is now 80% non-white, with 52% of people living in poverty.

"It's just halfway houses and drug houses, one after another," said Jonathan Hardin, the director of community engagement for Cameron Community Ministries on Lyell Avenue. He regularly canvasses that area with food and supplies for those in need.

Cameron has seen a 70% rise in people served in the last year, he said. The lines for hot lunches are now sometimes twice as long as they were in 2022.

"You can literally see an ambulance taking someone out on an overdose every day or every other day," Hardin said. "And it's getting so much worse."

What help is available for Lyell neighborhood?

Longtime local outreach worker Anthony Hall said his organization, Community Resource Collaborative, will soon relocate to the northwest quadrant in order to better assist people living in crisis there.

"It just highlights what takes place in some of these corridors that have been neglected for decades," he said. "We're talking about concentrated poverty, an open-air drug market and prostitution. ... And it's just normalized. It is what it is."

Residents living near the site of the shooting were reluctant to speak about it in the days that followed.

There was no makeshift memorial yet on Murray Street and no friends or acquaintances huddled together in twos or threes.

Formal statements of regret from city leaders left no mark.

A few days after Christmas, the gravel driveway where Novick skidded to the ground bore no telltale signs. The BB gun he dropped too late had been collected as evidence along with security footage from the boarded-up house next door.

Unseasonable December rain had washed away the struggle.

– Justin Murphy is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle and author of "Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York." Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/CitizenMurphy or contact him at jmurphy7@gannett.com.