

Tara Cole
from front Page

charged with aggravated assault for striking another homeless person, Jessie Masters, in the face with a bottle shortly before they came upon Tara asleep on the dock. Masters, 26, later jumped in the river and tried to save Tara. After questioning Webber and Dotts, who admitted to the crime, police investigators say the men confessed to driving to Nashville "specifically to harass and assault homeless persons." Police Chief Rona Serpas called the actions of the two men "sickening" and also expressed his extreme dismay at them choosing "to travel into our downtown area from other counties to bully the homeless." Detective Rick Winfrey and other investigators, according to Serpas, were determined to identify the persons responsible for Tara Cole's death.

"I am very proud of their efforts and dedication," Serpas said. And although the homicide case of Tara Cole has been solved, advocates of the homeless all over the country say that her death and the continued persecution of homeless persons all across the nation are instigated by the negative and offensive attitudes generally held about the homeless.

Clemmie Greenlee, director of the Nashville Homeless Power Project, is a non-profit organization of formerly and presently homeless individuals. The NHPP assists its clients in acquiring basic services such as food, clothing, and medical attention. "People feel that the homeless are on the streets because of drugs and alcohol," said Greenlee. "But there are other situations that put people outdoors, and they are not always in control of those kinds of circumstances."

Greenlee was personally acquainted with Tara, and most of the homeless or "street" community in Nashville knew who she was. "Tara would always be sitting alone by herself, and she didn't talk to anyone," said Greenlee. "She would stay to herself, and we very seldom saw her come in for any type of services."

"She wore a blue, woolen skull cap pulled all the way down on her face to the top of her lip. And we tried to look out for her. "You had to go where she was.

When someone brought her a meal, they would have to just go over and sit by her for a minute. Then, you just left the food there, and went on down the street.

Tara would wait until you left, and then she would begin to eat." According to Mrs. Cole, Tara had dreams of producing music, and she wanted to make a difference in the world. She enjoyed singing and she even toyed around with the idea of playing guitar for a while. "Tara was such a beautiful person. And when she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, it was devastating, just devastating to her and all of us," said Mrs. Cole. "She just couldn't see herself taking medication for the rest of her life. And so, she would stop taking the meds." Mrs. Cole laments that Tara felt that her parents and her very loving step-parents did not understand what she was going through. "Tara felt that we were happy with the way this world is because we work and are professionally successful," she said of her daughter. "But she found the world to be a very horrible place, brutal and unfeeling, and she dreamed of making an impact with the music she would someday produce."

Tara had been suffering with bipolar disorder for more than ten years. According to Mrs. Cole, she had been living in Nashville for the past five years. "There were frequent hospital stays, and when Tara would get out and have her medication, she would return home. She left and went to New York City for a time before going to Nashville. "And," says her mother, "she has been arrested before, along with other homeless people who would not leave the premises of some place where they had been asked to leave." The young woman, killed on a pointless and inhumane dare, would have turned 33 on Nov. 25.

Although Tara's parents went to Nashville when they learned that the young woman who was pushed off the dock was probably their daughter, they were spared the pain of having to identify the remains recovered from the river. "It was 12 days before they actually recovered Tara's body. We were told that the police were 98% sure that it was our daughter. And by the time they pulled her from a barge

the body was caught under, we had gone back home. "Tara was positively identified with dental records because by the time she was actually recovered, there was not much left to the body."

The grand jury in Nashville heard the testimony from homeless witnesses before bringing charges against the two homicide suspects. Several of those on the scene jumped in the river to try and save the drowning woman. Police surveillance cameras were also key in bringing the assailants to justice.

"Some of the men jumped in and tried to save Tara because they knew she couldn't float with all those heavy coats on," said Greenlee. "We just cried when we heard the testimony of the young men who did this."

"The two men who rolled Tara into the river were going back and forth saying, 'You do it,' and the other would say, 'No, you do it.' Finally, Webber said, 'Oh f*** it, I'll do it.' "And he swung around on a pole near the place where Tara was lying. He was swinging through the air like Tarzan or a monkey, and he worked up a hard swing around the pole on the third try and pushed Tara into the river with his feet." Almost six million Americans reportedly suffer with bipolar disorder. It is also known as "manic-depressive illness."

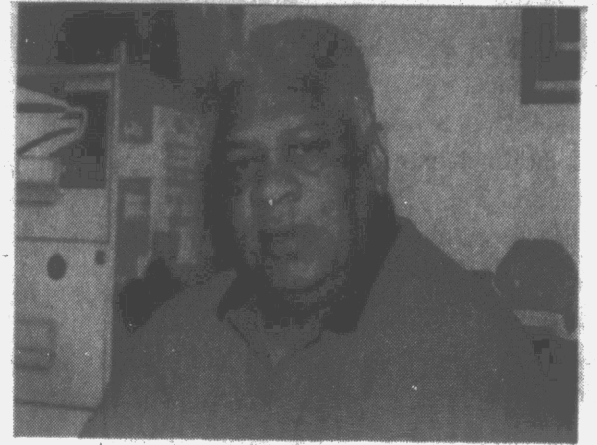
Some of the more destructive symptoms are: extreme depression, delusions, hearing voices, and suicidal thoughts, and behavior. Paranoia often accompanies the condition, and victims may feel that loved ones and close friends are "out to get them." How does the family of someone like Tara recover from such a shocking and distressing death?

"It was very hard, but the Lord is helping us everyday," says Tara's mother. "I have forgiven the young men who did this thing, and God will forgive them if they make a decision to follow Jesus Christ."

"Closure came for us when we were able to return home and hold a memorial service for Tara," said Mrs. Cole. "She died in the faith, and so, we know that she is in the arms of her Savior. We will see her again one day in heaven." And for now, says Mrs. Cole, that is enough for those Tara left behind.

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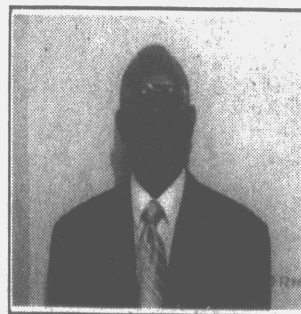


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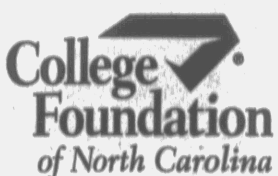
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LEADER

cont'd from front page

spoken," he said in a telephone interview. "They voted for the 264 bypass. We had debates; we had discussions; the City Council voted to name the 264 bypass. "I support their decision." His position has placed him in the minority among colleagues. The executive committee of the Pitt County NAACP recently voted against the city's proposal, and Garrett cast the lone dissenting vote, according to chapter president Calvin Henderson.

This week, the Pitt County Board of Commissioners voted 5-4 to support the City Council's call for naming the bypass for the Nobel Peace Prize-winning King, and Garrett said he agrees with that action.

Garrett, who has been honored with awards himself, including the Pitt-Greenville Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year and Pitt County Black Civic Group Life Achievement Award — wouldn't offer an opinion on what motivates those embroiled in the current controversy.

"I have no idea," he said. "I wouldn't dare to try to give you the thoughts of somebody else."

He does, however, offer an observation from his own experience.

"I have never had everything my way, and when people don't agree with my decision, it doesn't bother me," Garrett said. "I am living in a country called a democracy. If we are not going to be governed by the laws of those that we elected to speak for us, then we don't need them."

He is on record in support of naming Fifth Street for King; but Garrett — who lives on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, which was West Fifth Street until 1998 — also has consistently maintained that, barring that outcome, at least some street should bear King's name.

"I don't see what's so holy about any one street," he said. "I don't see what, honestly, anything is so holy about the street I live on — it's just another street."

"Martin Luther King don't know nothing about it."

The request to rename the U.S. 264 Bypass for King will go forward to the state Board of Transportation with the support of both the Greenville City Council and Pitt County Board of Commissioners. In the meantime, Garrett offers insight about the continued sniping gleaned from more than nine decades as an observer and participant.

"Folks have been fussing all my life," Garrett said. "Folks ... fussing is just part of human nature, whether state, local or international."

"We'll get over it," he said. "It too will pass."

T. Scott Batchelor can be contacted at sbatchelor@coxnc.com and 329-9567.

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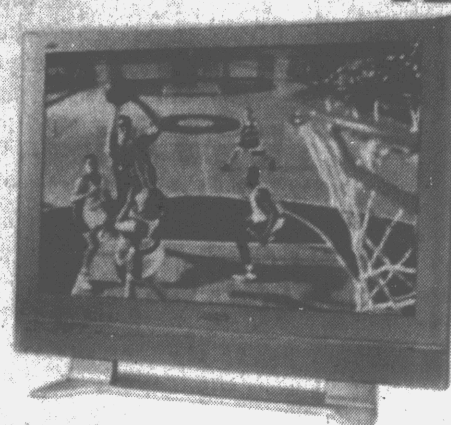


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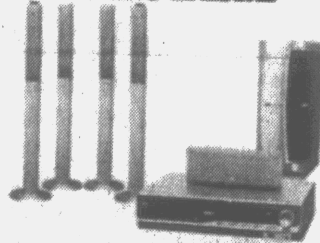
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