

## **Ripped Off Once, Mr. Grehl Got a Gun, Vowing Not To Be a Victim Again Eye to Eye With `Yo Roller'**

**By Angelo B. Henderson**

**from the 01/20/1998 The Wall Street Journal Page A1  
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### **Winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing**

DETROIT - "Get on the ground," a man holding a gun screamed. "I'll blow your heads off if you move."

Dennis Grehl and a co-worker complied. Dreamlike, he found himself lying face down on a cold, gritty black-tile floor, a pistol against the back of his head.

"Please, mister, don't make me shoot you," a second gunman threatened. A crazy memory: tiny specks of light floating in the tile; that, and the paralyzing weight of helplessness.

Mr. Grehl is a pharmacist, unassuming, mild mannered. A family man with a wife and a daughter. He was being robbed. He works in the Redford Pharmacy, a small neighborhood place in northwest Detroit. It's been around forever; the kind of place that delivers.

He had gone into his chosen profession in part because his mother had advised him to. "Nice and clean," she had said. Plus, he liked to help people.

He had helped these guys, too. One said he was looking for foot powder and skin lotion; the other, cough drops. They were African-Americans, well-dressed. They had totally conned him from out behind his counter.

Now he was a chump, on the floor. "It was the fear of not knowing what's next," Mr. Grehl recalls, staring off into the distance. "It's absolute, complete helplessness—you're not sure if they are going to eliminate the witnesses."

They didn't shoot. They took \$900 - \$300 of it from Mr. Grehl's wallet—and fled.

Mr. Grehl called the cops on that brittle November day and shook—not with fear, but with anger. He despised, more than the men who robbed him, his own vulnerability. "That's a position you don't want to be in," he says.

The year was 1990, and the robbers were never caught.

Mr. Grehl, who is white, dusted off a gun he had inherited from his father, a .32-caliber Beretta automatic, seven shots in the clip. He started bringing it to work, loaded, in a holster behind his back. He vowed to use it if he had to.

Then he crossed paths with Anthony Williams.

He would get to see if he really meant it.

Robberies like Mr. Grehl's almost never make news outside of a fleeting splash in local newspapers. In fact, armed-robbery rates here, as in most of the rest of the nation, have fallen for the past several years. That said, there were still more than 500,000 such crimes nationwide last year, about 8,000 in the Detroit metropolitan area alone.

And falling statistics are of little solace to victims. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health says the U. S. averages 20 workplace murders a week—75% of them robbery related. Only traffic accidents account for more on-the-job fatalities, according to the federal agency.

At the vortex of this are places like this city's Old Redford neighborhood, where suburban flight and declining economic fortunes, coupled with overwhelmed police departments, often subject them to crime boomlets that defy national statistics. In the past decade, drug dealing, with its attendant crime, has been a scourge here, and businesses—especially small businesses like restaurants, grocery stores and retail outlets—have felt the sting. Many, like Redford Pharmacy, believe they have only two choices: Install more elaborate security measures, or move out. So the drugstore added a buzzer system to control entry to its front door after 3 p. m., installed a panic button wired to a burglar alarm, and imposed a rule that no one could work alone. It also allowed Mr. Grehl to arm himself—a step that some consider extreme and others think is just common sense.

No one keeps track of such things, but most big retailers, for example, won't even arm security guards, much less their own employees, fearing adverse publicity and liability should a shooting occur. Moreover, one strand of wisdom says guns drawn by employees on criminals are all too often taken away and turned on the employees or co-workers, sometimes with disastrous effect.

But preliminary studies indicate that growing numbers of small-business people believe extreme measures are required in “defending their businesses,” says Joseph Kinney, executive director of the National Safe Workplace Institute, a trade group that tracks safety issues.

Denny Grehl knows all about this debate; he conducted it in his head for months. In the end, he will tell you, the decision—whether to shoot or not—all comes down to the blink of an eye.

Tony Williams, by all accounts, was a funny kid, the family comic, a real practical joker. Once, he tied a black thread to a boot in a darkened bedroom. When his younger brother Yancy entered, he pulled the string and made the boot move. Yancy thought he had seen a ghost. “He ran into the bedroom and jumped on my mother's head,” says Aaron Williams, another brother. Normally a brooding sort, Aaron practically howls with laughter at the memory of it.

Tony was generous, too, to friends and family alike. He was always lending his siblings money. “He'd give you his last, if he had it,” his mother, Erma Williams says. He was her firstborn, of seven children, and her favorite. A kid who loved his mother's cooking, her

smothered cabbage with salt-pork and bacon in particular. Things went sour for Tony soon enough, growing up in some Chicago housing projects on the city's west side. At 14, he ended up in front of juvenile authorities after the mysterious shooting of a friend. He dropped out of George Westinghouse High School at 16, moving from Chicago to Detroit with a girlfriend. Trying for a "new start," his mother says.

He went back to school for a while but dropped out again. He worked in a General Motors assembly plant for eight years but got fired for absenteeism. Kids came, five of them eventually, with three separate mothers. Tony always had lots of women friends. He never married any of them.

After GM, Tony took odd jobs, but nothing seemed to stick, as far as his Chicago relatives could tell. Still, he seemed to provide for his growing Detroit family, though now and then he would call home and ask for money. His mother, a longtime Chicago traffic officer, would send it. Once she gave him \$1,000.

"Tony knew he could come home anytime," Mrs. Williams says. But Tony, by the time he walked into the Redford Pharmacy on a cold, snowy Saturday a year ago, hadn't been home in a while.

Or gainfully employed, either.

In fact, his daily life was pretty much a mystery to his mother.

Detroit police know this much: Tony had a rap sheet. Tony had been a coke head. Tony lived in a southwest Detroit neighborhood infamous for its crack dens and gangs.

And that day, he had a gun, and he intended to rip the place off.

Declining neighborhoods are an urban cliché. But Mr. Grehl still couldn't quite believe it was

happening to Old Redford, a working-class, racially mixed enclave of about 50,000. He is a lifer at Redford Pharmacy, having worked there since 1961 when, as a college sophomore, he started delivering prescriptions to Redford's customers. It was a good job for a college kid; on weekends, he would sometimes work till midnight.

Most of the customers were regulars; everybody knew everybody else. If a senior citizen was short a few bucks for a prescription, Redford's pharmacists would hold a chit, or delay cashing a personal check until payday. The homey, relaxed nature of the place, and the work, suited Mr. Grehl just fine. When he graduated with his pharmacist's degree from Michigan's Ferris State University in 1970, he never thought about another job.

The drugstore still tries to put on its friendly face for its customers, half of them white, half of them black, many of them elderly, but it's grown ever harder to do so. Mr. Grehl's robbery in 1990 was one of a rash of robberies and break-ins in the Old Redford business district—nine of them in a nine-month period. In one brazen incident, the owners of a nearby sneaker store were handcuffed at gunpoint by robbers who then worked the cash register like they owned the place, pocketing the money. In another, a barbershop next door to the pharmacy was robbed, and several elderly customers were held at gunpoint.

Soon, iron grates appeared across storefronts. Strangers, once welcomed, were treated with a new wariness. So for Mr. Grehl, the years brought not just white hair, but palpable tension. Now 57 years old, he has lived in the suburbs since the 1970s, but looked forward to his time in Old Redford. Suddenly, going to work became an act of constant vigilance. Beyond the buzzer and the panic button and the no-working-alone rule, employees no longer linger at the pharmacy much after 6 p. m. All five watch out for each other on the way to their cars.

Mr. Grehl had the extra burden of dealing with his robbery. He had replayed it thousands of times in his head, second-guessed himself, had nightmares about it. But it was always there, in the back of his mind.

He kept thinking how he would react if it happened again. He remembers running through scenarios, enacting "3,000 dress rehearsals in your mind."

Saturday, Jan. 18, 1997. The Detroit winter in full bloom. Smudged gray sky, bone-rattling cold,

crisp new snow on the ground. Mr. Grehl is on duty with Jennifer Knott, a 33-year-old African-American assistant who has worked at Redford for five years. The day begins, as Saturdays always do, with Mr. Grehl breakfasting on a “Mexican Revolution” omelet from a carryout place just down the street.

It's moderately busy but uneventful—until a moment just after 1:30 p.m.

A slender black male slips through the door, dressed in a green windbreaker, blue jeans and white sneakers. He approaches Ms. Knott, who moves to the right side of an L-shaped counter to wait on him.

The first words out of his mouth: “Give me the money, bitch!”

He flashes a gun tucked under his shirt.

Ms. Knott is scared but not yet panicked. She steps to the nearby cash register and begins pulling out small bills, ones and fives, and dropping them on the floor.

She is hoping against hope to get Denny Grehl's attention.

Mr. Grehl is on a phone at the other end of the counter, talking to a customer.

Ms. Knott's ploy works; he doesn't see the falling bills, but the commotion causes him to look up. At first he thinks it's a guy from the tire store across the street coming in to get change.

But then the man rushes the cash register, shouting, “I'll get that, and a lot more!”

Mr. Grehl is thinking: This can't be happening. Not again. But he doesn't hesitate.

He drops the phone, steps forward, drawing his pistol.

The robber, two steps from the cash register, turns to face him.

Four feet apart, their eyes meet, fleetingly. The robber whips out his gun and begins to raise it.

Mr. Grehl jerks his Beretta to eye level and fires.

Seconds later, Tony Williams lies face down on the floor, next to a dusty stack of Yellow Pages and a shelf filled with tonics and cough syrups.

He is dead, a single gunshot wound to the head.

What does a mother ever want to know of a troubled son?

Everything? Nothing?

Erma Williams buried her oldest child nine days later in the shadow of a water tower: section F8, row 4, grave 25 of Restvale Cemetery in suburban Chicago. Tony was eulogized in a family ceremony conducted at the House of Branch Funeral Home on Chicago's west side. He was 36.

There was an organist, and a minister read from the book of John: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. ..."  
"Mrs. Williams had the funeral home publish a nice obituary of Tony, which she passed

out at the services. The cover shows a smiling picture of him, in a suit jacket and turtleneck, a flower in his lapel. She allowed herself a mother's liberties: She wrote that Tony had graduated from high school. She talked about his "devoted wife," Lawanda Robles.

"He was a hard-working man who always provided for his family and always helped others. He was a kind and loving man who was always there when you needed him," the obituary read.

Months later, puffing on a cigarette at the kitchen table of her small west-side Chicago apartment, she tells what it was like to hear the news of Tony's death over the phone.

She had been taping church music. "I hollered, 'No, not Tony!'" she says. She pauses, then says, "Tony was my heart."

Mrs. Williams is fresh from a shift on her traffic beat. The apartment is warm, and she unbuttons the top button of her blue uniform. Her fourth son, Aaron, is seated in a nearby chair; he's come by, unannounced, to see his mother.

She is short, hair dyed honey blond, a direct kind of person. In her mid-50s, she hopes to retire in a couple of years. She and her husband, Johnny Ford, an apartment-house maintenance man and Tony's stepfather, plan to just take it easy. Tony's real father, Hugh Earl, was never around much. But he came to his son's funeral. He has since suffered a stroke.

For Mrs. Williams there is still something unreal about Tony's death. The Detroit cops never explained in detail what happened. The idea that he could resort to armed robbery—she shakes her head.

"I believe something else happened," she says. "There's so much I don't know. What was he doing before he died? Was he working? How was he surviving? I can't paint him as an angel or put him on a pedestal because I don't know."



Aaron, crouched in a chair, turns out to know quite a bit about his late brother's life. At 30, he's about the same height as Tony, but heavier. His eyes are intense; he seems guarded and angry. Aaron missed Tony's services. He says he was locked up in an Illinois prison finishing a sentence for stealing cars. They lee him out just long enough to view the body at the wake. Aaron ticks off the names of other jails where he has spent time.

Aaron tells his mother: "Well, Tony did odd jobs and hustled."

"What do you mean hustled?" Mrs. Williams asks.

"He worked on houses, worked on cars and sold drugs," Aaron says. "Keep talking," Mrs. Williams says. "You obviously know more than me." Aaron continues: "His nickname was 'Yo Roller.' He sold cocaine, weed, heroin and mescaline."

Another pause. Staring into the ashtray, his mom says: "This hurts."

He goes on: "He made his living by selling drugs. He's been doing it since the laid-80s. That was his way of life and the way he raised his kids and supported his women."

Aaron pauses again. "He had about eight women," he adds. Mrs. Williams puffs faster.

"Everybody in the family knew what he was doing, but we never told you, Mama," Aaron says.

A long silence passes.

Finally, Mrs. Williams speaks: "I loved him, true enough. But some things you just don't know."

Ask Denny Grehl about the unreality of it all. The odd things he remembers, like the haze from the gunshot lingering for a long moment in the air, then evaporating.

His hand trembling violently as he put the gun on safety and laid it on the counter, not wanting to touch it again.

Then the searing reality of it all: The body hitting the floor before he could even think, "Oh my God—what have I done?"

Ms. Knott dialed 911. The police arrived in nine minutes.

"But it seemed like a half hour, when you are stepping over this body," Mr. Grehl says.

He was questioned briefly, along with Ms. Knott, at the scene, then allowed to drive himself to the local police station for more questioning. Ms. Knott followed in her own car. The police had been polite, but he was fearful.

He kept thinking, "What will happen to me now? Will anyone understand that I didn't intend to kill, but to stop a crime?"

The police questioned Ms. Knott first, then Mr. Grehl, keeping him 50 minutes. He was released and drove home.

On Monday, he was back at work—a crazy thing he felt compelled to do. Dick Sawicki, the

pharmacy's owner, told him to take some time off, but Mr. Grehl says he realized that if he didn't report for work immediately, &quot;l might never come back at all.&quot;

At 9:30 that same morning, the Wayne County prosecutor's office called Mr. Grehl to say it had ruled on the shooting: It was justifiable homicide.

Ms. Knott agrees adamantly. Mr. Grehl likely saved her life, and perhaps his own. &quot;l thought my life was going to be over—flash, right in front of my eyes,&quot; she says.

A year has passed and Denny Grehl tries to do what he has always done. He comes to work, serves his customers. He lives quietly in the suburbs. He takes his power boat out on the nice weekends in the warm months. Now and then, he and his wife of 28 years spend time at their little cabin in the woods in upstate Michigan.

And he thinks about the dead stranger, Anthony Williams.

This time, he isn't angry—just numb and somewhat fearful.

In the months just after the shooting, he kept wondering whether Tony's friends or family might seek revenge. Every new face that entered the door made him nervous.

One who entered, though Mr. Grehl didn't know it, was Aaron Williams. He says that shortly after Tony's shooting, he visited the pharmacy, in violation of his Chicago parole, to see the scene for himself. But he believed then that his brother had been set up, either by a rival drug dealer or a jealous boyfriend of one of Tony's women. Aaron and his mother are still not totally convinced that that's not the case.

Mr. Grehl's fears of retribution have faded some, though he is still jumpy. Counseling has helped. Statistically, his therapist told him, revenge shootings of that sort are extremely rare. The families of criminals are usually too chastened to want retribution and the criminals

themselves don't usually have the kinds of friends who stick up for them.

That Tony ran in rough company is indisputable. He was questioned but never charged in a 1986 murder case; charged with reckless use of a firearm a year later but never tried. Busted for drugs in 1988, and again in 1991. He pleaded guilty in the 1988 case, involving the discovery of 17 packs of crack cocaine in his pocket after he was stopped for speeding. He never served prison time (the 1991 arrest was dismissed), ending up on probation instead. After his 1988 guilty plea, he admitted to a parole officer that he was addicted to cocaine.

He asked for medical help; it isn't clear whether he ever got it.

The pharmacy has gone through yet another round of soul-searching over security. It spent heavily on more safety devices, including 1 1/4-inch-thick bullet-deflecting Plexiglas windows rising 4 feet above its counters, a thick Plexiglas door and armored plates on the lower shelves. Such measures initially bothered Denny Grehl, who worried that customers would be turned off.

But they haven't been. Instead, they appear relieved. Many came by in the weeks after the shooting to offer words of comfort. One customer said: "Welcome to the 20th century." Friends have been sympathetic, too. Paul Bologna, Mr. Grehl's friend for 39 years who owns the barbershop next door, says the druggist had no choice. "It was self defense in the first place. When a guy comes in and sticks a gun in your face, what are you gonna do?"

Mr. Grehl tries to be philosophical. "I can't say I'm glad I did it—kill somebody," he says. "But I'm glad it didn't turn out the way it could have."

But will it ever end?

Not long ago, a teenager Mr. Grehl didn't know entered the pharmacy alone. She asked: "Is this the place where the shooting was?"

Mr. Grehl replied: &quot;Yes.&quot;

The girl said: &quot;I just wanted to see who killed my baby's daddy.&quot;

She was out of the store before her words could sink in.

Reprinted from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. Tuesday, January 20, 1998.