

No Man's Land: Living Rough in No Man's Land: Being homeless on Grand means dodging law enforcement — and managing addiction

By Ryan Krull

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The second time I met Jimmy Wille he looked significantly worse than the first time — when he'd looked pretty good for a guy who'd been homeless and flying signs for the past five months in the spring and summer sun. Now, fresh scabs pockmarked his nose, and instead of walking up and down the highway on-ramp he sat hunched over on a particularly thin stretch of sidewalk along Grand Boulevard in Midtown. There was so little room for him that his bedroll and bag lay on the street. He would get more money, he said, if he walked up and down, back and forth, but he didn't want to be aggressive. He doesn't like when people who ask for money are. Plus, he just wasn't up for the extra effort.

He said his injuries were from a fight a few nights ago. He paused, before adding, "Not a fight, really. I got beat up." His assailant saw him talking to a girl, and one thing led to another. He raised his arm to show an open sore, which he blamed on cheap deodorant given to him as part of a care package.

At the time, Wille lived and worked on a stretch of Grand that runs roughly from Saint Louis University Hospital to SLU — an area that both the city and the Jesuit university have big plans for. But Wille moved to the area simply "because that's where the dope's at."

During one of our first conversations, when we spoke for an hour not far from the Grand MetroLink station, we witnessed at least a dozen open-air drug deals.

"There they go again," Wille said, pointing. Two young men with backpacks and visibly dirty skin jogged briskly down a small side street perpendicular to Grand, following a car that Wille said everyone knew belonged to a dealer. White buyers, black buyers. Buyers who could have passed for, and maybe were, college students. Buyers who looked pretty far gone. A pair of buyers who, if you met them at a party, you might think were siblings. Another two who moved in tandem like only a pair of significant others can.

"Every half hour [dealers] pull through," said Wille. "They look for us. They pull up and if they see you sitting here, they'll pull down the alley."

To a driver passing by it would have looked innocuous enough: like a car making a slow, uncertain turn down a side road, like people hustling to catch a bus or maybe the MetroLink. The transactions themselves were done far enough from Grand to be out of sight, and the dealers' cars were unremarkable.

"See that guy over there," Wille pointed again. "He's just coming back from getting high in the little getting-high spot."

The part of Midtown immediately around SLU is built-up and bustling. Same goes — to a lesser extent — for the area around the hospital. But the

two circles of development are not quite concentric, and the strip in between is populated by empty fields and under-utilized or abandoned buildings. According to one development document produced by SLU, there are more than 650,000 square feet of vacant industrial and manufacturing buildings in the area between Chouteau and Forest Park avenues. Wille guessed that on Grand from Interstate 44 to roughly Lindell there were at least 50 people like him, scraping together what they could, living as they could in places like the nearby foliage. Some people had habits that might have been as expensive as \$100 a day, Wille said. His own habit is more modest, he insisted, maybe \$10 a day. He doesn't spend all the money he gets on dope, he said. Some of it goes to food, some to methadone.

Those who drive through the area rarely are much more likely to give, Wille said, as opposed to the SLU students who see the same people on the same sidewalks and intersections every day. Two students I talked to said they didn't particularly mind the people asking for money and that they had never encountered what might be called aggressive begging. Maya Taylor, a first-year student who was on campus for several weeks prior to fall semester, said that having people hanging around on Grand "wasn't a big deal" and the people who solicit donations "don't seem hostile and are very with themselves." A SLU spokeswoman said that some students have reported incidents of "drug use and aggressive panhandling." But, she said, "there have been no incidents of violent crimes."

On Sunday evening in the first week of August, a tall, slender man was having what seemed to be a loud and sustained psychotic episode. He

shouted and flailed his arms. He buried his face in his hands then raised them to the sky. Not far away, two male students carried a futon into Reinhart Hall. The man on the sidewalk was impossible to miss, but the two students gave little indication of noticing.

At the time, Wille said, a shift was underway. On the north side of the bridge that runs atop the Grand MetroLink station a fence had recently been erected — Wille suspected it was to make it harder to congregate under the Highway 40 overpass. The night before, Wille had been standing outside Reinert Hall, using the building's WiFi (something he'd done all summer). Officers from SLU's Department of Public Safety arrived, saying there had been a call (which Wille doubted) and that he needed to leave.

"This last week they've really cracked down on this shit here," Wille said. "They don't want you on their property. They don't want you waiting on their property. They don't want you using their WiFi. They've been going out to the woods in their cars, going in and checking it out. And they've been taking people to jail for trespassing." He added, "They got these little bits of property. See that little strip there? That's SLU property. That whole field and that strip. People are going there to get high."

Wille said that the authorities don't hassle him all that often because he looks clean. "But for the hardcore homeless," he said, "it's every day."

A spokeswoman for SLU said the fence Wille referred to was actually put up by the owners of the adjacent private property. As for handling trespassers,

the spokeswoman said, "As a private university, our campus is private property." She added that it is its Department of Public Safety's policy "to give warnings only to those who trespass on university property. For those who continue to trespass after being given a warning, SLU does often involve city police in an effort to stop repeat offenders."

The crime logs that SLU DPS makes public only showed two records of trespassing and aggressive begging in all of August, five in September. However, Wille was correct about a sea change being underway.

In November 2016, SLU released an extensive redevelopment plan aimed at better connecting the university to the medical facilities to the south, essentially creating one large contiguous SLU campus. The redevelopment plan, which was approved by the city's Board of Aldermen at the end of last year, includes a new outpatient medical facility and food hall as well as residential housing.

Glance at the artist's rendering released by SLU, and it's hard to imagine the discrete places to crash or the "getting-high spots" in the area along Grand remaining undeveloped. A more detailed perusal of SLU's plans shows that the place where Wille and I watched the open air deals is marked for transit-oriented development and to become part of the Choteau Greenway, which would connect the green spaces of Forest Park to the Arch grounds downtown. In September the Great Rivers Greenway announced a competition soliciting designs for the project, and around that same time another fence was erected separating the vacant lots east of

Grand from the fast food restaurants along Chouteau. A hole big enough for a person to squeeze through was soon cut into its chain links.

That first summer day I talked to Wille a section of wooded area at Grand and Chouteau that had been a sleeping area had just been partially cleared; trees lay in a large pile, their leaves still green. Later that week, the pile of timber was gone and the cleared area looked like it was larger. SLU, a spokeswoman confirmed, did the clearing with development in mind.

"I sat and watched as they bulldozed all that," Wille said. "There were so many needles and lighters, crack pipes and shit. It wasn't safe. Someone might have stepped on something. I had some clothes back there that they bulldozed."

A group of people hung out in the shade of one of the brick pillars supporting the large Saint Louis University sign that arches over Grand just north of Chouteau. A few of them were the same folks previously darting onto side roads to do quick buys. They responded to the tree-clearing across the street with a collective shrug.

"That's SLU property," said the only member of the group who looked older than twenty-something. "I guess they're going to build something."

Later, when I asked Wille what he thought about SLU connecting its hospital and its university, he said it sounded like a good idea.

There is a template for a story about development in cities displacing the people already occupying the spaces to be developed. In the 1930s and '40s, for instance, the construction of the Gateway Arch pushed blocks and blocks of people out of their homes. This template accurately describes an age-old displacement, but to apply it too rigidly here would risk doing a disservice to someone like Wille.

Wille, after all, never really wanted to be on Grand in the first place.

Clearly visible on Wille's knee is the scar from the motorcycle wreck that set him on the path to where he is today. Fifteen years ago, he was, in his words, "the prodigy child." He raced motocross, making steep jumps with his bike on a dirt track. As a teenager he was good enough to get his gear for free. He got a custom helmet, a custom paint job on his bike. He even traveled the junior circuit, racing at the Hoosier Dome (now the RCA Dome) in Indianapolis.

Then another rider accidentally landed on him. He was put on Vicodin, he said, to manage the pain. He really enjoyed taking pills on the weekends — "it was a Friday-night thing" — and didn't think of them much differently than marijuana or booze.

He didn't realize that when he stopped taking them he was going to get sick. "It got to be that when I woke up I had to take some Vicodin just to get on with my day," he said. Vicodin led to Oxycontin which led to Fentanyl

which led to Dilaudid. He snorted pills. He injected them. Like 4 million other Americans, he started using heroin.

He'd been struggling with opioids for several years when he began growing pot in the house he rented in Illinois, unbeknownst to his landlord. "I did good," he said. "I read all Ed Rosenthal's books. I went to Worm's Way for dirt. I bought seeds from Vancouver Seed Bank, which were \$10 apiece. Feminized seeds. I had White Widow, OG Kush when it was brand new and Northern Lights Haze Mist, which were the best old-school strains."

Growing pot was a profitable enterprise, and in 2009 he met the woman who would become his wife. Together they spent the money he made, coming into St. Louis to party on long weekends, staying at some of the nicest hotels in the city. But he said his neighbors could smell his product and his house was burglarized. Even though not much was taken, he eventually stopped the whole operation, increasingly worried about the potential for arrest.

Two years ago, Wille and his wife had a daughter. He said all he'd ever wanted was to have a family. But then, he said, "it got rough. I couldn't catch up. You need to have money for the next day. Well, I got behind." In early 2017, after signing over temporary custody of their child to Wille's father in Illinois, Wille and his wife first came to this stretch of Grand.

On Grand, they worked as a team. He panhandled and flew signs, worked small side jobs and scored dope. She worked, too, kept their clothes clean, scratched his back.

A recent survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors showed that in 68 percent of cities, substance abuse was the most prevalent cause of homelessness among single adults. A 2013 study in Boston found that overdoses had surpassed HIV as the leading cause of death among its homeless population.

Yet even though addiction is a leading cause of homelessness, it's certainly not the only cause, nor is it the cause of the majority of homelessness. A recent study in New Haven, Connecticut, for instance, showed addiction to be that city's greatest cause of homelessness, yet only one in four homeless individuals named it as the primary reason for their living on the streets.

This summer Wille was arrested on a "failure to appear" for a retail theft charge and ended up spending 25 days in city jail. While he was locked up his wife sold his Doc Martens and his phone; she now lives in a community of the homeless downtown. Wille suspected she was using crack. "She's lost her mind," he said. "She went off the deep end." She doesn't know how to take care of herself, he said, and she must have panicked. He once contemplated buying a large crack rock and offering it to her just to get her to talk to him.

Wille sees his daughter as often as he can, when he is well enough and can transport himself across the river. He tries to go at least every Sunday morning. One time when we talked he was angry at himself because he'd intended to see her the day prior but failed to do so. Every morning he wakes up crying, thinking about his wife and about their daughter.

He's tried several times to get clean, and at one point a judge put him on a "fee-tox," which meant Wille could receive methadone but he would have to pay for it. The methadone allowed him to function and kept the effects of withdrawal at bay, but it also cost \$17 a dose. He required a dose every day, and the methadone clinic itself was an hour away by public transit. The clinic's hours, 5:15 to 10:45 a.m., were hardly convenient, and if he arrived too late he was left facing withdrawal until the next day. If being on methadone wasn't a full-time job, it was at least a part-time one, and the morning methadone routine made it difficult to earn steady income, which in turn made it difficult to scrape together his daily \$17. The dealers, unlike the clinic, came to Wille. They delivered.

He's attempted several times to quit without methadone, and he can generally get past the first four days of severe withdrawals. Then, he said, "about the fifth day comes around it's like the flu times ten. You get diarrhea real bad, anxiety, insomnia. You're hot and cold. You're sneezing. *Achoo, achoo, achoo.* Then after that physical part goes away the mental is hardcore on you. I'll start thinking about my wife, and the drugs have been putting all this off and hiding it in my brain. I get all depressed, and that's usually when you get started using again just to block it away."

Regular opioid use causes enduring changes in the brain, which, over time, make people physically dependent on the substance.

Christine Pace, an assistant professor of medicine at Boston University, said, "With regular heroin use, we see many chronic changes in the brain. An example is that your body expresses fewer dopamine receptors over time because it is so used to heroin massively increasing the amount of available dopamine. Dopamine is one of the neurotransmitters involved in a sense of pleasure and reward, so you actually end up as an addict with less capacity for these sensations than if the same person weren't addicted. You actually end up needing the drug not to feel high but to feel normal."

Wille told me about a plan to procure six wooden shipping pallets in order to build a makeshift shelter that could be disassembled easily and moved from place to place. He could attach an air conditioner and a power box.

"I shouldn't even say I'm planning on this," he said, "because that means I'm not planning on getting right."

It's hard to say exactly what happened on Grand. Around the start of SLU's fall semester, the intersections where all summer people had reliably flown signs and asked for spare change — at 40 and Grand, at Forest Park Avenue and Grand — were suddenly bereft of both. Groups of students walked up and down Grand, as did uniformed St. Louis police officers. Even Wille, who more often than not could be found in one of the

same handful of places, was nowhere to be seen for several days, maybe even longer.

Calvin Pittman, who works at the Circle K at Grand and Forest Park Avenue, said, "The police have been out here. [The homeless] don't come around here so much. They're not outside because the police are stopping their flow. If they can panhandle at the end of the highway, they can make money. But if they can't, then there's no need for them to come around."

Darrion Latcher, of Bellefontaine Neighbors, catches the bus on Grand atop the MetroLink station on his way home from his temp service job. "There were a lot of people here on the corner holding signs," he said. "Now they're gone. Lot of police patrolling, that's why."

When I reconnected with Wille, he told me he'd started sleeping downtown near the Lumiere casino, though he still comes back to Grand occasionally during the day. He said the police patrol on foot, and he knew a few people who had been taken to jail. He said it's easier for the police to just run a person's name rather than actually search them for drugs or arrest them for panhandling. "Most of these people have warrants," he said.

Because he didn't have any warrants he wasn't afraid of police running his name. He "can afford to take a warning." From time to time he still flew signs on that stretch of Grand, but, he said, "you won't see anyone else out."

"They actually moved away from the area because they can't [panhandle]. They don't want to live here," he said. "I'm not sure where they go, where they're at. The homeless have moved out."

It's not clear whether SLU explicitly asked the police to start patrolling the area on foot. When I asked SLU what actions, if any, had been taken by DPS or by the police in coordination with the school, its spokeswoman said, simply, "I don't have any additional information."

Their motives for taking action would not be difficult to imagine. What parents see while dropping college students off in August could potentially have an outsized influence on how they feel about their child returning next fall. SLU would hardly be the first institution to take efforts to move the homeless population in its midst elsewhere. (Loft developers in Downtown West played a large role in the New Life Evangelistic Center ceasing shelter operations earlier this year, for instance.)

But clearing out a community of the homeless only solves the problem for its neighbors — not the people who had been living in it.

"Unless you solve the problem, you're really just shifting it from one place to another," said Faye Abram, a retired professor of social work at SLU. "It's just a matter of where it's going to crop up next. There's no word other than criminalizing homelessness. I'm a firm believer that if you don't have low-income housing to accommodate the population, then the prisons become your low income housing."

On a chilly October night downtown, Wille's bedroll lay tucked beside a utility box beneath I-44, across the street from Morgan Street Brewery and Nelly's Extreme Institute. For a while he'd slept down by the river until one night the water rose and washed some of belongings away. Now he's been spending his nights here on this concrete island. He smirked, saying that he's had some success flying a sign that read "Too Ugly to Prostitute."

"I get people taking pictures all the time," he said. Even some police officers, he says, "took a picture with me and said it was the best sign they ever saw."

A woman who has known Wille for decades, whose younger brothers were friends with him in high school, sat smoking near the Lumiere's rear entrance. Kim (who didn't want to give her last name) said she reconnected with Wille four or five years ago and now bumps into him downtown — he's usually panhandling — almost daily. Kim said her husband, like Wille, struggles with opiate addiction.

"It's the devil," she said. "It's down here. It's out on Grand. In Maplewood. In Brentwood. Everywhere. If you're looking for it you'll find it wherever you are."

I asked her how many people she'd guess were out on the streets because of opiates.

"Thousands," she said.

"In St. Louis," I clarified.

"It's thousands. I mean I know of hundreds, so I got to imagine it doesn't stop there."

A few blocks toward the river, Casey (who also didn't want to give his last name) sat on a bench beside his dog, Lovely. Casey, who has been living without a home for the past six years, arrived in St. Louis a little over a month ago, after being pulled off of a freight train he'd ridden from Louisville. Since arriving in town he's taken part in the recent protests over the Stockley verdict, has spent a night in jail and was kettled at Washington and Tucker, pepper sprayed and chased down an alley by police.

"People don't understand that yeah, I'm homeless, but I'm not a drug addict," said Casey, who's originally from San Francisco. "I never touched drugs. It's sad because so many people think that the homeless are criminals or drug users, but if you've never sat down to talk to one you don't know where they came from, who they are."

When Casey asks for food, many people say no, that they don't want to be an enabler.

"No drug dealer is going to take food as payment for anything," Casey said.

Casey's friend Darren added: "Yes, a lot of homeless people use drugs, but there's a percentage who don't."

In addition to a meal, Darren said he needed money to buy a coat and gloves.

"Here we are going on to winter," he said. "And a lot of us don't have warm clothes."

A few weeks prior, in Midtown, around midnight, the Candyman was open for business near Chouteau and Grand. Written on a sign affixed to the open tailgate of his minivan were the words SNOW CONES in big block letters.

Wille was on the Candyman's cellphone, trying to reach the person he thought was going to pick him up and give him a ride downtown. He was leaving a voice mail — from the sound of it not the first message he'd left for this person that night. He gave the Candyman back his phone. "I'll be right back," Wille said. "Watch my bag."

A steady stream of people, more than you might think at such an hour, came by and purchased the Candyman's gummy bears, Snickers and sodas. The radio played lightly from the front of the van.

"You got to have your own concept," the Candyman said, nodding toward his van, his operation. "Forget corporate America."

The Candyman grew up in the '70s and '80s on Vista and Theresa, which is one of the few blocks in the western third of the Gate District neighborhood where residential houses still stand. The rest has been developed by SLU. If the redevelopment plan comes to fruition, though, the entire stretch of the neighborhood from Grand to Compton will be formally blighted, a preliminary step preceding development.

"This was the best place to grow up," the Candyman said. "In the city. South St. Louis. It was. It was. Saint Louis University has monopolized my entire neighborhood." The Candyman guessed there might be eight families from his youth still living in his old stomping grounds. "I guess all of us will eventually be in jars in this building right here," he added, laughing as he pointed to the futuristic-looking Edward A. Doisy Research Center, which houses the university's departments of biochemistry and molecular biology.

We'd been talking for about twenty minutes, through a slow but steady stream of customers, when Wille returned.

"I was just telling this guy how we met," the Candyman said. "Do you remember?"

"I was probably laying right here."

"You were right there, coming off the highway, and you asked me for some money."

"I asked you for some food, I think."

"No, before that. You asked me for some money."

That first meeting the Candyman looked Wille in the eyes. "Don't play with me," he told him. The Candyman would feed a man who looked hungry, but he knew what Wille was liable to do with money, so he wouldn't give him any.

"Please stop for a minute," the Candyman said now, the three of us in a circle. "Come on." Wille held open a tiny capsule beneath his nose. "I know you got to be doing what you're doing, but we're men, let's have a for-real conversation, just for a minute."

"I got a \$10 a day habit."

"Fuck that. You know there's something else you could do with that \$10. I need you to come back."

"I am," Wille said. "For my little baby's sake. Not for me, I'll tell you that."

"I hate this shit," the Candyman said. "Hate it." His voice caught.

Wille stepped away, back toward where he'd stashed his belongings. He apologized, said he hadn't meant to be disrespectful.

In the glow of the medical building across the street, tears glimmered in the Candyman's eyes. "I lost so many friends off that shit," he said. "People OD-ing. I can count ten people, ten people I was close to. It hurts. Thirty years ago it was crack, HIV. Right now what we're going through is the aftermath of all that. Now it's all opiates. If you got one relative who is not addicted to something, man, you're lucky."

Later, Wille and I had been talking for a while, off to the side, when the Candyman closed up shop.

"Hey! Listen!" he yelled. "We're going to get this guy straight." He pointed to Wille. "It takes a whole village, a whole village, to raise just one." His voice was both booming and solemn. He held his pointer finger in the air — "a whole village, to raise just one," he repeated — as he walked back to his van. He started the engine and pulled the candy store out onto Chouteau, into the night.

It was after midnight and, other than the nearby Rally's drive-through, commerce in the area seemed done for the day. Wille tried calling his ride again. Again, his ride didn't answer.

Later on a Saturday night downtown, Jimmy huffed his tote bag and backpack down Fourth Street toward where his bedroll lay. He'd misplaced some money and, arriving at where he'd had it last, searched frantically among mulch and shrubs. The weather was unseasonably warm for October. Wille, wearing shorts and a sleeveless shirt, wiped his brow.

"I never misplace money," he said. "I always double and triple check to make sure that don't happen." He added: "I was ahead, too. I had money so I could go see her."

He'd intended to use the money to pay for the MetroLink and bus rides for his weekly Sunday morning visit with his daughter. He'd thought that tonight he could lay down relatively early and get some rest. Now, he faced the prospect of having to panhandle late into the night to pay for the trip in the morning.

A look of frustration overtook his features. He sighed. He went back to his belongings and his sign and restarted the process that would allow him to see his daughter the next day.