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Fame, fortune have faded away for Detroit boxer Willie Edwards

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He had a wife, two children and a dynamite right hand that could put you to sleep.

Willie (the Sandman) Edwards had the world at his feet -- and many opponents as well, whom he knocked down during his colorful boxing career in Detroit and across the country in the 1980s.

Now the Sandman hides in a dark corner of a downtown homeless shelter, where his most precious possessions are an old folding chair and a few memories of his ring career.

"I don't want to cry about anything," Edwards told Free Press boxing writer Mike Brudenell, who visited him recently.



Former boxer Willie Edwards keeps to himself in his corner at Detroit's Tumaini Center, where he has lived the past few years. "They treat me well," he said. / Photos by SARAH RICE/Detroit Free Press



Dean Carpenter, the nurse practitioner at the Tumaini Center, believes that Edwards, left, has shown signs of Parkinson's disease.

"What's happened is nobody's fault."

Edwards, who is 55 and suffers from the early stages of Parkinson's disease, was once a punch away from being the world light heavyweight champion. These days, Edwards, who was born in Ypsilanti, struggles from a much different corner in his life.

The toughest fight

On a folding chair in the far corner of a sour-smelling, unevenly lit room, the Sandman sits alone.

A television rests atop some boxes to his left, showing reruns of "The Cisco Kid." In better times, the Sandman might have watched a movie as he lay stretched out on a big, comfortable hotel bed in Atlantic City or Las Vegas.

The Sandman's slide has been faster, and much sadder, than his exit from the boxing ring, in which he fought against the best two decades ago and almost reigned as king.

Edwards, a broad-shouldered Detroit fighter who once trained at the Coleman Young Center and was one punch away from upsetting Bobby Czyz for the IBF light heavyweight championship in 1987, lives today in the shadowy world of the homeless, one of the thousands forgotten in this city.

No pats on the back for Willie from admirers, no regal introductions from ring announcers; just a cheese and bologna sandwich now and again, a cup of coffee and a dark corner to disappear in.

Edwards, who was known as "the Sandman" in boxing circles for his ability to put opponents to sleep with his magical right hand and wicked left hook, spends his days and nights at the Tumaini Center on Third Avenue in Detroit -- a crisis-support facility where hundreds of desperate souls, some mentally ill, others sick from booze and dope, are fed and sheltered from the cold and the predators outside.

Edwards, 55, has been at the center -- a one-level, concrete-block building a few hundred yards south of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard -- for at least the past couple of years, he says.

Whether it has been longer is questionable. Edwards, according to health workers at the center, is suffering from memory loss and the early stages of Parkinson's disease, which may have affected his ability to recall when he arrived at Tumaini, if he even cares. His case file lists no contacts in an emergency, so it is difficult for anyone to check on his past movements.

One thing seems apparent: Edwards, who last fought in 1993, when he was KO'd in the first round of a bout in Virginia Beach, rarely, if ever, leaves the premises, preferring to work in the center's kitchen, washing dishes during the day or providing a little muscle if trouble erupts among those inside at night, according to center staff.

Remember him as he was

Edwards, who says he suffered a broken back working construction seven or



Willie Edwards' problems include suffering from the early stages of Parkinson's disease, which also has affected other former boxers. / SARAH RICE/Detroit Free Press

eight years ago and is disabled and without insurance, was once a feared fighter, known in the gyms around Detroit and across North America, having fought also in France.

He was managed in 1984-87 by the colorful Billy Gutz, who looked after some of the best fighters in the Midwest, including former IBF super middleweight champion Lindell Holmes of Toledo.

Gutz, 80, ran his boxing operations from the old Motor City Gym on Woodward and West Forest, where, Gutz says, members of the Detroit mob were known to hang out. He hasn't heard from Edwards for four or five years, he says, and is reluctant to see him now in his situation.

Gutz isn't squeamish, but he loves Edwards, he says, and wants to remember him as he was.

"I don't think my ticker could take the stress of seeing him now," says Gutz, who lives in Chesterfield Township. "Willie was a sweetheart. He was a great warrior who had a big heart. But as long as he has a warm place to sleep and food to eat, that's the best place for him."

Gutz was with Edwards for the Czyz fight. He urged Edwards to retire after Czyz knocked him cold in the second round, although Willie had Czyz in trouble just before the bell sounded to end the first.

"He had another six fights after Czyz," recalls Gutz, who has nothing to do with boxing these days. "The damage done, it probably happened after Czyz. You never know."

Tumaini family nurse practitioner Dean Carpenter checks dozens of men and

women during his shifts at the center. He doesn't have access to X-ray machines or other fancy medical equipment. He met Edwards several years ago and has even watched his fight against Czyz on YouTube.

Carpenter believes Edwards probably has some form of brain damage, or "pugilistic dementia."

"He has a shuffling gait, a Parkinsonism feature," Carpenter says. "His mask-like faces -- sometimes there's not much expression."

Carpenter and Edwards communicate better than most at the center. "Like a stone face," says Edwards, looking at Carpenter with a slight grin.

Tumaini Center is his home

Willie Edwards is still a strong man. His handshake is firm. His big fists still could deliver, if necessary. During his boxing days, he wore his hair shorter at the sides, longer on top. He now wears dreadlocks.

Edwards says he remembers owning a home, then moving in with a sister at Seven Mile and Rutherford in Detroit before going to Chicago for about three years. He returned to the Detroit area, he says, and chose to stay at the Tumaini Center rather than on the streets or with relatives.

"I've been coming here for two years," Edwards says. "They treat me well. I help the crew out -- the security crew. I also help in the kitchen. I don't push anyone around."

Leah Tollini is case manager at Tumaini. She says some people have been at the center for 15 years or longer and don't want to leave. She has been at the center since March 2010 and has gotten to know Edwards well.

"He is just so quiet and modest," Tollini says of the former fighter who handed out beatings to tough guys like David Sears, Anthony Witherspoon, Donny Lalonde, Rufino Angulo, Matthew Saad Muhammad and Len Hutchins. "He's the sweetest man. But it seems he is confused and scared of life out there -- not in the ring or in here, but on the outside."

The center's computer shows Edwards has been at Tumaini since 2009, but Tollini believes it's more likely 2007. She has offered to find him a place with a TV and furniture, but Edwards won't leave.

"He doesn't want handouts," says Tollini, who is trying to get Edwards social security. "He's a proud man who doesn't do drugs or alcohol. He doesn't want to go anywhere but stay at the center, stay close to his corner."

Edwards has never been a problem at the Center. But after he retired from boxing, Gutz saw changes in him, even when he got him a job in Madison Heights in the '90s.

"He started throwing tantrums," Gutz said. "He was screaming, scaring the (expletive) out of customers. He'd shadow box buses on Woodward. You can only take so many punches."

So close to winning the title

Edwards recalls his fight with Czyz clearly enough. He wobbled Czyz with a right hand seconds before the end of the first round. Had it not been for the ropes, Czyz would have hit the canvas. The bell saved him.

"I got cut over the left eye in the first, and the blood blinded me," Edwards says. "He knocked me out in the second round. I couldn't see."

Was the fight game worth it?

"I don't want to cry about anything, it just happened that way," says Edwards, who finished with 26 wins (20 by knockout), five losses and one draw. "I've had pneumonia a couple of times."

What about his memory issues?

Edwards says, "I couldn't really say."

He still follows the fights, he says, although he hasn't been to one in years. Edwards also hasn't seen his children, a boy and girl in their early 20s, for a long time.

"We still communicate, but there's no pressure on them to have to see me, or when I have to see them," he says.

He still has his faith

Willie's corner, as in his fighting days, remains precious to him. Along with his chair, it contains a heavy coat, a beaver fur hat, a couple of lifestyle magazines, several paper bags and a plastic crate for him to rest his feet.

No one messes with Willie's corner. It's where he sleeps, keeps watch on the forgotten and may live the rest of his life.

Edwards doesn't blame anyone for his lot.

"I'm a Christian -- I believe in God," Edwards says. "If you don't know how to invest your money, you are going to end up like me. I've slept in a chair before, and I will again. When I was the Sandman, I put plenty of people to sleep. I met plenty of guys with my left hook."