

MURRAY PARK CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 4 | MID-JULY

'A little eight-year-old kid can't play in his front yard without somebody shooting him?'

The land of the free? Not for little Treyvaughn Robinson or the other children of Englewood

By RICK TELANDER
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I see the narrow house with the black steps and railing on the west side of Wood Street. The tiny yard in front is green and there are flowers blooming. I ask the gray-haired man sitting on the steps watering the grass if this is where Treyvaughn Robinson was shot. He nods. I ask if he knows Treyvaughn.

"I'm his grandfather."

Does he mind if we talk a bit? No, he says quietly. His name is Hershell Robinson. But he seems to be not fully here, to be dreaming, drifting somewhere else, smiling softly, perhaps floating with the water spray he directs from place to place where it vanishes into the grass.

Just a week ago his 8-year old grandson was shot in the stomach by an unknown gunman who fired from the alley about 150 feet to the north. The boy couldn't have been the target. Somebody else on the street must have been — and there were lots of folks on the sidewalk that hot evening, just before 9. It's even possible nobody specific was the target, just somebody — anybody — from a rival gang or rival anything. So it goes in Englewood.

Hershell, 74, comes back from wherever it is he has been. His eyes are misty.

"A little eight-year old kid can't play in his front yard without somebody shooting him? It's just ..." He doesn't go on.

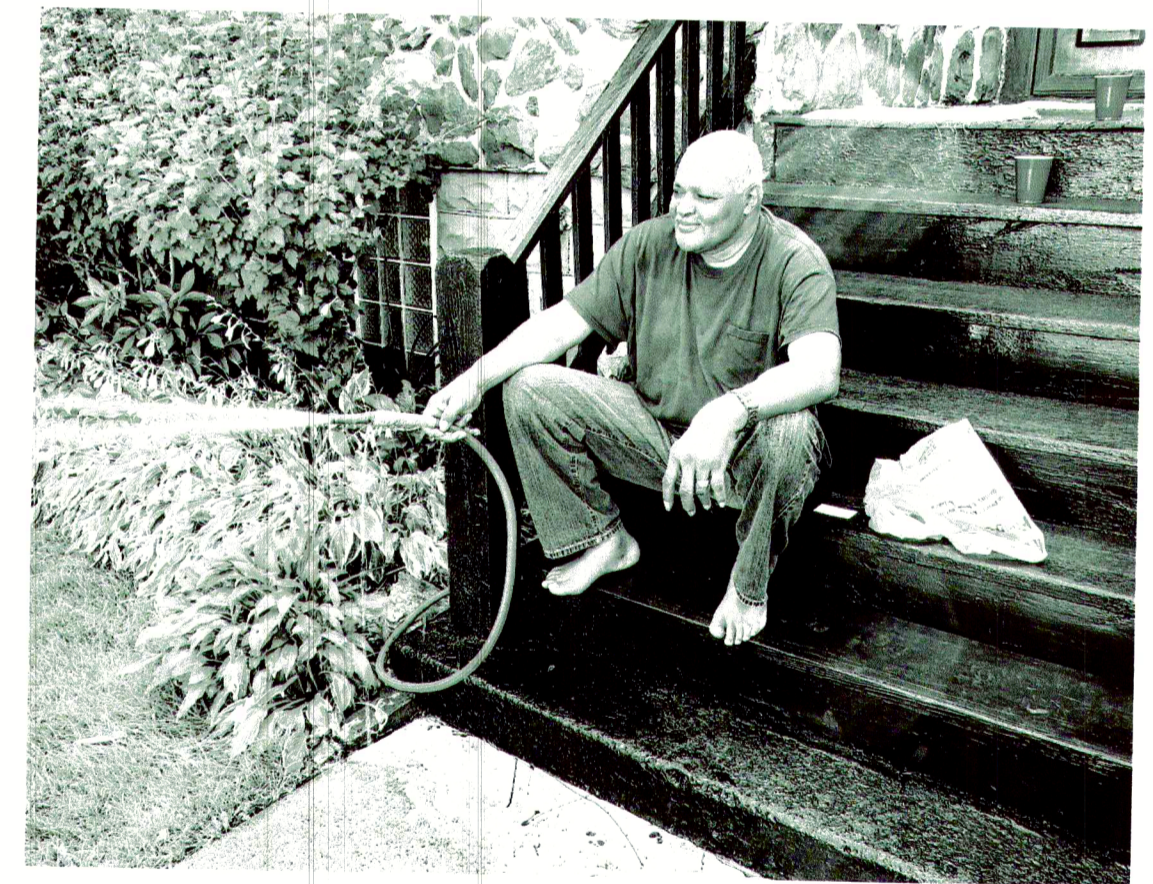
I ask Hershell where his grandson was when he was shot. "Right behind you."

I turn and look. There are only a couple feet of cement there — just the sidewalk and then the street.

"I was sitting here looking at him play," says the grandfather. "I heard what I thought were firecrackers. It was after the 4th of July, and I thought it was three firecrackers — some say they heard four — and then Treyvaughn kind of freaked, and his legs were no good to him. He looked back and I picked him up and put him on the steps right here. After I saw him fall I was just trying to get him out of the line of fire."

Treyvaughn lives in suburban Alsip with his mother, but he spends much of the summer here at the Robinsons, where his father, Leon, also lives — just a block and a half from Murray Park. He liked coming to Englewood because there are so many little kids in neighboring houses for him to play with.

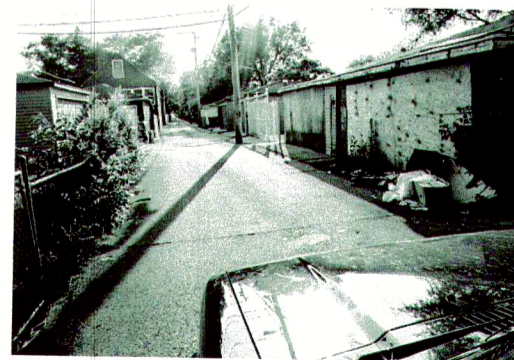
Once he was in critical condition. Now he is recovering nicely from stomach surgery to remove the bullet that bounced off his hip bone and damaged his colon. Hershell says that when he went to see Treyvaughn at the hospital, there was another little boy who had been shot just across the hall. He doesn't know who it was, but it could have been the 9-year old from Roseland who



was shot on July 6th while walking with his father.

We sit on the steps for a spell in silence.

There is something so crazy here that it defies description, as if safety is a mirage that is actually a mirror that is actually a cobra. Englewood and West Englewood mock the very reason our nation was created. What is freedom when poor people are locked in houses that

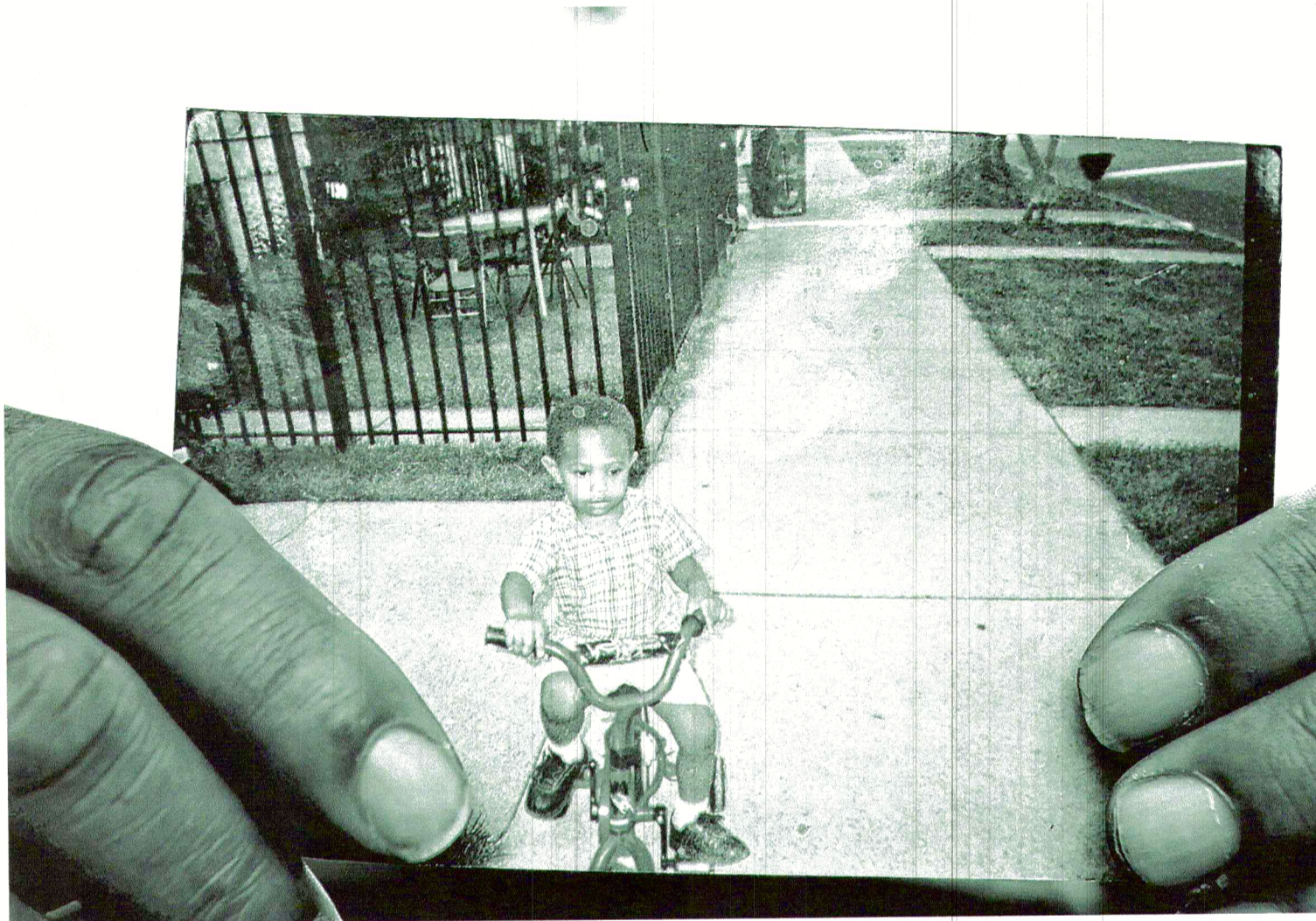
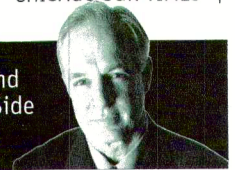


Hershell Robinson sadly waters the grass in front of his house. Shots rang out from this alley (left) and struck Robinson's grandson, Treyvaughn, as he played in front of his grandfather's house. | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES

ABOUT THIS SERIES



In the early 1970s, Rick Telander wrote *Heaven Is a Playground*, hailed as one of the best sports books of all time, about the lives and dreams of Brooklyn's ghetto hoops legends. This summer, Telander visited Englewood, the downtrodden community on the South Side where Derrick Rose grew up, to see if hope can still flourish on a neighborhood playground. To read Parts 1-3, go to suntimes.com.



Leon Robinson holds an old photo of his son Treyvaughn, now 8, who survived being shot in front of his grandfather's house. | KEITH HALE-SUN-TIMES

have no value, from which they are economically incapable of fleeing — and when they come out they may die without warning? Citizens become prey. The world becomes haunted. Instead of flowering, children's brains are blunted by the toxins of fear. Joyous play — the single most glorious outgrowth of free and empowered human society — vanishes.

Why does it happen? Drugs, depression, venality, stupidity, children giving birth to children. But also racism, poverty, bad luck, false trust, broken promises, a government by the haves, a history of oppression, guns for cheap. I have often thought as I sat at Murray Park that it's sadly ironic that the downtrodden here kill each other because they do not know how to turn the weapons on the thing that put them here in the first place, because it is shapeless and almost incom-

“PEOPLE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT IT'S NORMAL. IT'S NOT NORMAL.”

HERSHELL ROBINSON, whose grandson Treyvaughn was shot while playing near his home

prehensible.

“Treyvaughn came back in the car yesterday with his mother,” says Hershell. “All his little friends ran out to say hi, and he's squashed down in the car from the pain and everything. He's scared all the time.”

Hershell, who has owned this brick bungalow for 32 years, looks up from his watering to observe a young tough guy walking past. He doesn't like what he sees.

“It's the influx of project people,” he says. “And they bring their gang members over. They

created...” The grandfather thinks for a moment. “Chaos.”

It's a common theme I've heard many times from the Englewood elders and homeowners and those who remember better times, and whether it's true or not, it shows that the pain here is about class as well as race and economics. It's also about civility: Hershell Robinson didn't grow up watching splatter movies and listening to angry, sexist, obscene, violent rap with bass lines that rattled windows.

When Derrick Rose and his pals Tim Flowers and Arsenio

Williams grew up around the 7300 block of Paulina, they had escape routes as kids worked out so they could flee shootings and get home from Murray Park as fast as possible. They left gates open and they knew how to run hunched over and they knew where there were yard dogs and where brick walls would protect you.

“Everybody played basketball,” Williams, 23, had told me. “Kids, workers, gang-bangers — everybody. So if the shooting started, we had getaway routes. When we were little, me and Derrick cut

the bottom out of a milk crate and nailed it to a utility pole at 73rd and Paulina. It was too dangerous to go anywhere else.”

Earlier this week I had seen a young man standing atop a van on a side street near 50th Street. He was drilling screws into a backboard that he was mounting on an elm tree facing the pavement. I stopped to take a photo, and first he jumped off the van and ran away, and then two of his buddies split. A teenaged girl who remained said, “He doesn't want in it.” Then she left.

Across the street two men and a woman sat on the stoop staring hard at me. One man was leaning back evilly, smoking a joint. For whatever reason, I walked toward the trio and told them I was documenting street basketball and its impact in Englewood.

“For real?” asked the one man, taking a long drag on his joint, then flicking it casually over the railing.

I gave him my card, which he didn't read.

“You play ball?” he asked.

I tell him I used to.

“You a star?” he asked.

“No.”

The other two said nothing, just leaned back on the stairs, blank-faced.

“You play ball?” I asked the stoner. “You're a big guy.”

“Nah, I should have. I stayed home. I work out.”

He made motions like he was bench pressing. His muscles were large.

“Yeah, I work out,” he said again, staring at me.

Then there was silence. Long and tense.

I backed away and left.

“The thing is,” says Hershell Robinson now, “is that people come to to the conclusion that it's normal. “It's not normal.”

He gestures around with his free hand, the one not holding the hose. He means the violence, the randomness, the loss of humanness.

“It's not normal.”

PART 5 | THURSDAY

For Murray Park's supervisor, the constant threat of violence makes it hard to spread a message of hope.