



MURRAY PARK

CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 2 | A strange white guy cuts a curious figure at Murray Park in West Englewood, where a refurbished basketball court contrasts with a decaying community | **RICK TELANDER, PAGES 6-7**



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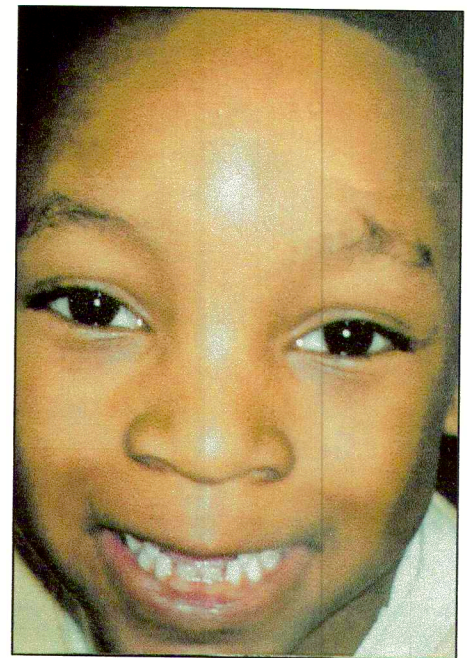


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Why was he sent to 3 hospitals in 11 hours?

'IT'S A FORMULA FOR DEATH' | The parents of 7-year-old Aaron Pointer are demanding to know why their asthmatic son was transferred from one facility to the next as he struggled to breathe on the day he died **NATASHA KORECKI REPORTS ON PAGES 2-3**



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MURRAY PARK CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 2

'You a coach?'

A strange white guy cuts a curious figure at Murray Park, where a refurbished court sits in contrast to a decaying community

By RICK TELANDER
rtelander@suntimes.com

Before I enter Murray Park, I stand outside the fence, pondering the old, red brick park house, the sidewalks outside the fence, looking to my right where someone has set up a stand along Wood Street, selling shaved ice on a card table, with big bottles of colored flavorings in the trunk. To my right and left and behind me are small houses, bungalows and the like. It's hard to tell which ones are boarded up.

I walk into the park, past the swing set, the chains of one swing having been wrapped around the top metal support like a choke collar, past the teeter-totter and the silver metal slide. There are two little rocker horses on large springs and a fountain with four seahorses spitting water into the air.

A basketball game is being played on the court just ahead, the only court. Not a bad one. Green and red-painted surface. Clean white backboards, on curved poles. Double orange rims. White rope nets hanging down. There is a teenager playing with his long striped shirt pulled up beyond his chest and over his head. There is a kid playing in

a leather-sleeved letter jacket, a red baseball cap backward on his head. There is a boy with plaid shorts almost to his ankles, a teenage girl in a pink top and light blue sweat pants, two youths, one little, one big, both with Mohawks and wearing identical white T-shirts and jeans.

The game is random, half-"21," half 5-on-5, or maybe it's 6-on-7. Maybe 7-on-9, it's hard to tell. Players walk off and on for no apparent reason. This is a social game, a chatter game, the kind that goes on at playgrounds worldwide. I've seen them in Brooklyn, Dallas, L.A., Florence, Sydney, Munich.

I have come by myself, no entourage, no photographer, no pals. Just me. An aging white male in shorts, T-shirt, Chucks. A small kid with dreads strolls up, looking at me as I sit on the wooden planter railing that passes as a bench. The boy is smoking a cigar.

"You a coach?" he asks, smoke swirling above his head.

No, I tell him. A sportswriter. He sifts that for a moment, apparently finds it satisfying and wanders off.

At a black park, a strange



Young men on the basketball court at Murray Park. | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

white man too old to be a basketball player is one of four things: a coach, a social worker, a drug dealer, a cop. To give an idea of the racial isolation within which Murray Park, and all of Englewood, exists, I find it illustrative that during my summer days in the area, I saw only a handful of white or Asian or Hispanic or Middle Eastern people anywhere — and all of those seemed to be workers or shop owners. I didn't see a white man anywhere until my second day in Englewood — including on street corners, in cars, on porches, in two McDonald's — and that was a white cop racing by in a squad car. I saw no white women all summer except for teachers in the Randolph Grammar School (Derrick Rose's old school) and dispatchers at the

7th District Police Headquarters on 63rd and Loomis.

In the park, a man sitting with an old woman under a tree gets up and walks my way. He looks like he might be drunk.

"You got a spare cigarette?" he asks.

"No," I say. "Sorry."

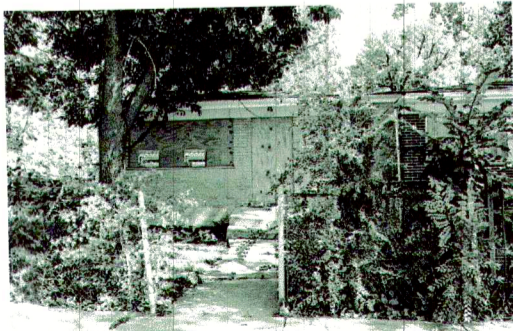
I make a mental note to buy a pack. Cigarettes are a good peace offering to down-and-outers.

And who isn't down and out here? The rotting, abandoned houses have made everybody's homes worth almost nothing. I checked on a real estate site and found a two-story house with four bedrooms for \$12,000. It likely had been stripped of all metal, plumbing and accessories, like so many empty houses here. A vacant lot could be had for \$10,000

or less, maybe free, I figured, if a buyer paid back taxes. Indeed, one of the scariest, most apocalyptic aspects of Englewood is the abundance of residential lots overgrown with towering prairie grasses and weeds, bisected by narrow dirt trails of the likes used in frontier settlements. To walk one of those paths after dark would be to walk in a nightmare.

Lenders and banks and mortgage brokers preyed on the poor folks of Englewood, helping make it this way. There is no need to go into the greed and deregulation and give-everybody-some-of-the-pie fabulousness of Wall Street and Washington of the last quarter century, but suffice it to say that when the house of credit cards collapsed, sub-prime places like Englewood fell first and hard-

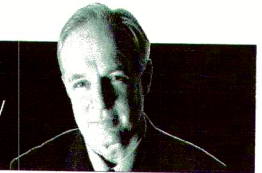
Boarded up houses surrounded by overgrown weeds make for a sad — and scary — scene in Englewood.



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.



RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES

as a result of the debasing and fracturing legacy of slavery, they brought spirit and the hope for better times. The ongoing real estate collapse, combined with the drawbacks of racism, urban crime, and educational and familial chaos pretty much have created the mess we now see. In just four years, from 2005 to 2009, the wealth — the sum of assets minus debts — dropped from an average of \$135,000 to \$113,000 for white households in the U.S., according to the Pew Research Center's analysis of U.S. Census data. For black households it fell from \$12,100 to \$5,700. In Englewood you have to wonder if there is any wealth at all.

"They got to get programs for these kids," says Jackson. "Not

WHAT I'VE FOUND IS THAT WHEN TEENAGERS GET IN FIGHTS, IT'S THE WAY THEY WERE BROUGHT UP. YOU SEE A KID WITH A BAD ATTITUDE, AND THEN YOU SEE THE PARENT, AND YOU KNOW RIGHT AWAY WHY."

STEVE MARTIN (middle), a positive influence in the neighborhood, with son Steve Jr. (left), 13, and a friend

just sports. Academics, schools and stuff"

"It's the devil's playground now," agrees Green.

The temperature is 93 degrees, which brings up another topic, summer nights.

"You gonna hear the shootin' tonight," says Green with authority, nodding his head. "It's all the time, but it's gonna be a wild night."

People stay out on summer nights, they sit on porches well after dark, they have parties in side yards, they get high, they get angry, they get guns.

"It used to be safe, but it's the new people," says Green, alluding to the so-called "Section 8" people who have fled the city's demolished low-income high-rises and used their Chicago

Housing Authority vouchers to rent from private property owners in Englewood. It's a common theme among longtime Englewood residents that the worst of the worst has drifted in as places like the hideous Cabrini-Green projects have been torn down.

"They all used to be trapped in one single place," sums up Jackson.

Whether that is true or not, a place like Murray Park must represent the best of what a debauched neighborhood has to offer. The reasoning is simple. If Murray is not safe, if play is not guaranteed at a gentle playground, then hope is gone.

A man wearing orange gym shorts and a T-shirt that says "Old School" with a flaming orange ball going through a rim walks into the park. It's now after 6 p.m., and the heat is ratcheting back some. The man's name is Steve Martin, and he is with his 13-year old son, Steve Jr., and another boy. Martin is a basketball coach and security guard at nearby Randolph School, which Derrick Rose attended from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Martin is the kind of man with a job who is rare in Englewood, and his presence in a park is always a good thing. Gang-bangers don't stop when there are responsible adults around, but at least they pause, or they go somewhere else where the pickings are easier, which is almost anywhere.

"What I've found is that when teenagers get in fights, it's the way they were brought up," says Martin. "You see a kid with a bad attitude, and then you see the parent and you know right away why."

The other night a little boy, just 8, was shot in the stomach outside his grandparents' house on Wood Street not far from here. The boy survived, and it seems he'll make it. I ask Martin if he knows the address.

"Over there," he says as we walk out of the park. He points up Wood on the left-hand side, just up from his own house, about a block away. "Where that black railing is."

"Think they'll mind if I stop by to talk?" I ask.

"No," says Martin. "I think they won't. They might want it known."

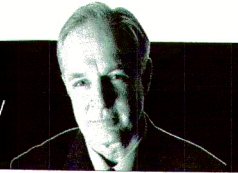
I head up the tree-lined street toward the house. Everything is so quiet, so deceptive.

PART 4 | WEDNESDAY

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

**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 West Side where Derrick Rose grew up, to see if hope can still flourish on a neighborhood playground.



Young boys clown around on a hot day at Murray Park.

HOW DO YOU GIVE A KID SELF-ESTEEM WHEN YOU HAVE NONE YOURSELF? HOW DO YOU TALK ABOUT THE FUTURE WHEN YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT A GOOD JOB LOOKS LIKE?

est. Combined with white flight, the demise of manufacturing jobs and the influx of chronically unemployed "Section 8" people, relocated after the tear-downs of their high-rise, low-income housing projects, Englewood has become the septic hole at the end of the

sewer pipe. It should be noted that it is the "haves" who relentlessly put stuff into the "have-nots" system and hope that the sewer gas doesn't someday explode.

Whereas America once had stable working and middle classes, we now have the "downwardly

mobile," vast populations that would like to work but are not as clever or lucky as those who win the game.

Joblessness in Englewood is so bad that it is more than double that of that national average (9.2 percent). For male teens, it is almost 50 percent. As I drive through the district, I see bored, scary-looking young men on many porches. I see one shuttered small business after

another. Not even the corner bars — scenes of frequent violence themselves — have survived the economic mayhem. Can you be so down that you're wistful for sleazy bars? Here, yes.

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, people can survive temporary joblessness without much psychic damage. But, the study showed, after half a year off "experiences with emotional problems increased

dramatically." In short, how do you give a kid self-esteem when you have none yourself? How do you talk about the future when you don't even know what a good job looks like?

And so there are shootings. Seldom fisticuffs or brawls. Just over-the-top shootings by young, unguided, hopeless men who couldn't care less about a fair fight. And the worst are the drive-bys — gun spray from thugs in cars aimed at crowds or houses or nothing at all. Editorials always call these shootings "senseless." But they're not. They're over gang turf, drug deals, embarrassment, machismo. Those may be dumb things, but they are no more senseless than wars in distant lands over resources, imagined fears and male pride.

Murray Park is bordered on the west by Wood Street, and by June 28, three teen males will have been shot to death on or near Wood about 20 blocks north. Technically, that is Back of the Yards, but it's close enough. As Jesse Jackson has said of unemployed young people: "They are dry sticks in a parched land, ready to burn."

A 14-year-old kid at Murray Park talks to me after a game. He is so skinny that his huge white belt has nearly two feet extra to it. His long pants are nearly off him. The boy keeps tightening the belt, then loosening it.

"You ever seen Derrick Rose?" I ask.

"I saw him play here. Twice."

I tell him he's too young, kidding.

"I was about seven," he says.

I ask him if he's from near here.

"Right around the corner."

I ask him if it's safe here, if the thugs ever come out.

"Not too much," he replies. "It's good."

On the way out, I drive east on 71st, also called "Emmitt Till Drive" on the brown street signs. Is it sad when one of a community's main thoroughfares is named for a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was beaten to death, whose murderers were found innocent? Or is it just life.

PART 3 | TUESDAY

The rise and fall of a community that no longer has a reason to exist.

MURRAY PARK CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 3 | MID-JULY

'It's the devil's playground now'

In a neighborhood that no longer has a reason to exist, there's no hope if Murray Park doesn't remain a safe haven

By **RICK TELANDER**
rtelander@suntimes.com

I stop at a gas station off the expressway, buy a pack of Marlboros and drive south and west to Murray Park.

Two men in disheveled clothes sit under a shade tree off the basketball court. Beyond them is the grass field with a softball diamond at this end and a hardball diamond at the other. During the entire summer I will see not one person play baseball on either field. But the basketball court, recently fixed up after years of neglect — that's a different matter. It's seldom empty. Basketball is the urban black man's game. Today is different, though. It's too hot for more than the occasional little kid to shoot around.

The men under the tree are dappled with water, having apparently recently stuck their heads in the nearby fountain. I sit near them, offer them cigarettes. The larger man's name is Michael Jackson (yeah, he's heard all the jokes). The smaller man with an earring in his right ear is Gregory Green. Both are wearing ball caps on backward, and both are longtime residents of Greater Englewood. We light up, sit in the heat, and they talk about the neighborhood.

"I came here in the fall of 1976," says Jackson. "As kids in the park we had it all. Used to ice skate right over there in the winter (he points to the field), had boxing, wrestling, and I played baseball for the Murray Park Battlers."

Great name for a team, I tell him.

"We used to travel to Gage Park, Lindbloom Park, McKinley Park, all over with those teams," he says proudly.

"Mm-hmm," agrees Green, who then talks about his wrestling days. "I was definitely a lightweight. Back then it was working class neighborhood, a lot of white people. There was a big factory over there on 74th, by the CTA. Steel, chemical, something. I don't know what happened. All the white people moved out. All the jobs left."

The deserted factories and warehouses on 74th Street and along Ashland Avenue are almost as frightening as the boarded-up houses that dot Englewood like a pox. Maybe they're more frightening, because to an extent their demise has taken away the very reason for Englewood to exist. This was never a commuter suburb. This was an entity unto itself, only nine miles south of downtown Chicago, but a place where people dwelled and stayed. Ironically, in its epic decay Englewood is still that way.

White flight changed the economy forever, of course, but there was a time after that when Englewood became a distinct and proud African-American community. The great migration of blacks from the South had occurred after World War II, and even if the new folks brought little wealth with them

WEALTH GAP IS BLACK AND WHITE

From 2005 to 2009, wealth (assets minus debts) decreased for white households by 16.3 percent, a significant number. But black households saw their wealth decline by a staggering 52.9 percent to an amount that is almost one-twentieth of white households.

WHITE HOUSEHOLDS

\$135,000

2005

\$113,000

2009

-16.3%

Percentage decrease

BLACK HOUSEHOLDS

\$12,100

2005

\$5,700

2009

-52.9%

Percentage decrease

Source: Pew Research Center, U.S. Census data



Longtime Englewood residents Gregory Green and Michael Jackson lament the community's downfall at Murray Park. | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES



The last high-rise at Cabrini-Green came down in March. Many Englewood residents say the neighborhood deteriorated further after displaced families from places like Cabrini moved in. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES



An abandoned factory near Englewood, one of many such factories on the South Side
RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES