

MURRAY PARK CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 6 | AUGUST-SEPTEMBER

Seeking safety where there is none

Derrick Rose's old school is a bright spot in an area where safety depends on strategy

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

Phillip Randolph Public School, Derrick Rose's old grammar school at 73rd and Hoyne, had classes from kindergarten to sixth grade when he attended in the 1990s. Now it goes up to eighth grade, because so many families have fled or been driven out of Englewood and West Englewood by job loss or home foreclosure.

But when Rose went to Randolph, like his three brothers before him, it was a good place. It's still a well-run, clean, and disciplined school. The walls are painted bright yellow and bright orange and the kids behave in the brightness because the teachers guarantee it.

"I don't believe that the neighborhood determines the kind of kid you will be," says school principal Michelle Smith firmly. "I'm not optimistic and hopeful. I'm certain."

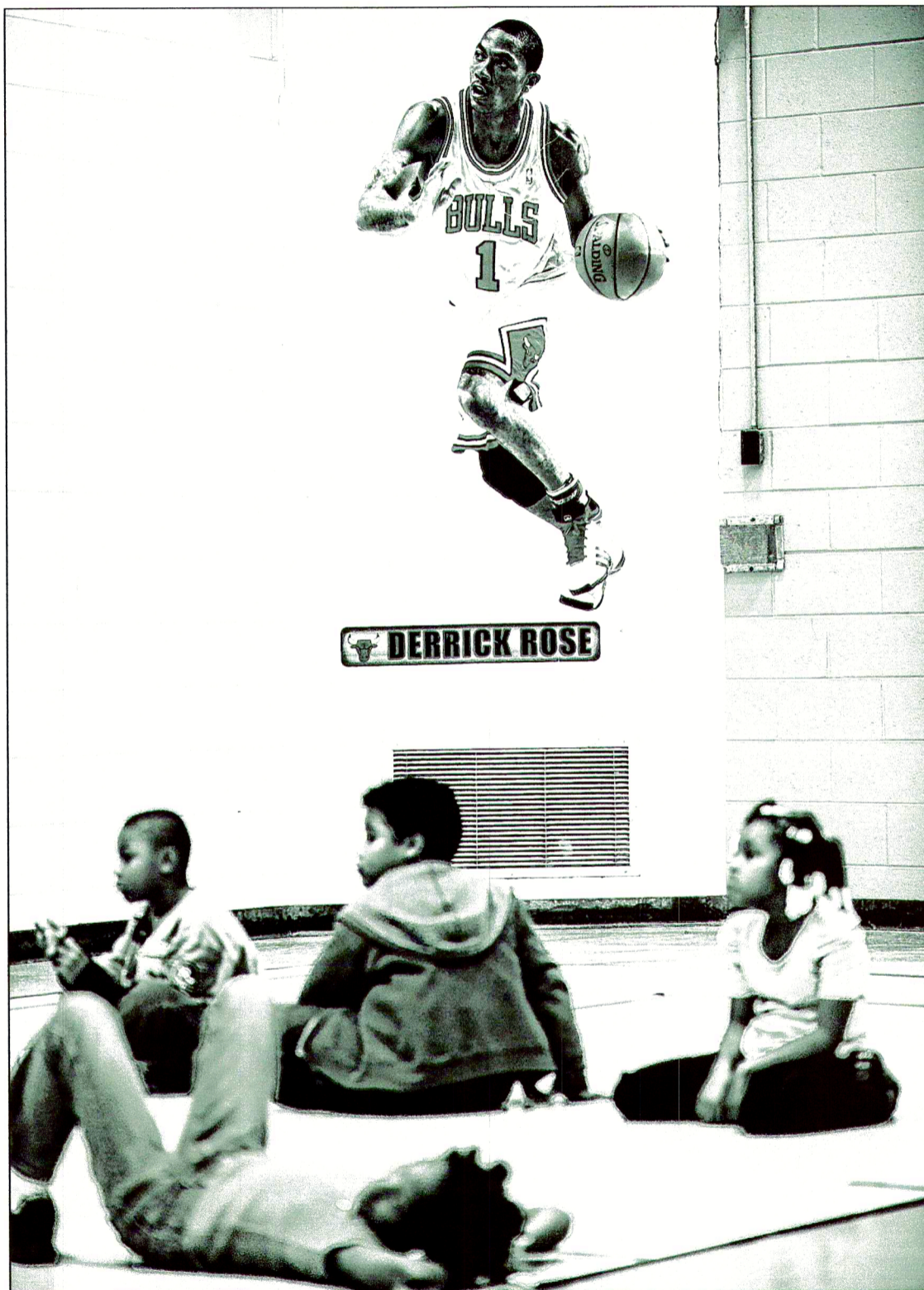
Smith runs her ship with a firm hand on the tiller, but the main door is steel and locked, with an intercom and buzzer to get in, and just past that is a walk-through metal detection machine. And Steve Martin, the

fifth- and sixth-grade basketball coach, works daily as one of the security guards always ready to stand up to nonsense, or worse.

Today Martin's at the door, feeling good. His 13-year-old son, Steve Jr., is growing and working hard on his basketball skills and conditioning, and — most important — staying out of trouble. Martin knows Derrick Rose, and like everyone in Englewood, marvels at what a good and diligent kid he was and how successful he became. "And he always gives back," says Martin.

Indeed, the buzz is that Rose will be coming back to Murray Park — just a few blocks east of Randolph School on 73rd — in September to dedicate the overhaul by his sponsors of the court there and to greet the schoolkids. Nobody is supposed to talk about this yet, because once it leaks out thousands of people, including gang-bangers and thugs, will know.

On the hallway wall not far from the gym entrance is an awards plaque under glass, titled "Olympic Champions." For 1995 the name engraved for winning the sit-up, half mile, high jump,



JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



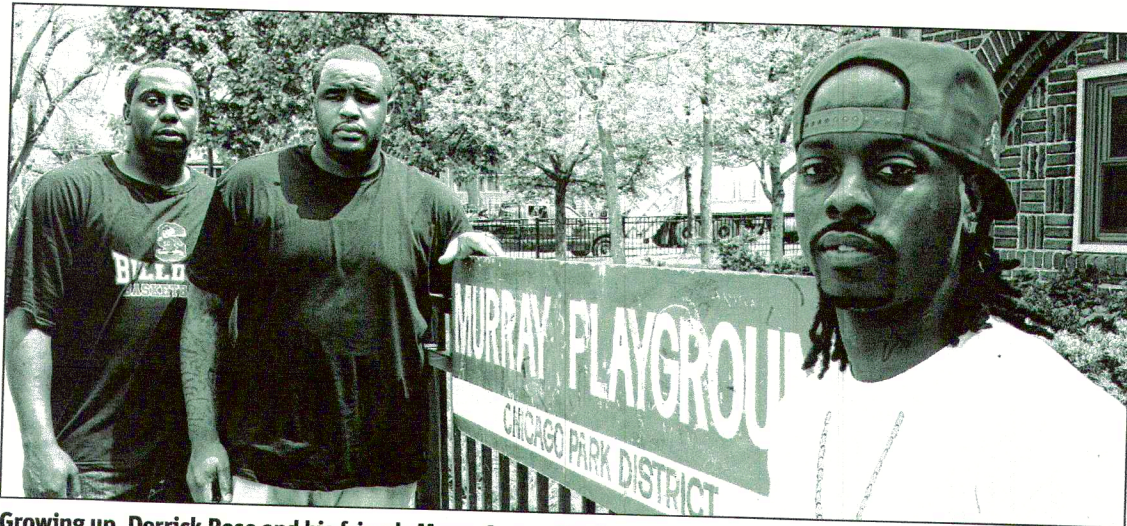
THEY'LL TALK ABOUT WHEN SOMEBODY GETS SHOT. BUT THEY'RE SORT OF IMMUNE TO IT. I WILL SAY THE KIDS FEEL MORE SAFE IN HERE."

MICHELLE SMITH, principal of Phillip Randolph Elementary, Derrick Rose's old school

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 1-5, go to suntimes.com.



Growing up, Derrick Rose and his friends Marco Sams, Tim Flowers and Arsenio Williams were frequently joined at Murray Park by a couple of gang-bangers who could play. | AL PODGORSKI-SUN-TIMES

and "Outstanding Athlete" awards is Allan Rose. He is Derrick's next closest brother, seven years older. By 1996 the Randolph contests were no longer held, which only makes one wonder what Derrick himself might have done.

Much has been made of the Rose brothers' protection of their little sibling, enabling him to avoid gangs and violence, but it also seems fortunate that the older boys were not closer in age to "Pooh," as Derrick was nicknamed. The brothers were such good athletes themselves that the competition factor might not have been healthy for the littlest Rose. With no father on the scene, the boys had to emulate men, to learn on the fly. And they did all they could.

"Duane is the oldest, and he was the all-around ballplayer," says Arsenio Williams, a 6-4, 230-pound power forward who grew up on the same block with Rose and graduated last spring from South Carolina State University. Williams, 23, it should be added, is a low-key, charitable man, continuing to live in West Englewood to work with violence-prone teens through an agency called Children's Home + Aid. Despite the fact Rose has asked him to move out, maybe live closer to him in the north suburbs, Williams is staying in the home turf. There's work to do, he always says.

"Reggie, who's next, was the shooter. Allan, he was just a sick athlete who could jump to the moon," continues Williams. "And it's all wrapped up in Derrick."

Retired Randolph teacher Greg Lopatka is visiting the school today to see his daughter, a current teacher, and he recalls having Rose as a student and watching the boy's earliest basketball moves. "The first time I saw Derrick, he was in kindergarten and he was trying to hoist the ball to the rim," says Lopatka. "He wasn't real outgoing, but he was a good kid and he wanted to learn. Never any kind of problem. Plus, his mom [Brenda] worked here in the office."

There has long been debate about the value of sports in the development of children and adults. Nothing is clear. But if calming young men, keeping them active, is all sports do, that's something. And some young men from bad places can honestly say that basketball has saved them. Yet there are far fewer outdoor basketball rims at Chicago schools and playgrounds than there used to be. As a recent cover story in "The Reader," titled "Criminal Courts," describes it, "Residents and officials . . . believe getting rid of basketball hoops can help. They say that not only do fights break out frequently on the courts, but gang-bangers try to recruit younger members or deal drugs under the guise of waiting for the next game."

That may be true, but no connection between basketball as a game and criminal activity has ever been made. There are signs in Englewood playgrounds warning: "You Have Entered A Safe Park Zone — Criminal Penalties Are Severely Increased For Gang



Leon Robinson holds an old photo of his son, Treyvaughn, who survived a shooting this summer. Leon has been shot several times himself, according to his father, Hershell Robinson. | SUN-TIMES

Recruitment And Possession, Use Or Sale Of Drugs And Weapons." So the bad guys go somewhere else. But they don't disappear.

In June a member of the Maniac Latin Disciples jumped from a car and fired a .45 handgun at rival Latin Kings playing basketball at Avondale Park on the Northwest Side. He missed and hit two girls, ages 2 and 7, playing in a sandbox, leaving one in critical condition. In August a drive-by shooter tried to gun down a suspected gang member on the basketball court at Metcalfe Park at State and 42nd. He missed and killed a 13-year-old boy instead. Back in the day, Rose and Arsenio Williams and fellow neighbor Tim Flowers

often filled out their Murray Park fivesome with a pair of gang-bangers who could play. That's how the kids rolled, but it was only for hoops.

The issue isn't basketball, anyway, it's disdain for rules, morality, life. Recent studies have shown that familial child abuse — resulting in shaken, beaten, deprived children — has increased dramatically with the failing economy. This makes sense. Rage always is transferred to the lowest common denominator. But growing up in a place like Englewood must stunt even the most stable of kids.

Even optimistic principal Smith talks about the dulling effect of the constant violence. "They're desensitized to it, because it happens so often," she says. "They'll talk about when somebody gets shot. But they're sort of immune to it. I will say the kids feel more safe in here."

One big reason for that, she adds, is that the gang thing is "literally block to block." Which it is. "The other side of 71st, that's different. The other side of Ashland, that's different. The other side of Damen . . ."

Reggie Rose, Derrick's middle brother and business manager, recalls that traversing the seven blocks home on 73rd from school to their house on Paulina might necessitate a detour around Murray Park along busy 74th Street rather than a simple straight line walk through harmless-looking rows of private residences.

"If you just looked different, that could be it," Reggie says. "Kids — if you grow up here — you get used to it. And that's not right."

On the July afternoon when I first spoke with Hershell Robinson, he seemed dazed. His 8-year-old grandson, Treyvaughn, had been shot in front of him, and Hershell was devastated. His daughter-in-law — Treyvaughn's mother — was upset, as one would expect, and Hershell's world had been rocked and nearly sunk by the stress. When I drove back past his house five hours later, he had been sitting in the same place on the porch steps where I had left him.

On this day, several weeks later, he is still troubled.

"When Treyvaughn came back with his mom just for a little while, he seemed . . . bewildered," says Hershell. "He's having flashbacks."

If the new curfew law for children under age 12 had been in effect then, Treyvaughn still could have been outside, since the shooting happened about 8:15 p.m. on a Saturday, and curfew time — put into effect in mid-September — is 9 p.m. for kids on weekends. Nor was it even dark out, if that matters.

As we sat and talked, a scowling, bare-chested young man had walked out of Robinson's house, past us wordlessly, and headed down the sidewalk. It was another of Hershell's grandsons, Christopher, 15.

"He looks upset," I said when the youth was gone.

"He is."

"Because of the shooting?"

"Yes."

Where would that lead? How would you feel, what would you do — if a punk had shot your little brother for no reason? Of course, the police had no suspects.

We sat in silence.

"Treyvaughn was the first shooting we've had on this block in eight years," says Hershell.

What was the last shooting?

"His dad."

I almost fall off the stoop.

"By that tree," Hershell points to the right. "Shot three times. Over a woman. The man got 30 years in the penitentiary."

I stare at the tree. I'm speechless.

"His dad's been shot eight, nine times. Twice at Murray Park, three times around the corner. He's fine now. He's 38 and he goes to work every day."

I've got to talk to the police. I have to see what they think around here. The 7th District Headquarters are at 63rd and Loomis, about a mile from the playground sometimes called "Murder Park."

I'll go tomorrow.

PART 7 | SUNDAY

A wild ride with 7th District police; chaos spreads, and Rose's pal shot seven times by gang-bangers