

MURRAY PARK CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

LAST OF A SERIES | LATE SEPTEMBER

'If they don't have a truce by Tuesday, Derrick Rose Day will never happen'

Gang violence is the way of life around the playground at Murray Park, where the NBA's MVP grew up and now returns as a hero

By RICK TELANDER
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Derrick Rose is coming! The long-awaited ceremony for "The Derrick Rose Renovation Project" will be held Tuesday at the park, right on the basketball court that has been spiffed up this summer, with fresh paint and new baskets and white nets. Right on the court on which the 2011 MVP of the NBA played for years as a kid. "Man, he'd shovel snow off it in winter time," says his brother Reggie.

But the festivities next week don't mean much to Arsenio Williams. He sits now in pain on his bed at Advocate Christ Hospital in Oak Lawn. There are bullet holes in him from his elbows to his ankles, a couple of them hidden by his green gown. He was shot seven times, but there are more than seven bullet holes, if you count exit wounds. And there is still a bullet in him, lodged in his right elbow and bulging slightly under the skin like a budding tumor.

"It was two guns," he says. "Something small, like a .22, and then — he points at a larger scar — "I think a .380."

Williams was standing by his car near his house on Paulina Street, talking to some young men, when a car drove up and the occupants began firing. The alleged gang members were caught quickly by police, at whom they also supposedly fired. Six were arrested, three were charged with aggravated discharge of a firearm. Three of the detained were minors.

Williams is a group leader for Children's Home + Aid, a tutor for that national organization who visits schools "trying to de-escalate problems," as he puts it. That's what he was doing when he was shot, talking to teens, no doubt the actual targets, trying to get them to continue the peace treaty he had already negotiated.

"He was working to stop exactly that kind of violence he was a victim of," says Rebecca Clarkin, the vice president for external affairs for Children's Home + Aid.

And so three punk-ass fools who know nothing about life or dreams are charged with a lame felony and will probably be back on the streets some day soon. That Wil-

liams is not dead is like cutting an ace seven times in a row.

"They should call in the National Guard!" says his mother, sitting on the nearby chair.

"Mom," says Williams softly, shaking his head.

This isn't a foreign country or a hurricane or a concentration camp. This is us. Somehow we got here on our own.

"It was a 30-day peace treaty that I helped make happen," says Arsenio, whose right leg still has blood on the bandages. "Because I got shot, it's gonna be crazy out there. They were gonna squash it, no shootings, not even about drugs. Our turf — there's a gang called 'Small World' — goes from 71st to 74th, from Ashland to Damen. We're surrounded, and all these other gangs [he names them, but asks me not to print them] are coming after us." He looks down sadly. "If they don't have a truce by Tuesday, Derrick Rose Day will never happen."

Squash. Small World. Like something from Disneyland rides. And the thought strikes me: How



Arsenio Williams was near his home when occupants in a car drove up and opened fire. He was shot seven times. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

could anyone — let alone perhaps the best basketball player on earth — have made it out of here.

"There was a lot of love in our neighborhood back then," says Williams. "And we had basketball. We had the game."

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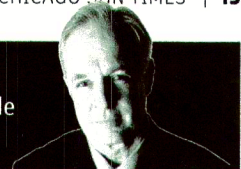
Five nights ago police marched

into coach Steve Martin's house a block from Murray Park. The cops handcuffed his nephew, who lives in the basement and is on probation, and rounded up everyone else, including Martin's 88-year old mother, the official owner of the house.

The extended family — every populated house in the Englewood area is jammed with some-

**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 1-7, go to suntimes.com.



one's relatives and friends who otherwise would be homeless — was forced to sit in the living room while officers ransacked the basement. Martin's mother became agitated, saying that no one had ever broken into her house like this, that this couldn't be happening. Her son, Steve Sr., and grandson, Steve Jr., 13, tried to calm her, to lessen her anxiety. She became dizzy and said she didn't feel well.

The searchers came up-stairs, apparently having found nothing, un-cuffed the nephew, told the Martins to have a good evening, and all the police left. The grandmother tried to walk, but she collapsed and was taken to the hospital by ambulance, where she was diagnosed as having had a stroke. Within hours she was dead.



Here now walks Derrick Rose himself, coming out of the park-house, where he has been talking to reporters and signing basketballs. He is wearing black jeans, a gray sweatshirt and sneakers. He is almost 6-3 and he looks lean and ready to hoop.

Rose looks and sees an amazing sight. It is his pal Arsenio Williams hobbling on crutches into Murray Park from his house two blocks away for the first time since he was shot. They hug and then they text each other, and they'll get together when all this party hoopla is over.

It has been raining all day, but now it's clear and dry, with all these tents and bigshots present at a park that never sees such pomp and ritual. Maybe things aren't as terrible as they seem. Oh, when I left Williams that night at the hospital I watched an ambulance take away a man who had been shot dead in the street at 76th and Wolcott, just a few blocks from the park. There were 40 cops there, in and around the yellow and red tape, a police helicopter



Derrick Rose tells the kids, "just go out there and dedicate your life." | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

“**HE WAS WORKING TO STOP EXACTLY THAT KIND OF VIOLENCE HE WAS A VICTIM OF.**”

REBECCA CLARKIN, vice president for external affairs for Childrens Home + Aid, on Derrick Rose's friend Arsenio Williams

overhead, snipers with rifles.

But what about the other people I met? I visited old Hershell Robinson a week ago and he had pneumonia, but he actually felt better than he had three months before.

"Treyvaughn is doing good in school," he beamed about his grandson who had been shot in the belly. "The shooting thing drove a wedge between his mother and me, to be honest. But I have to agree with her about the incident. I just don't know what's going on. I don't. Who was the

bullet for? There's no suspects. If I knew anything, it would help."

The kindly grandpa had coughed and covered his nose and mouth with a hankie. His voice was nasal and congested and he looked weak. Yet there was joy in him.

"On Tuesday he went to see the mayor, at City Hall, I think. All the gunshot wound survivors were invited. I think he enjoyed it. I think he did."

And just now it is good to see that both Steve Martin Sr. and his son are here with the Ran-

dolph School teachers and kids who have been escorted past the police barricade that extends for the entire circumference of Murray Park. Little Steve is somber and has "R.I.P" shaved into the left side of his head and "Granny" on the right side. Steve Sr. is keeping the excited kids under control, moving on with his life. As the family must.

And Ivan Lee, the park director, has recently overcome his crisis of confidence. What was he doing in this park, with these kids? he had wondered. Where was his life going? Was he making a difference at all? He had even taken the police exam, to see whether being a cop was his calling. But he was told by someone there that he wasn't psychologically cut out to be a cop. Maybe he was too kind. Maybe too much of a teacher.

Then it hit him, as his little Cougars football team won its season opener while running just two offensive plays: *This is what I was meant to do.*

And it is. And when you see his father, a retired truck driver and Vietnam veteran, there by the park house in the crowd, and big Ivan spots him and gives little Ivan a bear hug of love — or is it the other way around? — you know how a man is made.



Derrick Rose speaks calmly to the kids, and he tells them, "When you look at me . . . just go out there and dedicate your life . . ." To something. To anything. Hold on.

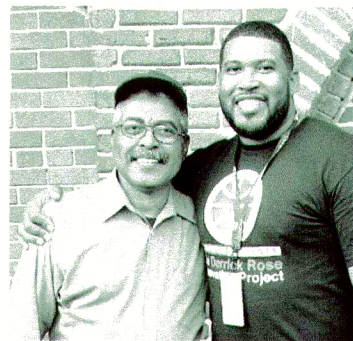
Perhaps it's best to let the elder Lee sum up, as he so eloquently did after the dignitaries were gone.

"It's a dirty diamond," he said of the park, the violence, Englewood, Chicago, the world. "There are many facets, and all are dirty. They need to be cleaned, one by one."

Then he asked, "Can we do that?"



Steve Martin Jr. and his dad, Steve



Ivan Lee with his son, Ivan Jr.