



CURRENT ISSUE

Select issue

10/10/2001

EMAIL PRINT COMMENT [0]

DIGESTS

CAMPAIGN BEAT

MURDER INK MAPS

2006 2007

BROWSE ARCHIVES

NEWS+FEATURES

COLUMNS

COMICS

FILM

MUSIC

ARTS

EVENTS CALENDAR

LOCAL MUSIC

EAT GUIDE

CLUBS

SEARCH ARCHIVES

SPECIAL ISSUES

BEST OF BALTIMORE

NOISE

S/HITLIST

CPTV

IN YOUR FACE

CLASSIFIED

REAL ESTATE

PERSONALS

NAUGHTY BALTIMORE

FREE LOVE

WILD SIDE

ADVERTISING

ABOUT US

CONTACT CP

USER COMMENTS

WIN FREE STUFF

CP EVENTS

FEATURE

Growing Pains

A Reservoir Hill Childhood, Yesterday and Today



Part four of a series.

Read [other](#) stories.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Mariano Didonato (center) focuses on real-world education in the after-school program he runs at Corpus Christi Community Center on Whitelock Street. "They learn real skills," he says of his kids. "They can go home, they know how to use a hammer. They're doing math."



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

"We watched these kids come up from babies," says Tyrone Gaines, a Reservoir Hill native who runs childrens' programs out of the neighborhood recreation center. But if they got in trouble, he says, they "stopped getting love from the community."



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Robert Hurd (right) now lives in Baltimore County, but his mother and stepfather, Glenda and Paul Gentler, still live in the Reservoir Hill rowhouse in which Hurd was raised.

By **Eileen Murphy**

Today, Robert Michael Hurd is a gregarious teddy bear of a man with an easy smile and a big laugh. In 1975, he was a third-grader who had moved with his mother from a home in the Northern Virginia suburbs to an enormous rowhouse in Reservoir Hill.

He was, in his own words, "very, very innocent," a white boy with deep Southern roots, and the move to an urban, mostly African-American, mostly poor neighborhood to join his new stepfather came as quite a shock. He was one of two white children in his homeroom class of about 35 students at Mount Royal Elementary School.

The racial difference was just the most visible example of Hurd's new reality. The neighborhood kids were tough here; they didn't act like the children he knew in Virginia. He remembers running up to the ice-cream truck and pulling out the fancy wallet his grandmother had given him. The man on the truck warned him not to let the other kids see it. In other places Hurd had lived, the kids may have coveted his wallet, but they wouldn't have taken it. Reservoir Hill was different. Sure enough, before the ice-cream truck was out of view, he was robbed. "There probably wasn't much money, but that kind of incident really, really stays with you," he says.

Glenda and Paul Gentner, Hurd's mother and stepfather, were infuriated, he says, but there was little they could do, short of moving. The Gentners were pioneers who wanted to "make things different, better for everyone, better for themselves." There were bound to be some rough spots. But they didn't want their son to be victimized--and he didn't want to be a victim. So he made some adjustments.

"I was put in an environment that was very antagonistic, a predatory environment. I learned to adapt. By the fourth grade, I had changed my whole mentality. I was a bully," Hurd says. "The kids that lived in the projects were my friends. We used to play 'guns' around the neighborhood."

Being a bully didn't solve all of his problems, and making friends in the neighborhood didn't have much impact at school--"A lot of people in my

Post this story to:

Digg

Most viewed NEWS articles

Murder Ink: 6/13/2007

Under Fire: Embattled Fire Chief William Goodwin Jr. Faces The Heat

Mr. Boh's Neighborhood: Baltimore's New Master Plan Looks To The Future With One Eye

Murder Ink: 6/27/2007

Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics: Rumors Of Carroll County Teen-Sex Parties Have Been Greatly Exaggerated

BALTIMORE BOUTIQUES
MUST HAVES
FOR SUMMER!
baltimore boutique guide

Top Jobs

Top Rentals

ADMINISTRATIVE PROJECT MANAGER:
[Fabrication/Construction](#)

RESTAURANT: [Tony Foreman & Cindy Wolf](#)

ADMINISTRATIVE PROJECT MANAGER:
[Fabrication/Construction](#)

CLADDAUGH'S PUB RESTAURANT: [Daytime Manager](#)

DRIVER: [Zannino's](#)

View all **TOP JOB** ads

CANTON/FELLS POINT: [2710 Fait Avenue](#)

BAYVIEW/GREEKTOWN: [Fully Renovated](#)

HAMPDEN/ WOODBERRY: [Luxury Living](#)

WASHINGTON VILLAGE: [Ravens Stadium](#)

FEDERAL HILL: [Riverside Avenue](#)

View all **TOP RENTAL** ads

Browse Category

> PLACE CLASSIFIED AD

Recently in **FEATURE**

Choose or Lose

10/3/2001

A Decade After Passing One of the Country's Strongest Abortion Laws, Maryland Faces New Challenges to Choice

Hot Line

9/12/2001

The Feds Are Considering Shipping Spent Nuclear Fuel Through the Howard Street Tunnel. Are They Playing With Fire?

Course Correction

9/5/2001

Two Years Before Desegregation Became the Law of the Land, a Baltimore High School Opened Its Doors to 13

30 Years
CITYPAPER
1977-2007

Background Checks
Find Background Checks now See our Background Checks guide
www.CitiesGuide365.com

Background Checks
Get practical advice on conducting employee background checks
www.allbusiness.com



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Rebecca Yenawine (top left) started Kids On The Hill in 1996 after discovering neighborhood children scribbling graffiti on a vacant house in her block. The program now has five paid staffers and operates numerous arts and education programs.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

neighborhood didn't go to my school." But as Hurd grew up, he got to know more kids and began to feel more comfortable.

But the danger of the neighborhood could still intrude and make Hurd feel like a victim. When he was in eighth grade, he was held up at gunpoint by a group of older teens as he walked to school. He had a dollar on him.

Glenda Gentner called the police, and drove around the neighborhood in search of the robbers. No luck. Once again, Hurd adapted. "I woke up earlier [and] found the crowd" walking to school, he says.

Soon after the robbery, Hurd's family moved to Colombia, where his stepfather was working as an architect on a coal mine. "Colombia was a culture shock, just like in the third grade, where I was one of the only white kids," Hurd says. "I was still a minority."

There were other Americans in his school, but most of his classmates were locals from wealthy families. Besides the ethnic and economic differences, Hurd found that little of what he had learned at Mount Royal Elementary--academically or socially--was useful. "Here, I was at a disadvantage. . . . My bullyism didn't sit so well in Colombia," he says. He ended up being what he calls "a belligerent victim"--still hassled by his classmates, but not quiet about it. ("Forget a chip," he says. "I had a brick on my shoulder.") To make matters worse, he didn't have the academic chops to do well: "I didn't have any study habits. I was behind." But he made friends and discovered Dungeons & Dragons, the fantasy role-playing game

that kept thousands of unhappy teenagers sane during that era.

In 1984, Hurd and his mother returned to Reservoir Hill so that he could finish high school in the States. (His stepfather remained in Colombia for two more years.) Their years abroad coincided with big changes back home. Both Hurd and his mother were surprised by the new tone of their old neighborhood--where there used to be pitiable alcoholics, there were now frightening drug addicts. Dealers occupied corners; houses sat boarded up.

After graduating from Baltimore City College in 1985, Hurd joined the military and attended Towson State University. Despite all of his bad experiences in Reservoir Hill, Hurd lived in his parents' Park Avenue house until he was 30.

"I get along with my parents," he says by way of explanation. "I lived on the third floor. I had my fraternity brothers, my ROTC buddies [over]. That was my home."

Now Hurd runs a mortgage company in Owings Mills and lives in Baltimore County with his wife. (His mother jokes that Hurd "always wanted to live in the suburbs.") He still visits his parents on a regular basis but says that when he's in their house, "laughing and joking, [I'm] thinking, *Is my car safe?*" He worries about his parents' safety but believes "they want to stick it out and see it get better."

To hear Hurd discuss it, having grown up in Reservoir Hill is the defining factor in his life. He acknowledges that incidents from his childhood, such as being robbed at gunpoint, "have had an effect on my politics, my way of looking at the world." He believes it is not society's responsibility to protect you, that you have a responsibility to protect yourself, to defend yourself. That doesn't have to mean carrying a gun, although Hurd believes in that right. If a gun makes you uncomfortable, he says, use a baseball bat, a knife.

That protective attitude itself is not so unusual. But for Hurd, it is accompanied by a heightened sense of danger. His extroverted charm and easygoing manner notwithstanding, his wife considers him "very sensitive," he says, and he describes himself as "still very conscious about my environment." He jokes about his "clouded vision" of the world. He rattles off a list of nearly ritualistic behaviors that allow him to feel safe. If the couple gets home after dark, Hurd turns off the car's interior light so that no one can see him, steps out

of the car and assesses the situation, then signals his wife to follow him. When he hears a sound in his yard, he creeps into the kitchen to reach the switch that will flood the yard with light, even though he considers his suburban neighborhood relatively safe--"People do walk their dogs and don't get molested." And he is mindful, in a way even he finds troubling, of matters that most people leave unspoken.

"My muggers were always black males," Hurd says. "It's not a white/black thing. It's not that I feel black people are less than whites, or that white people are superior. But if I'm alone and I see a young black male wearing cutoffs and a T-shirt, I'm going to have second thoughts about what is happening."

Those are the negatives of Hurd's experience, the bad effects of growing up in Reservoir Hill. They're not his only remembrance of the neighborhood. Hurd says he's learned a lot from watching Reservoir Hill evolve. He believes the neighborhood's continuing crime and housing problems have encouraged the residents to create a sense of community that, in his parents' case, manifests itself in an active block club and committed homeowners.

And then there are other, more personal habits that Hurd has built up over a lifetime of living in a racially diverse neighborhood, an understanding of what it's like to be the other that can serve him well in any situation. As part of his job, he says, he drives into all kinds of communities all over Baltimore City. Thanks to his upbringing, he says, he feels at ease where others might feel unsure; he knows as a matter of course how to approach people of different backgrounds.

"A lot of people who didn't grow up in that environment, they get scared," Hurd says. "I deal with a lot of people, and there's a sincerity that they pick up on. I don't need to prove anything."

Reservoir Hill today still tempts kids into trouble, large and small. In 1996, two years after Rebecca Yenawine bought her house on Madison Avenue, she noticed that children had been scribbling on a vacant house in her block. She happened upon the neighborhood girls who were responsible--but instead of lecturing them or notifying police, she issued a challenge: Learn to draw so you can create something more than crude graffiti. A former student at the nearby Maryland Institute College of Art, Yenawine gave the girls painting and drawing lessons in her home.

That was the origin of Kids on the Hill, the nonprofit arts organization headed by Yenawine, one of several people working to address the problems and meet the needs of kids growing up in Reservoir Hill. Those needs are many and diverse. Vandalism might just be a symptom of boredom, but the kids of Reservoir Hill have larger problems, such as poverty. (In three of the four public elementary schools that serve the community, more than 70 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast and free lunch--in two of the schools, more than 90 percent.) The combination of need and a shortage of structured, supervised activities for neighborhood kids leaves them vulnerable to getting involved in everything from truancy to teen pregnancy to the street-corner drug trade.

In the early days, Kids on the Hill consisted largely of Yenawine finding and helping to finance art and performance classes for her charges and then chauffeuring them to their lessons. Now the organization has a five-member paid staff and fingers in many pies--an after-school program, a summer camp, mentoring, a cooperative project with Beth Am Synagogue. Yenawine dreams of opening an alternative high school that will serve the teens of Reservoir Hill and nearby Penn North.

Her approach relies on art and unconditional kindness. She believes that kids respond to both. She and her staff try to fill the gaps left by low-income families and underfunded schools--providing meals, access to education resources, support for kids' self-expression.

Sometimes Yenawine's goals manifest themselves in surprising ways. When the summer campers took a field trip to Towson's Hampton Mansion in July, Yenawine and her staffers prepared the kids with trips to the library and personalized topics for them to research. As the docents gave their spiels on the mansion and its history, the kids and Kids on the Hill staffers alike grew impatient and began interrupting with questions and comments of their own. Yenawine and her staff are unapologetic about such behavior. They don't want to teach these kids to suppress their natural curiosity. They want the kids to have their own agenda, their own notions of what they can learn. They don't want them to settle for what's offered.

That doesn't mean the program has no behavioral standards--in any given situation there's a three-strikes policy for transgressions of the rules set by Yenawine and her staff. But they don't worry so much about others' standards of behavior. They encourage the kids to be loud and expressive, to demand their share, to participate fully.

And they don't try to program the kids for mainstream success. Yenawine recalls one early participant, a young man she helped get into the Baltimore School for the Arts. He was not asked back after his first year. Yenawine says she now realizes that he didn't have the support system in place to succeed in the high-pressure school. So now she worries less about such traditional external measures of achievement. She'd rather they learn something about themselves.

That philosophy was on display last month, when the group premiered a video made in collaboration with teens from Beth Am Synagogue and filmmakers from Wide Angle Community Media. *History Hill* examines relations between the African-American and Jewish communities in Reservoir Hill through documentary and dramatic scenes. Besides teaching the kids about race relations in their neighborhood, the project taught them filmmaking and acting techniques and gave them a chance to work with peers from different geographic and ethnic communities.

She tries to expose the kids to as many different experiences as she can. As part of the after-school program, neighborhood children have learned boxing and animation. During the summer camp, Yenawine and her staff scheduled field trips that would reinforce the African-American history lessons and research they were doing in the library, visiting Harpers Ferry and an Underground Railroad stop as well as Hampton Mansion.

Yenawine describes the Kids on the Hill's mission as "two-pronged," relying on relationships and arts education. "I want them to build relationships that are positive. I want them to have a sense of a supportive community," she says. "Ideally, [the program is] a place where they treat each other well, that it's a safe space.

"What I hope that people get from the art and academics, and how we combine those two, is that their perspective is valuable. I hope that they learn to articulate their perspective and present it and learn that their perspective is very valuable to others. People learn a lot when young people speak up. Adults learn something, white people learn something. [Kids] have a role to play in social change. In other countries, like in Africa, there are young people's movements. I would love my kids to end up feeling like they have that kind of role. Through the art projects --frequently about a young person's perspective on racism, how adults feel about kids--people are much more able to look at a piece of art or a video than they are to sit down with a young person and listen."

Across the neighborhood at the Corpus Christi Community Center on Whitelock Street, Mariano diDonato leads an after-school program with a different tone. Although the walls of the center are lined with drawings and paintings created by the children, the program and its summer camp don't use art as the means of reaching kids. Thanks to the center's affiliation with Corpus Christi Catholic Church, located across North Avenue in Bolton Hill, all of the programs, including the twice-a-week soup kitchen, have a religious component. Thanks to diDonato, the activities teach practical skills and strive for measurable results.

DiDonato, a native Argentine who is studying network communications at Community College of Baltimore County's Catonsville campus, delights in surprising his charges. When he takes them to the Shake & Bake roller rink on Pennsylvania Avenue, he pretends that he doesn't know how to skate, then thrills the children by cruising along with ease, performing tricks, and nailing quick maneuvers. The children, entranced, wait anxiously for their turn around the rink with "Mr. Mariano."

For all this playfulness, diDonato takes these kids and their lives seriously. He speaks frankly about the murders that have taken place on Whitelock Street. He points out a 6-year-old girl, a participant in the center's programs, who was shot on the corner. He wants these kids to do better--to *do* better--with the hope that they'll feel more confident and hopeful as they achieve. As a result, his after-school program focuses on tutoring the children, helping them with their homework, beefing up their reading and writing skills. In contrast to Rebecca Yenawine's more intuitive approach, diDonato wants to see improvement in the form of better grades and good feedback from teachers. Even the rewards he gives have an educational component--kids who do well earn "money" that they deposit in the "Corpus Christi Love Bank," which they can withdraw to purchase treats or supplies.

That doesn't mean all work and no play; during the summer the kids take trips to the Druid Hill Park pool and Fort McHenry, or make cards for a Corpus Christi volunteer laid up with a broken hip. But the public-assistance/social-services model of helping children is not practiced here (diDonato even chides a reporter who shows up at the soup kitchen in officewear for being "dressed like a social worker"); diDonato believes in high standards and usable skills, in equipping the children to navigate the neighborhood and the world outside.

At the summer camp, practicing what diDonato preaches means building things--last year, a go-cart; this year, an ambitious city in miniature. Using donated materials and volunteer help, the children, ages 8 to 12, worked for five weeks behind the center to construct buildings big enough for them to move about inside.

They start with the frame of a church, including steeple. As diDonato roams the backyard and offers tips, very focused children equipped with safety goggles and full-sized tools learn to measure, to saw, to hammer, to build. "At first I was scared," says an 11-year-old named Rashid, who now looks adept and confident. The kids aren't simply busy, they're learning, and their faces glow with concentration and, later, pride.

"They learn real skills," diDonato says. "They can go home, they know how to use a hammer. They're doing math," he says, gesturing with a measuring stick toward a group of children.

The kitchen at the Reservoir Hill Recreation Center just needed a bit of an upgrade so kids in

an after-school program could make snacks. But that wasn't enough for Tyrone Gaines. He was thinking two steps ahead. Why stop at snacks when kids could maybe make cakes and pies for fund-raising bake sales, or the center could host big community meals? In came commercial-grade refrigerators and ovens, enormous counters, gleaming stovetops. Where most folks saw a kitchen in need of a little work, Gaines saw possibilities for his neighborhood.

No matter where Tyrone Gaines resides, Reservoir Hill is home. It's where he grew up in a Newington Avenue rowhouse, two blocks and 15 years away from Robert Hurd. It's where his mother still lives, in the same rowhouse. It's where he founded a basketball league that gave troubled children a chance at some good clean fun and a moment in the spotlight. It's where he created the Reservoir Hill Coalition Afterschool Enrichment Program so today's kids have somewhere safe to go and someone wise to look up to.

And it's where, 31 years ago, a 16-year-old Gaines, out riding his bike, saw his friend Cody killed on the street. Cody stepped in to break up a family fight; instead of ending the scuffle, he was stabbed with an ice pick.

Born into the neighborhood, Gaines had taken the everyday roughness of the streets for granted. In those years, before the drug trade emerged, most trouble stopped well short of brutality. Gaines had been a bad kid, a wisecracking brat who played class clown when he wasn't playing football and basketball. He didn't care about his grades or his behavior. So frequent were the calls from school officials that one day Gaines' mother paid a visit to his fifth-grade classroom and, in front of his teacher and classmates, spanked her son. Not long afterward, he was expelled and sent to a school on the other side of town.

Suddenly exposed to life in another community, a tough west-side kid adrift in a tougher east-side school, Gaines started to think a lot more about his own neighborhood, its problems and their possible solutions. He was already spending his free time at Reservoir Hill's city-run recreation center. The director, Charles Robinson, paid attention to him, made him feel special--and if that attention could make a difference in his life, it could do the same for any kid. And Gaines took notice of the neighborhood's reaction to Cody's murder by a relative--it wanted to run the family out of Reservoir Hill because one of its members had killed one of Reservoir Hill's own.

As he grew into his 20s, Gaines was looking for a way to put into practice what he'd learned at the rec center, and to strengthen the extended family that was the neighborhood. He found it in his love of sports.

"I used basketball as my bait to do other things," he says of the league he started in the late 1970s, for ages 8 to 35. "Trashbusters--kids who clean up the neighborhood from time-to-time. Mentoring programs came from the basketball leagues. Everything in the community was centered around these leagues."

The first games were played on a small court in an alley at the eastern edge of Reservoir Hill. For Gaines, the league was a way to reach the entire community: Folks from all over the neighborhood played, and many more came to watch. "Three hundred people would pack into the alley," he says. Folks living courtside soon tired of the big crowds, prompting a drive to build a new court at the center of the neighborhood, along Whitelock Street. If some viewed the new court as a way to relocate a noisy nuisance, Gaines saw it as a community-sponsored upgrade, a vote of confidence. Such is the optimism that fuels his efforts.

That optimism allows Gaines to believe that anyone can be redeemed, by basketball or art classes or just some good old-fashioned attention. He was adamant that "bad kids"--even those involved in the drug trade--have a place in his leagues. Having been a bad kid himself, he suspected that he knew something about what was really going on in their lives.

"We watched these kids come up from babies. They would carry your bags from the stores," Gaines says. But if they got in trouble, they "stopped getting love from the community. They showed love to each other, but it was violent love--girls getting pregnant, thinking, *My boo will always love me.*" He added a girls softball league, and recalls proudly, "Those girls weren't having babies--only one girl got pregnant. They wanted to be ready to play ball."

By the mid-'80s, the leagues were well-established, and Gaines was ready to get on with his life. He married his longtime girlfriend, Rosalyn Maddox, and they moved to Houston, where she had gotten a good job. He thought the move would be permanent. But in his absence, his mother had a stroke, the basketball league disintegrated, and he realized that he needed Reservoir Hill as much as it needed him.

"We had to come back," Gaines says. "My wife sacrificed for me to stay in the neighborhood. She knew where my heart is."

Today, the 47-year-old Gaines spends his free time as president of the Reservoir Hill Coalition, which he founded in 1998 and runs in a way that reflects both his childhood experiences in Reservoir Hill and the adult lessons he's learned in reaching out to the neighborhood's kids.

The program grew out of an effort to prevent the Police Athletic League (PAL) from taking over the neighborhood recreation center, where Gaines had spent so many afternoons as a teenager. Although PAL centers generally have a good name in Baltimore, Gaines and others in Reservoir Hill feared the change would alienate a lot of rec-center regulars.

"We didn't want police officers setting up shop in our rec center, making the kids more angry," Gaines says, recalling his own effort to open his basketball league to kids with drug connections--the kids that he says need such activities most. "That would be closing the door in their face." So he "rounded up some people, put some suits on, and went down" to talk to police officials and returned with an agreement that the center would remain with the Department of Recreation and Parks.

But it wasn't enough to make sure the center was open; he wanted to improve the lot of kids in Reservoir Hill and he needed to create a structure that could survive without him. He reached out to institutions in the community: John Eager Howard Elementary School, which provided the first participants; the Maryland Institute College of Art's Community Art Program, which brings art students into schools and communities for instruction and mentoring; older folks in Reservoir Hill, who became mentors and substitute grandparents for the kids.

With their help, Gaines created a program that provided 150 students with after-school tutoring, sports, and art programs, plus a summer camp. Now, after three years at John Eager Howard, he is moving the program across North Avenue to the Midtown Academy, a charter school located in Bolton Hill but serving a student body that's half Reservoir Hill residents.

Gaines is still a hands-on guy--he spends an enormous amount of time in the center, where the children spot him in the halls and tackle him with hugs. But he's increasingly cast in a new role as the public face of the program. Now his way of helping neighborhood kids involves wearing a suit and talking to potential funders of the \$200,000-a-year program. "I look at what I didn't take advantage of when I was in school, and it motivates me to raise money," Gaines says. Two years ago, his employer, Baltimore Gas & Electric, honored him for his volunteer work and helped him meet foundation directors.

Every day, after he's watched over the kids in the after-school program, after he's worked his shift for BGE, Gaines returns to his house in Woodlawn. Still, he says, Reservoir Hill is his home.

"The neighborhood has given so much to me, so much mentoring," he says. "This is my neighborhood, and I take a lot of stuff personally. . . . What I want is to impact [Reservoir Hill kids'] lives, to have [them] realize someone cared, someone wanted you to reach your potential."

He points to his hair and smiles. "I went gray early because I was trying to save them all."

User Comments

Please read our [posting policy](#) before adding comments. Report offensive comments using the [+](#) link.

If you think what you have to say deserves a letter to the editor, [why not send us one now?](#)

Comment on this article

User:

Password:

No account? [New users sign up here.](#)

[\[Register - Login\]](#)