



BUILT ON HOPE

Mount Hope's Billy Taylor Park is the heart of the neighborhood

By Maryclaire Dugre

Damon Gomes glides down the court. He's lighter than air and just about floats off the asphalt as he weaves in and out of defenders with surprising control over his spindly legs. With ease he finds the open lane and skips to the hoop for an effortless finger-roll layup. As he hustles back to defense, he high-fives his teammates, unusually comfortable in his thirteen year-old skin.

Meanwhile, Dexter Thompson grabs a rebound from his unsuspecting opponent's hands. He dons the number 23 with pride – a nod to greats Michael Jordan and LeBron

James that's a common sight on this court. His shirt is neatly tucked into shorts worn at an appropriate waist level. Dexter's seriousness is no less apparent in his game than in his attire: he drives down the sideline, removes a defender from his path with a spin move and a lowered broad shoulder, and goes up strong – again and again. Lather, rinse, repeat.

What do the two have in common? Damon explains in a seeming paradox, "We're competitors; that's my best friend."

The scene is a typical one at Billy

Taylor Park on the corner of Camp and Doyle Streets, the heart of the Mount Hope community. It's long been the social center of the neighborhood, and hazy summer nights like this might inspire déjà vu in the older folks in attendance. They remember three decades ago when Billy Taylor the man and the neighborhood kids were known to cause a ruckus – of the good, clean, fun persuasion – in the park that would later bear his name. Now, as it was then, there are swarms of people here. Kids are playing ball on both

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“We’re competitors; that’s my best friend,”
Damon Gomes says of Dexter Thompson (pictured opposite page).

courts, hanging around the sidelines, heckling from the bleachers, and sitting with their feet dangling over the huge graffiti mural painted on the retaining wall below the new playground (the work of legendary New York graffiti artists TATS Cru). Hot dogs and hamburgers are sizzling on grills as an older woman scoops her grandson out of the way of a stampede of high school-age kids wearing blue t-shirts that say “Billy Taylor Basketball League” on them. It’s a community affair, one of the few places seven year-olds and seventy-year olds alike have a reason to congregate – something Billy Taylor was great at coordinating.

William Albert Taylor, known to many as Fat Albert for his uncanny resemblance to the television character, was a figure of mythic proportions even before his prominent role in the Mount Hope community. Born with a heart murmur, he was one of the youngest in the country to undergo open-heart surgery. He was expected to live only ten or twelve years, but decided to keep on keepin’ on almost two decades past that, and did so with reckless abandon. Taylor played every sport on the doctor’s forbidden list. He was so involved with the youth of Mount Hope and so vigorous in spirit that one might forget about his

heart condition were it not for the scar on his chest, or his untimely death at the age of 37 in 1983.

What earned him the nickname of Billy the Great, however, was the impact he made on the children of the Mount Hope neighborhood. His sister Cheryl Taylor recalls the camping weekends, talent shows, block parties, and one memorable trip to Block Island, all organized and mostly paid for out of pocket by Billy Taylor. When he didn’t have the money himself, long time friend James Webster remembers, he would have no qualms about soliciting it from neighbors, who couldn’t refuse a humble request for the sake of the youth. A mentor and counselor to the children, “Billy Taylor was like the pied piper in this neighborhood,” says Webster. When he died, Martin Luther King School closed for the day, and as the funeral procession made its way up Camp Street, it passed a sea of neighborhood kids in the park, holding a banner that read, “Billy Taylor, we love you. Rest in peace.” The city, under then-mayor Buddy Cianci, would eventually rename the park in Billy the Great’s honor.

Having grown up together on Pleasant Street, Webster and Taylor founded the Pleasant Street Peasants, a loose

neighborhood association that planned programs and events for Mount Hope youngsters that would keep them active and out of trouble. The park was the focal point of the community, serving as the venue for everything from cook-outs to softball games to the legendary Midnight Basketball League, a tradition that continues, albeit at an earlier hour, through Damon, Dexter and their peers.

“Billy Taylor embodies what positive can come out of this neighborhood,” says Raymond Watson. Unfortunately, “positive” is an adjective used infrequently in reference to Billy Taylor Park and Mount Hope, though it simply radiates off Watson as he shows the plans for a new community center set to be built in the fall. Watson is the Executive Director of the Mount Hope Neighborhood Association, the more organized progeny of the Pleasant Street Peasants. He lived in Mount Hope as a child before moving to Fox Point, and eventually obtained a Masters in Planning at the University of Rhode Island. Lorenzo Perry (pictured on cover), the organizer of the summer basketball league and a former football player at Bryant University, is also a Mount Hope native. In fact, what began as an interview with Watson and Perry quickly became a neighborhood gather-

ing. No sooner was the subject of Billy Taylor addressed then Cheryl enters the room, a beaming smile on her face as she shares what stories she remembers and calls up Mr. Webster to fill in those she can’t.

The historically black section of the East Side, Mount Hope is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. The sense of community that has been cultivated over the years is obvious in the reminiscing and rehashing that constituted our meeting. Watson shows us a black and white photograph in the hallway of the Neighborhood Association that was taken in mid-1980s. It captures the Mount Hope community gathered at the park on “Billy Taylor Day.” He explains that the families in Mount Hope have been here for generations, and Webster confirms this as he points out people he knows, and has known, all sixty-plus years of his life.

Of prime concern to such passionate residents of Mount Hope is the rather unsavory image associated with Billy Taylor Park. The area has the reputation for being the dangerous neighborhood amid its wealthier East Side surroundings. (Residents even take issue with the City’s Mount Hope designation, joking, “We always thought we were ‘East Side.’”



It was only like ten years ago they started telling us we were ‘Mount Hope.’”) Drugs and violence are among the most common complaints, which, depending on whom you ask, is either a major problem or a handful of isolated incidents that have been blown out of proportion.

A blog entry on the Mount Hope Community Website, maintained by the Greater Concerned Camp Citizens, reflects the frustrations of its president, John Twomey: “Why isn’t the City putting all the weight of its resources and agencies to correct the quality of life imbalance extant in Mount Hope in comparison to all other East Side neighborhoods? Is criminality allowed to prosper in Mount Hope because there is a small, influential minority population in Mount Hope who are invested in the Drug Trade and who wield a disproportionate influence on how the police police and the City governs? To the detriment of the Real Mount Hope?”

The Greater Concerned Camp Citizens is another Mount Hope association aiming to better the neighborhood, but one with a decidedly different style and attitude than the Mount Hope Neighborhood Association. The efforts of one often meet with the disapproval of the other, and the two don’t necessarily agree on who or what represents “the Real Mount Hope.”

Nonetheless, GCCC Vice President Irene Tayber-Twomey, who has lived across the street from Billy Taylor Park for twelve years, remembers the park as a “nightmare” when she first arrived, but has been pleasantly surprised with its progress over the past few years.

“I think that negative issues in the neighborhood get overblown. For every negative issue there’s probably about three or four positive things going on that no one’s paying attention to,” says Watson. For examples, he cites the annual “Billy Taylor Day” celebration, the events put on by the Mount Hope Baptist Church, the Nonviolence March that took place on June 27 and the installation of a state-of-the-art playground at the park on June 20, at which neighborhood volunteers, Councilman Kevin Jackson, and the local police were present to help with its construction.

“If you talk to people in this neighborhood, they love the park. The park is not an issue,” argues Watson. Issues arise, he states, when residents neglect to properly address what they are unhappy about, shutting down lines of communication with organizations like the Neighborhood Association, thereby spreading fear and contributing to the negative connotation associated with the park and Mount Hope in general.

Watson continues, addressing frequent

and often unjustified complaints about kids gathering in the park: “Instead of calling the cops, see what you can do. Stop in the Neighborhood Association; ask how you can help out. Perhaps you know someone that can donate a few funds, so that instead of just hanging there, maybe we’re able to pay them to clean the park up – give us something for them to do.”

Watson fervently maintains that programs like the summer basketball league and the Capital City flag football league that plays on Saturday mornings, also run by Perry, are essential to the wellbeing of the community – especially adolescents, whom he claims adults tend to misunderstand and consequently mishandle. “If you keep them engaged and active, most of them will say out of trouble,” he contends. “Programs like this are exactly what the youth need because if they’re not here, then on Mondays and Wednesdays, who knows what they’ll be doing.”

Lieutenant David Schiavulli agrees. As commander of the District 8 Police Station, located a literal stone’s throw away from the park on Camp Street, he says he has seen tremendous improvement in the park in the four years he’s been there. Schiavulli credits the Mount Hope Learning Center and Watson’s Neighborhood Association with “motivating

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Bill Taylor's sister Cheryll enjoys the games from the bleachers

“The basketball league serves another purpose for Mount Hope citizens: keeping a tradition alive.”

the young men of Mount Hope.”

The basketball league serves another purpose for Mount Hope citizens: keeping a tradition alive. This summer is the first in three that the league has functioned. Watson recalls the uproar that ensued when he assumed his position and did not immediately start up the program. Older summer league veterans dream of getting the league back to what it was years ago, when players would come from as far as Barrington to play at the park and compete for the championship trophy. The league saw some players go on to play for college teams. (Even in this year's crop, Perry points out a few athletes with potential futures at the NCAA level.) Whether motivated by nostalgia or pride, many of the coaches, referees and volunteers that help out on Mondays and Wednesdays played in the league in their youth. Perry is one of them. Speaking on behalf of the league's positive influence on his younger years, he says, “It kept me involved as opposed to hanging out on the corners. It was the place to be.” The joy Perry and others experience in coaching younger siblings and neighbors – call it living vicariously – is visible on their faces.

Watson only wishes he could see it on everyone's faces when Billy Taylor Park and Mount Hope are discussed. The Neighborhood Association is thrilled with the City's help in revamping the playground area, especially in the current financial circumstances, but the fact remains that disinterest and disinclination toward the area often prevail. Miriam Hospital remains the sole sponsor of the basketball league. Furthermore, in a recent Mount Hope neighborhood monthly forum, a suggestion was made in all seriousness to change the park into a dog park.

And yet, the thought of kids like Damon Gomes and Dexter Thompson ceding their courts to dogs is almost comical. They take these games seriously. Dexter says of the league, “It means a lot; it helps me develop my game.” Later, revealing a sensitive side he neglects to show on the court, he reflects, “I thank Lorenzo for getting all the kids into this organization.” The park isn't just a place to hone basketball skills; it's where community bonds are born and fostered, a breeding ground for future leaders and role models like Perry.

Watson makes frequent jokes about the futility of trying to do anything in

Mount Hope without the awareness and full support of the community: “Nothing goes on in this neighborhood unless it's a community thing.” Although it is said good-naturedly, the message is clear that Billy Taylor's legacy, and his park, will persist as long as there are people who believe in it.

It isn't that the Mount Hope Neighborhood Association or users of the park are delusional – for, just as two thirteen year-olds can be both best friends and opponents, so too can a park have elements of both good and bad – it's that they choose to celebrate and improve upon the positive attributes of Billy Taylor Park rather than succumbing to the negative. Damon Gomes, who merely shrugs when he admits he “only” scored twelve points (albeit half of his team's total) in his game, represents this ideal of never settling, but always doing better next time.

Likewise, the people of the Mount Hope Neighborhood Association are realists, but with a healthy dose of confidence and ambition. “We know what the problems are,” says Watson, “It takes time.” Time, and maybe just a little bit of hope.