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The Neighborhood Ties That Still Bind

By COREY KILGANNON

Families and high schools are not the only institutions that have reunions. Some New York City housing projects have them too, welcoming back former residents who have moved on up or simply away.

One project, the Amsterdam Houses on the West Side of Manhattan, held a reunion this weekend that brought together war babies who had grown up side by side and formed an unusually tight-knit group. For three days, hundreds of former residents from all over the city and the country gathered to meet on the blacktop of a playground near the complex, just west of Lincoln Center.

The Amsterdam Houses first opened in 1947 for veterans returning from World War II. The project was unique at the time for its diversity, especially in a city still divided into pockets of ethnic neighborhoods. The G.I.'s and their wives begat a generation of war babies, born within the next few years, who came of age in the late 1950's and the 1960's on a different kind of battlefield -- the streets -- where they faced drugs, gangs and the Vietnam War draft.

"The group you see here are the survivors, but a lot didn't survive," said one of those war babies, Earl Spencer Dow, now 57. "Everyone was poor, but there were no racial barriers. We all just got along."

The old gang began arriving Friday at the playground of Public School 191, at Amsterdam Avenue and 60th Street, which was once softball central. They found its backstop partly dismantled, and some of the playground had been turned into a parking lot for school employees.

But the former neighbors hugged and greeted one another by their old nicknames. Irish men danced merengue, Latinos sang along with the Stylistics and black women swayed to Sinatra. As night fell, some gathered to sing old doo-wop numbers.

And, of course, to remember what it was like to grow up in postwar New York, with dozens of children your age just a door or a floor away.

Patrick Mann, 61, who now lives in Fort Worth, recalled the days when he and other boys traveled all over the city in ragtag uniforms, shellacking basketball teams from other neighborhoods. When the good times cost nothing, because a refund from Walker's variety store for a load of soda bottles could buy a Spaldeen, the pink rubber ball used in stickball. When you could make a pair of cardboard knee pads for a roller hockey game (if the skates were not already in use on a milk crate scooter).

Most residents of the Amsterdam Houses today are black, but the complex was conceived as an "experiment in integration," said Harold Thomas, 56, an art curator who moved in with his family as a baby and still lives there. "It was a beautiful mix, so many different races, and we all lived here just like

one big happy family."

Like most of the other people at the reunion, Mr. Dow was the child of an Army veteran who started a family at the complex, 13 buildings between West 61st and West 64th Streets, stretching from Amsterdam to West End Avenue.

"I was one of the first guys in the playgrounds around here to get out of the neighborhood and go to college through basketball," said Mr. Dow, known as Satch.

He became a talented guard, competing against players like Tiny Archibald and Lew Alcindor, a gangly boy who attended Power Memorial High School, next to the projects, and later changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Mr. Dow made All-City in 1965 and college All-American in 1969, and then tried out for the New York Nets. But by then he had joined the National Guard to avoid the Vietnam draft, and his game had declined.

Another alumnus, Rudy Noriega, 59, did serve in Vietnam with the Marines for three months before taking mortar shrapnel in his leg.

"I got what they used to call a million-dollar injury, because they couldn't send you back," he said.

Back home, the streets weren't always safe, either. "This was a tough neighborhood to grow up in," he said. "There were gangs. A lot of us went to school with the Westies in Hell's Kitchen. And heroin definitely took its toll."

Most of the men credited the strict youth counselors in the Evening Community Center at P.S. 191 with keeping them involved in sports and away from street gangs like the Sportsmen and the Dragons. One of those counselors was Stanley Hill, who later became the well-known leader of District Council 37, the city's largest municipal union.

At the reunion, Mr. Mann hugged Mr. Hill.

"If it wasn't for this guy, we'd all be in jail," he said. "He was a father to us and really whipped us into shape. He kept us off the street."

Eventually, progress came to the neighborhood. Tenements across Amsterdam Avenue were bulldozed, and Lincoln Center was built in their place. One high-rise after another arose, and the old neighborhood was transformed into a high-rent district. Neighbors now include the glitzy Time Warner Center and the Trump International tower.

Many widows of the veterans, all in their late 70's and 80's, still live in the same apartments. One of them, Carmen Acosta, said four generations of her family had grown up in the Amsterdam Houses. It was 55 years ago that she and her husband, just out of the Army, moved into a two-bedroom apartment, paying rent of \$37 a month.

She hugged Butch Curtis, 60, a retired corrections officer now living in Virginia.

"I knew him since he was 4," she said. "His father had one of the first hi-fi's, and Butch used to drive me crazy with the loud music."

Mr. Curtis said he used to play cards at Thelonious Monk's apartment on West 63rd Street, with Monk, Harry Belafonte and Miles Davis.

David Small, 58, a retired stagehand now living in Winchester, Va., had his own "I knew him when" story about Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, then a 6-foot-9 high school sensation.

"I played him one-on-one on that hoop right there," he said, pointing across the playground. "I scored the first basket, but then he got the ball and I never touched it again. He scored 15 straight points and beat me 15 to 1. But I'll never forget that feeling of leading him 1 to 0."