A Decent Place To Live

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Published by Northeastern University Press

Roessner, Jane.
A Decent Place To Live: From Columbia Point to Harbor Point-A Community History.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/68431.

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Children of the Point: I

We had a very privileged childhood. The world was at our doorstep, and everybody I know just opened the door and said, “Let’s go!”

—Deborah Shearer

Columbia Point in the early days was a community of children. In the late 1950s some four thousand children lived in the project, concentrated in twenty-seven buildings on seventy acres. For children, it was a bonanza: more than a hundred kids in your own building, and hundreds more just outside your door.

The boys and girls who grew up at Columbia Point in the 1950s and 1960s are now men and women—“adult children” of the Point, as it were. Across the years, they remember the project as a place they loved, a place full of fun. They are protective of the project, sensitive to the stigma that later became associated with it. The place they knew and loved, the place where they grew up, was very different from the place described in the newspaper and magazines, or the place outsiders imagined. “It’s very dear to my heart,” Chris Aylward, typical of many, emphasizes, “and I don’t want to hear people talk negatively about it.” The media always paid plenty of attention to negative stories about Columbia Point, they argue, but ignored the positive stories—the children of the Point who went on to college, to graduate school, to productive jobs.

The youngest of five brothers in a family of nine children, Aylward lived at Columbia Point for twenty-three years, attending Northeastern University on a football scholarship and earning a place in the university’s athletic hall of fame. His work as a juvenile probation officer sometimes brings him back to the old neighborhood. “When I was growing up there,” he recalls, “it was a place of real community spirit. Families were real close to each other. I can remember, back then, that you never locked your doors.”

People who grew up there remember the project as a place to roam and play, a labyrinth not of danger but of endless games. “The high-rise buildings were good for us with baseball, because everybody tried to hit it over the seven-story roof,”
Butchie Arroya and Chuck Shearer at the baseball field in back of the project, 1961. Courtesy of Erline Shearer
Joshua Powell recalls. “The way the streets went was nice for kids, too—the streets were like a maze. You could go down Mount Vernon, turn in on Monticello, then turn around here at Montpelier and come back on Monticello and come all the way around on Mount Vernon. We used the whole project to play games.”

Some games, though, had inherent dangers. Chris Aylward’s older brother John recalls that kids used to ride on the tops of the elevators; for bigger thrills, they would ride the weight on the cable above the elevator. In 1956 John’s friend Tommy Gaskell was killed riding the weight.

Kids and policemen knew one another on a first-name basis—or rather, police called kids by their first names, and kids knew the police as “Officer Kinneally,” “Officer Olbrys,” and so on. Kids had the sense that the police knew them well enough that, if they ever stepped out of line, a patroline would soon be knocking at their door.

When Columbia Point first opened in 1954, school-age children were bused into South Boston. Each morning, twelve buses would pick up children in front of the administration building on Mount Vernon Street. The boys were bused to the Thomas N. Hart School on Eighth Street in South Boston, and the girls to the Gaston School. The busing was uneventful, nothing like the traumatic era of court-ordered busing in the 1970s. “We had busing before ‘busing,’” Chris Aylward recalls. “You just got on the bus and you did what you had to do, and whether it was a black student sitting next to you, or Irish Catholic, or Chinese, or Spanish, it didn’t matter. You had to get along, and you had to try and work things out.”

For Joshua Powell, the only black in his classroom at the Thomas N. Hart School, the experience was not wholly trouble-free. “Some kids were okay and some weren’t,” he recalls. The few racial incidents he remembers are characterized by the usual mixture of cruelty and banality. “In sixth grade, this kid named Thomas Courtney—some of these names I just don’t forget—was sitting in front of me. He just turned around and said, ‘You’re black, I’m white,’ and there was a Chinese kid and he said, ‘He’s yellow.’ And it was just that.” In another incident around Halloween, Powell recalls, “This one kid said, ‘You don’t need a mask ’cause you already got one.’ I never even put the connection together until years later.” It was casual racism—but no less hurtful, or less memorable, for being offhand. For the most part, tensions ran more along Southie versus Columbia Point than racial lines, and didn’t amount to much.

For Kevin McCluskey, one of the seven children of John and Pat McCluskey, life at Columbia Point revolved around sports. Of a
typical afternoon in his youth, Kevin recalls, “You’d come home and get out of your ‘good clothes’ and into your ‘play clothes,’ and then you’d go out and start playing whatever sport was in season. You had everyone else spilling out of their buildings, too. With a core group of anywhere from a dozen to twenty guys, I used to just take my basketball and go up to the hoops outside St. Christopher’s and play ball for three hours.” Although there were big fields “in the back” of the project, toward the water, the kids preferred the asphalt to the grass. “The parking lots had the perfect configuration for a football field,” Kevin explains. “You’d just roll right out of your door. You learned how to run in between the cars.”

In the first few years, according to John Aylward, white kids played sports with whites, and black kids with blacks—just as they had in their former neighborhoods. After a couple of years, though, the racial lines broke down and everybody played together. As Aylward says, “It came down to who could play.” From then on, athletic teams were racially integrated—not by conscious decision, but because race was a non-issue. Hundreds of children at the project played sports together without incident. “It was all mixed,” Kevin explains. “We didn’t really know there was a racial issue. This is who lived in the projects. All different kinds of people. In our building, we had twelve families, and for the bulk of my time there it was evenly divided between black and white. If there was a fight, it wasn’t viewed as a racial thing; it was just a fight.”

The one group that held itself apart from the rest of the community were the West Enders, mostly Italians, who were relocated to Columbia Point in the late 1950s when the West End was being demolished as part of Boston’s urban renewal. John Aylward recalls that West Enders were protective of their own group:

When they came to Columbia Point, they were traumatized by the forced taking of their community—not only their house but their whole community. By then, most of the groups at the project were pretty well established. . . . We were thinking, “Why doesn’t he want to come and hang out? Why doesn’t he want to come out and shoot baskets?” I was too young to realize what the impact of their having been thrown out of their community was to them.

Many children who lived at Columbia Point were familiar with other parts of the city. Once you walked across the field to the T sta-
my brother and I would go downtown after school and sell newspapers at the corner of Summer and Washington, right there at Filene’s Basement. That was a great education. You were eleven years old, you were in town, and you were with your brother—it’s a different day. You’d just travel freely around the city. You don’t have the issues you have today. Your parents would tell you, “If you run into any wise guys, just walk the other way.” Not like today. . . . I loved it: you made some money and you got to see what was going on in town.

Other kids found jobs right at the project. “I remember working as far back almost as I can remember,” Charlie Titus recalls,

but I think that my first job was on the milk truck at Columbia Point. In those days, Hood’s used to deliver the milk right to the doors, and they had milk crates that you could carry maybe eight bottles of milk in. I would meet the milkman in the morning at six o’clock, and if it was a school day, I would work until it was time to go to school. On Saturdays we would get started at five o’clock in the morning and work to two or three o’clock in the afternoon, lugging milk cases. I remember doing that all day until I was ten.

For children, Columbia Point was a great place to grow up, a self-contained community with, as Kevin McCluskey puts it,
all the traditional markers of a strong community—a strong adult presence, the sense of an extended family, the strong role of the church and all the community institutions. There was a feeling of safety, a sense of knowing the local police. We knew who all the cops were—it was community policing before it was part of the jargon. Eddie was our maintenance man, and you didn’t throw anything on the ground or make a mess because Eddie might hit you with his broom.

St. Christopher’s Church, directly across the street from the housing project, was the center of athletic activities for boys and girls living at Columbia Point. Father Francis Moseley, head of the newly established parish, was joined in 1961 by Father Larry Wetterholm, a charismatic young priest who would be a major influence in the lives of hundreds of children at Columbia Point. “Because of Father Wetterholm,” Kevin McCluskey recalls, “I always wanted to be a priest. Then I hit puberty.” Father Wetterholm ran an extensive sports program through the church. He had himself once been headed for pro baseball, signing with the Philadelphia Phillies upon his graduation from Brockton High School and playing on their farm teams from 1946 to 1948—a matter of no small wonder to the Little Leaguers from Columbia Point.

From the start, St. Christopher’s centered attention on the children of the project. The church’s athletic program included basketball, baseball, and football for the boys, and basketball and softball for the girls. Although technically CYO—the Catholic Youth Organization—teams, St. Christopher’s paid no attention to whether the players were Catholic or not.

The Little League team began by building itself a ballpark behind the church, on an empty field that had once been a huge hole filled with hundreds and hundreds of junked cars. Father Wetterholm was adept at mustering the resources needed to construct the ballpark without a budget. “The Boston Housing Authority helped me with

Above: St. Christopher’s CYO basketball team, 1966. Front row, left to right: Peter Barbuto, Dennis Marchant, Larry Joyce, Dennis Gambon. Standing, left to right: Kevin McCluskey, Stephen McCluskey, Fran Cronin, Jay Cronin, John Quirk (coach). Courtesy of Kevin McCluskey.

the equipment and with their professionals. We needed welders to put up a backstop and to help in erecting bleachers and benches for the players,” he explains. “Also, to fill in that area properly and level it off, I was able to get loads and loads of loam from the city. I don’t know where they got it, but they dumped it off at my place.”

Father Wetterholm had a ready and ample supply of labor in the Little Leaguers themselves. “We had to mow the grass and rake it all up,” recalls Chris Aylward, who was eleven years old at the time. “Then we had to bring in the loam, spread it, throw the grass seed, and try to get it to look as nice as it could be. . . . It was a labor of love, I suppose.” That spring, some three hundred youngsters played Little League on their brand-new, homemade field.

Father Wetterholm’s right-hand man in the athletic programs was John Quirk, described by one of his players as “a crusty old character with a heart of gold,” who coached the CYO teams for fourteen years. Through their connections, John Quirk and Father Wetterholm managed to get uniforms and equipment for the CYO teams from local colleges—Tufts, Boston College, Northeastern, Harvard.

Father Wetterholm saw sports not just as a way to occupy kids’ time but also as an important way for kids to learn and grow as people. “I have always said that the great equalizer in racial relationships is athletics,” he explains, “and particularly among the youngsters. When you have Little League, you have blacks and Puerto Ricans and Chinese and whites—no one asks what you are. You’re just one of the ball players.”

The children who grew up at Columbia Point seem to have been remarkably unaware of racial differences, let alone racial prejudice. “People laugh at me,” Deb Shearer recalls, “but I never knew that I was black until I got out of Columbia Point. Until I went to high school. The only difference between me and my friends was that they were Catholic and I was Protestant. That was it.” In fact, Deb got her firsthand education about racial prejudice in the suburbs. “I never heard the ‘n-word’ until I went to Metco,” she recalls, citing the program that bused black, inner-city children to suburban schools. “That’s where I first heard it, when I went to Lexington High.”

Angie Hines moved into Columbia Point in 1956, at age five, and lived there until she
was eighteen. She remembers being the recipient of racial slurs—and, for that matter, dishing them out. But for her, it was “personal,” not “general.” And to her, that made all the difference:

If someone called me a nigger, I wouldn’t think that they meant everybody who was black was a nigger. I’d think that they were calling me that name, only. Because they were angry at me or they didn’t like me. I just never thought it was any larger than that—because I was also quick to call somebody “honky” or something, and I didn’t mean the whole world. I was talking about that individual person, so I always thought that’s what the extent of all our problems was, was individual issues.

In fact, the racial conflict Angie remembers most vividly, and with the most shame, wasn’t between blacks and whites. It grew out of differences between northern urban blacks and southern rural blacks in her own building. “There was a black family that moved in who were from the South, but at the time I thought they were from Africa,” she recalls.

I’d never seen anybody like them before. The mother was wearing dresses that were kind of long. Her hair wasn’t straightened. They didn’t have much; they were on the poor side. Now, I didn’t think folks from Columbia Point were poor; in fact, they weren’t poor. They were middle-class working people, it seemed to me. So this family was different. They ate different kinds of foods and everything. . . .

I went up and asked them, “Are you from Africa?” And they looked at me like I was crazy and I’d insulted them. Plus I couldn’t understand what they were saying half the time. They’d ask me something and I didn’t know what in the world they were saying. Me and some other folks—black and white—decided to make them the end of any point of
our frustrations. We did some horrible things to these people. We didn't like them, and we just made sure that everybody else didn't like them, too. They were so different. And not until maybe three years later did I ever pay attention to them and treat them like human beings.

Angie Hines's memories of how she and her girlfriends, black and white, treated a southern black family are a perfect example, almost a parable, of how racism starts and runs its course. What bothered her was that "they were so different," nothing more, nothing less. And their sheer difference—different hair, different clothing, different food, different accent—was enough justification for Angie and her friends to set about making the family's life miserable. It wasn't enough for Angie and her friends to "not like" them; they had to make sure that everybody else joined in ostracizing the family as well.

In the end, the stories people tell of growing up at the Point are the most eloquent testimony to the values of the community. For Chris Aylward, a worn-out baseball was something to be cared for and mended and preserved as long as possible—because you had to have it to play. It is a small metaphor for how kids grew up in the world of Columbia Point. He recalls: "We'd all go down there to play baseball. When the cover got torn off the ball, someone would bring a roll of tape, and we'd tape the ball up. We'd hit until the tape came off, and then we'd tape it up again. That was our existence. We didn't have money to keep buying baseball after baseball, so we'd try to preserve it as long as it would go."

"You learned to survive and you learned to appreciate what you had," Chris reflects. "I wouldn't trade growing up at Columbia Point for anything. It gave me an understanding of what I am, and who I should be."

For another child of Columbia Point, the acres of asphalt surrounding the housing project provided an immense drawing board. Almost magically, chalk was offered up from the ocean, and the whole board was periodically washed clean by the rain:

We had so much black asphalt, blacktop, around there. In the summer, there was a lot of chalk available, I guess from the rocks or something. We always had chalk, and we would draw games on the asphalt to play, you know, like hopscotch. We had some very elaborate games; they were amazing. And if it didn't rain for a couple of weeks, the asphalt would be covered. We wouldn't be able to find a spot to draw a game. And this is acres of blacktop covered with chalk, with drawing and games and names. And then it would rain, and it would be like a clean slate, and you could start all over.

**Transportation and Recreation**

Chris Aylward's father worked in a foundry in Hingham, several miles south of Boston. The family didn't have a car, so his father hitched a ride with a fellow worker who lived north of Boston, in Medford, and who drove through Boston on his way to work. Each morning, Chris's father would walk a mile or so up to the Southeast Expressway and wait for his co-worker to pick him up.

Every Saturday morning, Chris's father would take his kids to the Lucky Strike bowling alley in Dorchester. The deal was, whoever among the nine kids got up early Saturday morning and was ready on time went. Most of the time, all of the kids took their father up on the offer. They would walk up to Columbia Station, pay the nickel fare to take the train to Fields Corner, and walk to the bowling alley.