

time& place

BY JUDGE LYNN C. TOLER

Paradise Remembered

EVERY JULY IN LIVINGSTON HEIGHTS

On the east side of Columbus, Ohio, just south of James Road, there are three small streets accessible only from Livingston Avenue. Each street has four to eight houses. They are nice homes, larger than the majority of houses in the surrounding area. This, in and of itself, is not remarkable.

Who built them, when and why, however, is.

Livingston Heights came into being in the early 1940s, when two black men - a small businessman and a physician - bought land on the outskirts of Columbus in what were then little more than cow pastures. They developed this plot by selling individual parcels to other black professionals. Unwelcome elsewhere, the twenty or so families who settled there took land that was of no interest to others and built themselves a community. They held regular meetings to discuss issues of common interest: the building of roads, the construction of sewers. They presented a united front to the City of Columbus and managed to successfully integrate the area into its surroundings as the city grew out to meet it. They named their community Livingston Heights.

I was born into that oasis in 1959. And every July, for as long as I can remember, all of the families in Livingston Heights got together for the annual picnic. We all congregated in someone's backyard to eat, talk and enjoy one another's company. The children in the neighborhood would put on a show for the adults. We were a spunky, if not a particularly talented group of kids. We got rave reviews every year.

I looked forward to the picnic. The women planned and cooked and made costumes for our show. They talked about cleaning ladies and colleges. We kids played kickball undisturbed in the street, since all three streets were dead ends, anyone who would ordinarily travel them was already accounted for in someone's backyard.



ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID BUTTRAM

The men made boasts about barbecue sauce and disagreed on how to light the fire. They also spoke more quietly among themselves about the things they were trying to change for the children they watched play in the streets they had created.

The picnic would last well into the night. We kids all got to stay up late, since it was summertime. Toward dusk, as Johnny Walker and Jim Beam made their presence better known, the jokes began to roll, and the Richard Pryor albums came out. Our parents left us kids on our own to carry on as we pleased, feeling safe in the knowledge that we were firmly ensconced in our own safe haven: a clean, upscale black neighborhood, in which we took care of our own.

As time went by and my world grew beyond the confines of those three small streets, I began to comprehend with greater clarity the significance of what happened there every July. What I had once taken for granted as nothing more than a rollicking good time on a warm summer afternoon, I now know was a celebration of achievement and vision, the memory of which I will always cherish, along with the men and women who made it so.

Lynn C. Toler has been Cleveland Heights' municipal judge since 1994. Beginning in September, she will host the Fox Network's Power of Attorney.

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