

Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy

Finally coming to Ward 7's Fort Dupont Park

BY JOHN MULLER



1.

1. "Josh Gibson with young fans."

2. "Morris Brown baseball team from turn of the century." Photo by Library of Congress

3. "1913 Homestead Grays of the Negro Leagues"

4. "Homestead Grays began playing in Washington, DC in the 40's. They routinely drew more fans than the Washington Senators"



2.



3.



4.

Baseball is not perceived to be a major youth sport in D.C, but the city used to produce Major League players. According to Baseball-Reference.com, 94 players and 41 pitchers in Major League Baseball history have been born in Washington, DC. But the majority of them played before the turn of the 19th century. Only one of the five managers born in Washington, 1962 National League MVP and Los Angeles Dodger Maury Wills, a Cardozo High School graduate, was born after 1900. Although Emmanuel Burriss, Wilson High School graduate, was drafted in the first round of the 2006 Amateur draft and played on the San Francisco Giants in 2008 and 2009 before injuring his foot in Spring Training, baseball is not thought of as a sport that DC youth excel in.

This could all change. Early last month, after years of inner-bureaucratic and NIMBY environmental disputes, the National Capital Planning Commission approved the transfer of 15 acres of federal park land from the National Park Service to the city.

Located in the northern area of Fort Dupont Park, bounded by Ely Place, Minnesota Avenue, and Ride Road SE, the land will be used for two purposes -- to expand the Fort Dupont Ice Arena, built in 1976 and already serving an estimated 10,000 boys and girls each year; and the highly anticipated Washington Na-

tionals Youth Baseball Academy.

To support the Academy, the Nationals Dream Foundation has made a significant contribution of one million dollars as an initial investment for construction and \$250,000 for each of the next ten years to maintain operational costs. Two years ago, in anticipation of the land transfer, the City Council set aside \$11.3 million towards the construction of the Academy.

"The goal of the Nationals Dream Foundation is to respond in a significant and impactful way to problems that plague our community," says Marla Lerner Tannenbaum, daughter of Nationals owner Ted Lerner and chairman of the Dream Foundation. "We've been working on this Academy for the past three years and are now focusing on the zoning, design, fundraising, and a lease with the city."

The Academy is being modeled after Harlem, New York's successful Reviving Baseball in the Inner City (RBI) program which integrates academic enrichment and after-school support programs with fundamental baseball instruction.

While the Capitol City Little League has operated in areas of NW Washington to the west of Rock Creek Park for more than two decades, the Batter UP Foundation was formed in 2004 and serves as DC's RBI program, conducting in-school programs and summer leagues for children and teenagers in Wards 6, 7, and 8. KPMG, a global accounting firm, has partnered as the lead sponsor of DC's RBI program to strengthen and grow youth baseball efforts in East Washington.

The Nationals will be one of five host sites for the Mid-Atlantic RBI Tournament July 15-18 to be held at Nationals Park, Catholic University, Brentwood-Hamilton, Gallaudet University, and Banneker Recreation Center.

In 1975, more than a quarter of all major leaguers were African American. With the growth in popularity of professional football and basketball, baseball quickly became an after-thought for many urban youth. To re-introduce baseball to urban areas, former Major Leaguer John Young started Reviving Baseball in

the Inner City (RBI) in South Central Los Angeles in 1989 after noticing that the majority of urban kids quit baseball between the ages of 13 and 16 due to a lack of organizational support.

The program is now in more than 200 cities with more than \$30 million in support from Major League Baseball and its teams. Current players Carl Crawford, 2007 National League MVP Jimmy Rollins, and Dontrelle Willis are all alumni of RBI.

In 2008 10.2 percent of players in the Majors were black. Ten of the 64 players selected for the 2009 All-Star game were black, with only Derek Jeter among the 16 players chosen to start by fan vote. In comparison, the 1979 All-Star game featured 16 black players and seven starters.

The situation has become so dire that many Historically Black Colleges and Universities recruit white and Latino students to fill the rosters of their baseball teams. Howard University, with three modern major leaguers amongst its alumni, no longer fields a team although in recent years students have on their own initiative started a club team.

"The sandlot doesn't exist anymore. Youth baseball is all highly organized now," says Gerald Hall, Sr. Director of Baseball Operations for the Woodridge Warriors. Hall's son, Gerald Hall, Jr. plays in the Minor League system of the Kansas City Royals, after playing for Gonzaga High School and Old Dominion University.

"For a sport that doesn't thrive in the city, this is a great development we support. It shows there is a public interest and people within the city who are making an investment in youth and baseball," says Mason Clark, Athletic Director of the Woodridge Warriors Youth Organization in NE Washington.

If all goes well, the Academy's three fields will open for a six-week program in the summer of 2011 with the Academy opening in 2012. ★

Great Streets Garbage

Deanwood Improvements Hampered by Trash

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



Illegal dumping detracts from efforts to fashion "Great Streets" in Deanwood

Work is underway on Great Streets improvements to Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue NE. The commercial corridor along Nannie Helen Burroughs and Sheriff Road is receiving investment through Deanwood Heights Main Streets. In addition, area parkland has seen a range of improvements.

The National Park Service, Groundwork Anacostia River DC and other community partners have been collaborating to improve Fort Mahan, at Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road, and to complete the larger Fort Circle Trail. The District government, local businesses, cyclists and hikers, Washington Parks and People, Groundwork and others have contributed improvements to Marvin Gaye Park, the city's longest park.

As part of the Deanwood Strategic Plan, the District identified four "gateways" to Marvin Gaye Park, which stretches from Minnesota Avenue at Nannie Helen Burroughs to the eastern edge of Ward 7. The intention is to "create a linear park running the length of the Watts Branch Stream Valley." To the east is "Capitol Gateway," near the Watts Branch Recreation Center. The Riverside Center, at Division Avenue and Foote Street, and the soon-to-be-developed Strand Theatre are part of "Heritage Green." The Lederer Center, at 48th and 49th streets, anchors the third gateway. Lady Bird Johnson Meadows, between Minnesota and Nannie Helen Burroughs avenues, is the western gateway to Marvin Gaye Park. The city recently completed a \$2.7 million improvement at this gateway.

Gateway or Garbage Dump?

"We are making real investments in our communities – building stronger, safer and healthier neighborhoods," Mayor Adrian Fenty said at the Lady Bird Johnson Gateway ribbon cutting on June 18. "Residents in every neighborhood in our city deserve first-class recreation amenities, and we are delivering just that with this park."

Around the corner, however, at 4300 Hunt Place NE, is an overgrown and unsecured vacant lot, a magnet for dumping and other illegal activities. Adjacent to this lot is All Aboard Contractors, which serves as an informal



CLOCKWISE from TOP:

1. Improved section of parkland near Lady Bird Johnson Gateway abuts trash-filled properties.
2. Demolition materials afire at All Aboard Contractor, 4214 Hunt Place NE.
3. Construction debris and other trash piles up in vacant, unsecured lot next to All Aboard.

transfer station for demolition materials.

Since 2006, neighbors have been requesting help from the District regarding these properties. One round of complaints resulted in a tarp on the contractors' fencing, blocking some of the unsightly view. But trash continues to amass, and neighbors report fires and other unhealthy conditions.

More recently, the mayor's office implemented a "Fix-It" at the vacant lot; the property remains unsecured, however, so unsightly, unhealthy and illegal conditions persist.

Dennis Chestnut, executive director of Groundwork Anacostia River DC, is among those who want to ensure that All Aboard conducts only legal activities on their property. In addition, he has a proposal for a more long-lasting and community-centered solution for the vacant land.

A Greener Proposal

One of Groundwork's goals is to remediate "brown fields" like the vacant lot on Hunt Place. Without transferring ownership, he says, Groundwork can bring healthier conditions to the property. Among the more ambitious suggestions is a native tree nursery. At a minimum, however, Groundwork could replace concrete, weeds and trash with plantings that would prevent groundwater run-off. Any one of several options would remove the current eyesore and provide other community benefits.

"I would definitely support the efforts of Groundwork Anacostia for improvements to that area. This would be a prime example for the type of work that the group was formed to do. I have zero tolerance for blighted property in our community," says Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander.

To date, however, Chestnut has not been able to get sufficient official support to make this proposal a reality. The Advisory Neighborhood Commission has not taken up this issue. The mayor's office organized the Fix-It but has not yet taken any long-term action. ★