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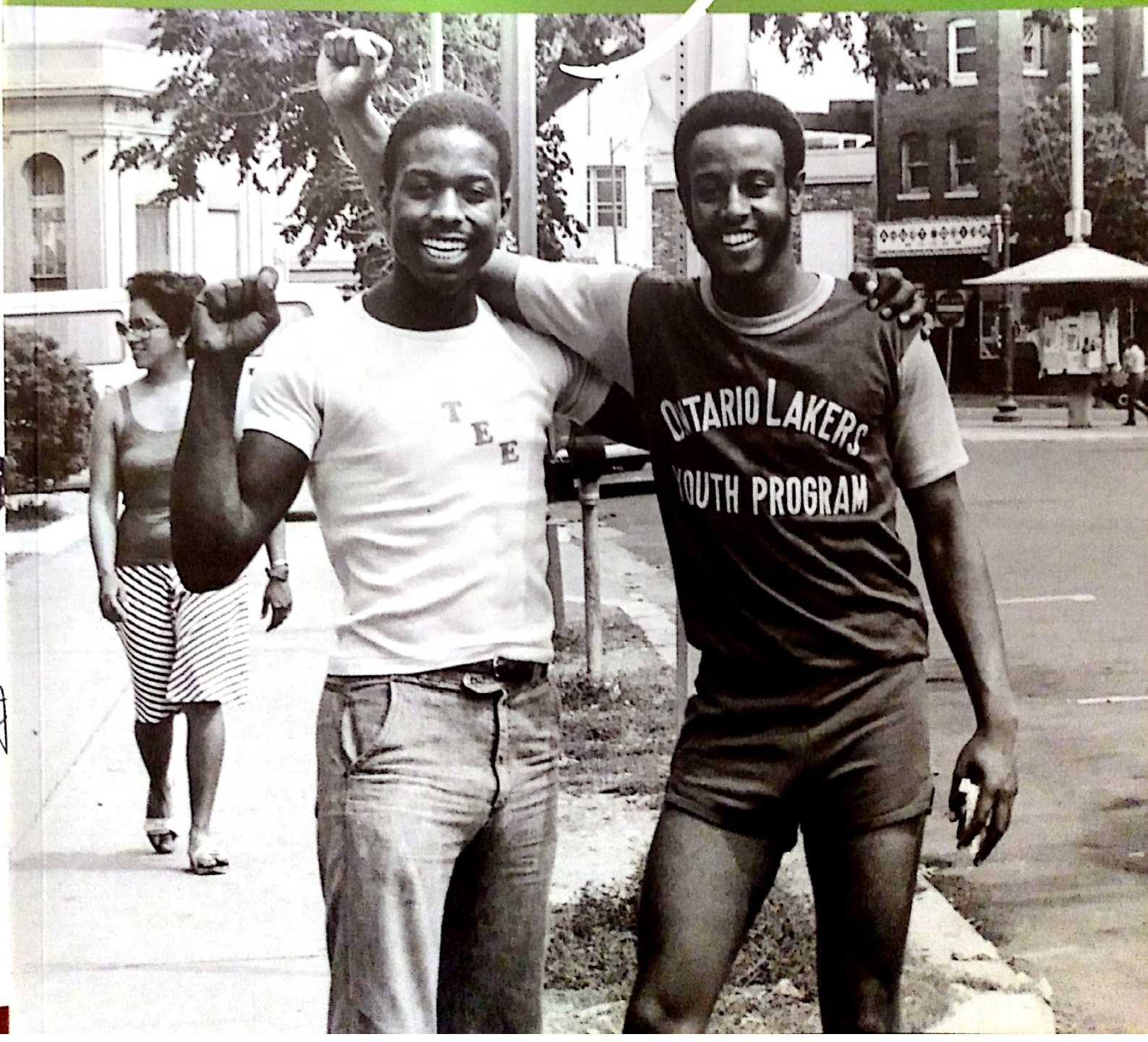


Caring in Public

The Struggle for Community Park West

BY AMANDA HURON, WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCY SHIA

In 1965 a group of Black teenagers in a run-down Washington, DC neighborhood needed a place to play—so they took over a four-acre tract of vacant land owned by local real estate speculators. Together with their neighbors, they created a commons out of the land, a free space for all sorts of activity. Over the course of ten years of collective labor, they figured out how to care for and govern the space themselves. When, in the mid-1970s, the space they had created was threatened with development into market-rate townhouses, the neighbors pressured the District into using its power of eminent domain to take the land from its owners in order to maintain it in perpetuity as a protected public park. It was a major victory: the space, known as Community Park West, was saved. Today the neighborhood surrounding the park has gentrified to the extent that it is no longer a home for many of the people who fought for, and cared for, the park. But the struggle for Community Park West highlights the transformative potential of caring in public. It is a story that illustrates what is possible when people get together to act on a dream. This history is especially important in the context of today's hyper-financialized and regulated city, when it can be hard to imagine implementing creative alternatives for the use of space.

This corner of land in Adams Morgan was once on the outskirts of the City of Washington. The approximately seven acres were first used by Washingtonians as a space for the dead. In 1807 local Quakers established the Friends Burying Ground, the District's first and only Quaker graveyard, on a small section. In 1870 the Colored Union Benevolent Association—founded in 1838 by a group of free Black men as the Free Young Men's Benevolent Association—purchased the adjoining, much larger lot, naming it the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery. The graveyard the group had owned at 12th and V Streets NW was closing, and they needed a new space for their dead. In 1873 they reinterred the remains at Mt. Pleasant Plains. For years the two cemeteries existed side by side, and Black Washingtonians continued to be buried at Mt. Pleasant Plains. Most of the adults buried in the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery in this era had been born into slavery and were part of a massive wave of newly freed people who moved to the nation's capital during and after the Civil War seeking work and freedom from violence. "Being buried in a cemetery of their choosing," local historian Mary Belcher explained many years later, "would have been part of their newfound freedom."[1]

By 1890 the cemeteries had reached capacity, and the District refused to issue any more burial permits. As the decade wore on, the once well-kept graveyards began to fall into neglect. Former residents of the area remembered the site in the 1920s as overgrown with weeds, littered with broken and overturned tombstones. In 1929 the western end of the tract was sold to the federal government and

Neighbors dance in Adams Morgan's Community Park West during the 1977 Latino Festival. Years of determined organizing and pressure on the DC government yielded a much-needed playground, event space, and garden on what had been a vacant lot awaiting development atop two 19th-century cemeteries. *All photographs appear ©Nancy Shia*

folded into Rock Creek Park. But the remaining section of land—4.2 acres—continued to languish, untended. Finally in 1940, the trustees of the Colored Union Benevolent Association arranged for the removal and relocation of their remains to Woodlawn Cemetery in Southeast Washington. Although only 139 of what were then estimated to be 1,500 sets of remains were located and removed, later that year, the trustees sold the land to local developers Maurice and Jacob Shapiro for $78,000, splitting the proceeds among more than 80 heirs, their attorneys, and the trustees. In 2013 a District-funded investigation would estimate that 8,428 burials had occurred in the cemeteries. As researchers were able to document "fewer than 300 formal disinterments," they concluded that "thousands of graves remain" on the site.[2]

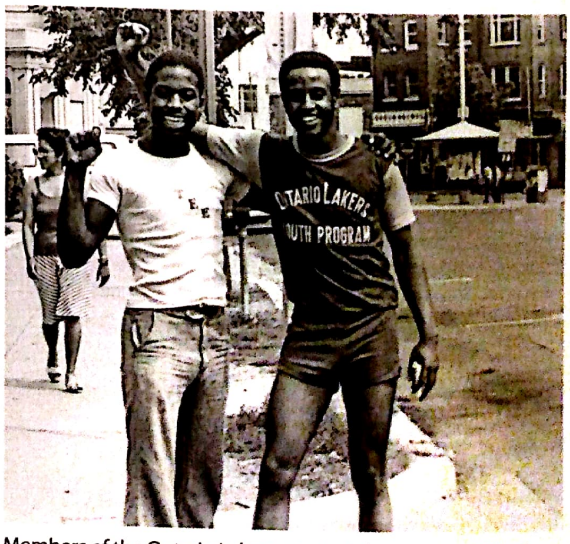
Then nothing was done with the land. The remains had been stripped out, or so it was believed, so there was no longer any history there, no past lives to visit and commemorate, to care for. Ten years went by. In 1951 the Shapiro brothers obtained permits from the DC government to build four apartment buildings there. Then another eight years went by, during which the Shapiros tried to gain possession of the small Quaker Cemetery, a parcel that was essential to their development plans. In 1959 they were finally able to purchase it from the District in a tax sale. A few months later they began excavation work in preparation for building their rental properties. But during the course of the excavation, steam shovels unearthed scores of human skulls and bones. Neighborhood kids playing near the site started collecting them and taking them home. This went on for a month. Finally, the District ordered all work to halt.[3]

In 1961 Maurice and Jacob Shapiro mortgaged the property for $250,000. The appreciation in the tract's market value over the two decades the Shapiros had held it reflects the intensity of development pressure in DC. All of a sudden, real money had been conjured from the wasteland: a space of death could, because of shifting real estate trends, now be made to generate cash. But, in real time, the land itself still sat unused, waiting. It was known, simply, as "the Shapiro Tract."[4]

Three years later, in 1964, a teenager named Walter Pierce moved with his family to the Lanier Heights section of Adams Morgan. Pierce had grown up in the District's Capitol Hill neighborhood, and, at age 16, had recently graduated from Phelps Vocational High School. His family had been forced to move after the District condemned their block. They purchased a house on Ontario Place, about a hundred feet from the Shapiro brothers' vacant lot.

When Walter Pierce arrived on the block, he found some 40 other boys—all, like him, African American—living there. He asked them what they did for fun. Nothing, they replied. So Pierce decided they should start a sports club. "We lived on Ontario [Place]," he explained years later. "The [Los Angeles] Lakers were the champions then. So we called ourselves the Ontario Lakers." The Ontario Lakers started putting together teams, basketball and softball, among others, but they needed a place to play. And their neighborhood was desperately short on play space. According to an analysis by the National Capital Planning Commission, the part of the District that included densely populated and highly diverse Adams Morgan should have had 53 acres of recreation space for its many residents; instead, it had only about ten.[5]

So the kids took matters into their own hands. As Pierce described it later, "we hacked out a small diamond on the vacant Shapiro Tract and began to play softball in the spring of 1965." The next year, young people working with Pride, Inc., the youth employment group newly founded by civil rights activist and future DC Mayor Marion Barry, cleared a much larger section of the tract, enabling the playground's use to expand. The Lakers were joined in their efforts by the Lanier Heights Association, a neighborhood group, and Charlotte Filmore, an African American woman then in her 60s who was a longtime neighborhood activist and supporter of local children. By 1966 the Shapiro Tract was being used regularly as a community-run playground. The Lakers had received



Members of the Ontario Lakers sports club pose near 18th St. and Columbia Rd., 1977.

permission from the Shapiro brothers to use the land, paying rent of a dollar a year.[6]

Over the next few years, the space blossomed, metaphorically and literally. The Lakers worked with other neighbors to establish a community garden on a slice of the land, where they grew rows and rows of flowers, pole beans, greens, beets, carrots, eggplant, peppers, cabbage, pumpkins—and, in the garden's first summer, more than 250 pounds of tomatoes. They constructed their own basketball courts. Each year Walter Pierce and the Lakers organized a tournament among basketball teams representing District recreation centers. The event, which they called the "Ghetto Tournament," was co-sponsored in at least some years by the local, DC-funded Neighborhood Planning Council. In the park the Lakers built a facility they dubbed "Ghetto Stadium," installing bleachers for spectators.[7]

The Lakers and their supporters were able to get picnic tables and trash cans installed in the lot. They borrowed lawn mowers from the nearby National Zoo to keep the grass cut. Donations from individuals (activist Frank Smith once gave $1,000 for equipment, another neighbor donated a car, and many others gave varying amounts) and businesses (for example, the General Store, on 18th Street, donated 50 pairs of pants to the Lakers every year) supported their activities. The kids, their parents, and other neighbors contributed money to buy playground equipment, and over time, the playground was built. "The slightly rusty swing set was the first play sculpture to rise atop the dust and weeds," observed one reporter. "The sliding board followed shortly. A lopsided treehouse was built nearby and not one person cared that there wasn't a tree under it. What was important was that somewhere in the midst of apartment buildings, townhouses, and city streets, Adams-Morgan had a park."[8]

The park was made and maintained by the community. "We wanted to have these things and no one gave us nothing," Pierce wrote in 1971, "so we managed to get the needed equipment and went to work doing it ourselves. . . . the children in the community really take pride in their park. You can count the paper that you see on the ground on one hand. The kids keep the park clean without having to be told, also they do a great job in taking care of our park equipment." The people who worked to help make the park came up with a name for it: Community Park West.[9]

Increasingly the park was a space for neighborhood celebrations and festivals. A Baptist church organized a fair in the park to benefit a local alcoholism center. A festival celebrated neighborhood beautification efforts. The growing Latino immigrant community organized dances. By the summer of 1974, eight adult league softball teams played in the park, as well as at least four youth league teams. As a reporter for a neighborhood newspaper, the *Columbian*, observed, "Teams exist, it seems, for nearly every age level and sex found in Adams Morgan, and games are played before appreciative spectators who, like the players, reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds found in Adams Morgan." Fifty spectators were there to witness the softball season's opening day. The park's sizable community garden contained its own worlds of organizing, conflict, and community building.[10]

Hanging out in the park, 1977. With donations from neighbors and local businesses, the community put together the basic amenities such as picnic tables and play equipment.

Families relax at the park, 1978. The painting of campaign signs like this one for Councilmember David Clarke was a neighborhood tradition.

The park was a space of recreation, and also of politics. Three candidates for the Ward 1 seat on the DC Council (including David Clarke, who ultimately won) took turns throwing out the first pitch at the adult softball league's opening day in June 1974. Homemade campaign signs for local candidates were posted in the park. Elections for the Adams Morgan Organization, formed by residents in 1972 to serve as a neighborhood governing council, were held in the park. Walter Pierce himself, ever the activist, was an early chair of this experiment in small-scale democracy. As the AMO gained organizing power in the neighborhood, it became a key player in the park's story.[11]

The people of the neighborhood had taken a privately held tract of vacant land and created a commons: a space open to a wide variety of uses, cared for by those who used it, and open to all. The project, "born of initiative and interest provided largely by the Ontario Lakers and their originator Walter Pierce," observed the *Columbian*, was a testament to "what citizens can do independent of government hand-outs, gentrification, and inefficiency." Residents did this on their own initiative, born of their very real need for space to gather and play, to recreate. They were responding, as the *Columbian* noted, to both economic and political threats. In the early 1970s, gentrification was an issue of increasing concern in the District, and the park users were well aware of the pressures real estate development was putting on the land. But the District government, with its "inefficiency" and maligned "government handouts," offered little help. While the Shapiros waited for future development opportunities for the tract, neighbors put the land to immediate use in the present. Through building the park together, they built relationships with each other: relationships across generations, race, and class.[12]

Eventually, though, the park's commoners realized they needed the government in order to hang onto this space they had created. At one point in the 1960s, the neighbors asked the Shapiro brothers to donate the land to create a permanent park, but they refused. In 1972 Walter Pierce ended a brief report on the park with a wish: "One day we hope someone could perhaps purchase this piece of property so we can have a permanent park that will be here for ever. We are short of land here in this community for our growing children and nothing is being done about it."[13]

For some years, in fact, neighbors had had the idea that the District should purchase the land from the Shapiros and make it a public park in perpetuity. By 1973 this idea was being more seriously considered, and the Adams Morgan Organization lobbied hard for the project. Walter Pierce and fellow AMO representatives John Jones and Steve Klein testified before the DC Council in support. "The people of the community made this a park," Pierce told the Council. "Now we are waiting to see how the government will respond. It is always talking about self-reliance. We're obviously self-reliant. We've demonstrated that."[14]

Walter Pierce, photographed in 1982 outside the District Building (today's John A. Wilson Building), lobbied tenaciously for his community's playground.

In response, in 1974 and again in 1975, the District sought congressional permission to allocate $2 million in its budget to purchase the tract; it was not until the summer of 1976 that Congress finally agreed. But by the spring of 1977, the Shapiros had signed a contract to sell the land to the Holladay Corporation for the development of 156 townhouses. Their asking prices of $65,000 to $100,000 were in line with average District prices—but far beyond affordability for many Adams Morgan residents. Mayor Walter Washington told the DC Council he would offer the Shapiros $2 million for the property—reportedly matching the Holladay Corporation's bid. But in early 1978, the District's offer was still in limbo, held up by further delays in the convoluted District-federal budget process.[15] And time was running out: the sale of the tract from the Shapiros to the Holladay Corporation was to become final on March 30.

The thought of development on the tract made Walter Pierce ill. "I looked at those plans," he told

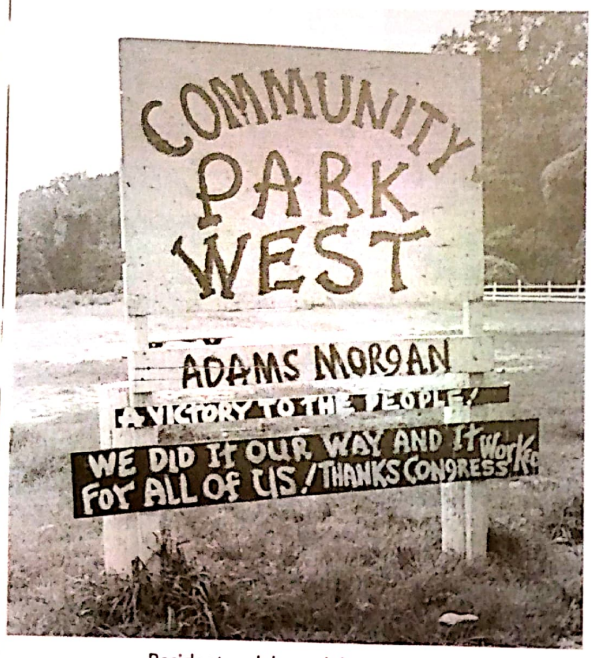
Musicians of Maria Rodriguez y Sus Magnificos perform on the Ontario Lakers stage in Community Park West, 1977. At the time activists were pushing the city government to secure the park from development.

a reporter, "and it was like seeing the body of my best friend lying there." Steve Klein expressed his sense of urgency: "I feel that [keeping the park] may be one last chance for Adams Morgan to avoid a lot of deep-seated racial problems. We may get into a situation like the Southwest area with barriers between low- and high-income people." Former SNCC activist Frank Smith, another AMO leader, who would soon be elected to the DC Council, said, "I think that the struggle to save the Shapiro Tract is representative of the spirit of Adams Morgan. It's had volunteer participation from all ages and racial groups. If we lose the park it'll diminish our spirit of struggle." A park clean-up, organized by the Ontario Lakers and other community groups, was scheduled for a Saturday late in March, in what a reporter noted "may be one of the neighborhood's last festivals on the Shapiro Tract/Community Park West." Uncertainty ran high.[16]

Three days after the clean-up, Congress finally released the funds, and the District immediately offered the Shapiros $1.6 million, the land's appraised value. If the Shapiros rejected the offer, Mayor Washington declared at a press conference, the District would file a condemnation suit to enable it to immediately acquire the land, letting a court set the final price. And the Shapiros did reject the District offer. So late in the day on March 30, the day the Shapiros' sale to the Holladay Corporation was due to become final, DC Corporation Counsel filed a formal declaration of taking in Superior Court.

The community had won. This tract of land, so long held with its eventual financial appreciation in mind, had finally formally become public space owned by the District, thanks to relentless organizing by the people who had transformed it into a park.[17]

A few weeks after the District seized the land, about 150 people gathered in Community Park West for a victory celebration. Vendors sold hot-dogs and Community Park West t-shirts. Games, rummage sales, plant sales, and raffles dotted the park. Several people worked on a mural sponsored by El Centro de Arte, a local arts group founded by Latin American immigrants. People played horseshoes and listened to Latin and folk music, and kids swung on the swings. Maria and Fernando Jimenez sold Ecuadoran dinners of fritada, salad, corn, and fried bananas for $2.50. "We heard of the festival and my mother wanted to sell food to help," their daughter Yolanda explained to a *Washington Post* reporter. Residents signed up for community garden plots in the park. Members of the Mintwood Tenants Association sponsored a game called "Help the People Knock the Speculators." "For 25 cents," reported the *Post*, "players got an opportunity to



Residents celebrated the District's taking of the Shapiro tract for permanent use as a community park with this victory sign, 1978.

Mayor Marion Barry speaks at the groundbreaking ceremony and community blessing in 1982. Seated in the front row from left are Ward 1 Councilmember David Clarke, Recreation Department Deputy Director Alexis Roberson, Adams Morgan Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Frank Smith, and Ontario Lakers founder and organizer Walter Pierce.

knock over a stack of beer cans that were labeled with the names of local real estate developers." A local group sponsored a booth to provide information on tenants' struggles, unemployment, eviction, and other issues of concern. Another group set up a booth to help people think about how to plan a renovation of the park. Neighbors were looking to the future of a permanently public park.[18]

In 1981 the DC Council passed a resolution formally naming the park "Community Park West." The following year, the District renovated the park based on plans that had been put together with substantial community input. A groundbreaking ceremony and community blessing of the park took place that year.[19]

Walter Pierce, the seemingly indefatigable organizer, died in 1991 at the age of 45. He was certainly not the only person who made the park happen. It had been a collective endeavor of many neighbors and supporters. But he was uniquely identified with it, and in 1995 the park was renamed in his honor.[20]

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s, the park continued to be used for all sorts of community purposes, including festivals, games, gardening, pick-up soccer, and general hanging out. In recent years, park activism has focused on ensuring appropriate commemoration of the site's Quaker Burying Ground and Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery, and of the graves that lie beneath the park.

Neighbors have not always agreed on how this precious piece of open space in a densely packed urban neighborhood should be used. The decades since the land formally became a public space have been marked by contestation and debate as well as by joy and fellowship. The story of the park in the years since the battle for the park was won has been the story of how people have come together—or not—to care for, argue over, and use this space.

Today the permanently public space called Walter Pierce Park still occupies its corner of the Adams Morgan neighborhood. But the neighborhood around it has changed dramatically.[21]

As early as 1975, neighborhood activists were worried that their phenomenal acts of public care would ultimately stoke rising property values, potentially driving from the neighborhood the very people who had worked so hard to make it such an attractive place to live. That year John Jones, the AMO's acting executive director, testified before the DC Council in support of changes in tax policy aimed at curbing land speculation in the District. Jones reminded the Council that Adams Morgan was a community success story, "applauded and held in wonderment by politicians, studied by academics, found fascinating by tourists. Everyone references our attitude, energy, progress, creativity, genius and wisdom." The question now, suggested Jones, was whether the community's success would benefit communi-

ty residents. "Each week," he reported, as "we watch more of our families evicted and thrown from their homes, we wonder if we did the right thing. Perhaps we should never have built and made visible our unique identity. Maybe we should not have cleaned our streets, built and fought for a park, . . . educated our children about our specialness . . . or raised our AMO flag flying 'Unity in Diversity.'"[22]

It was precisely because working people came together to improve the neighborhood, he argued, that it was increasingly difficult for them to afford to live there. "We exhibit collective concern about our community," Jones told the Council, "only to become victims of our efforts." Adams Morgan residents became victims, he continued, "ONLY because our economic fortunes haven't been as rewarding as others. Racism we all know has kept us from jobs or in those low-level ones. It is racism too, in its veiled, sophisticated form that is a virulent part of speculation."[23]

Land speculation and racism, Jones pointed out, are interlocked. A solution, Jones and others believed, lay in changing District policy to disincentivize real estate speculation. The Adams Morgan Organization, together with other groups across the city that organized around housing issues, supported a measure that would tax up to 70 percent of the profits earned through speculating in DC real estate. Although the anti-speculation tax was implemented in 1978, it was difficult to enforce, and the Council allowed it to expire in 1981. It did little to stop speculation and rising property values.[24]

More than 40 years after Jones testified, his fears have largely been realized. Low-income tenants in several of the buildings bordering the park lost their fights to keep rents low and prevent condominium conversion. Their buildings are now high-priced co-ops and condos. The Pierces' block, which in 1970 was 53 percent Black, had become just 11 percent Black by 2010. Neighborhood incomes have increased dramatically. The field in Walter Pierce Park where generations played pick-up soccer and held community dances and festivals has been fenced and locked off. Today a permit from the District is required to play there. The western end of the park has been converted into a dog park. Though the park is still used and beloved by neighborhood residents, it's much rarer to see Black teenagers in it today.[25]

What happens when collectives of people concentrate so much energy in a single urban space, be it a park, a community garden, or a neighborhood? In the case of Community Park West, the land itself was saved for public use. But the surrounding neighborhood is no longer a home for most of the people who fought for, and cared for, the park. Without a structural change in land ownership more broadly, this kind of caring may always, ultimately, feed into rising real estate values.

Still, long-term relationships built through ongoing acts of care can be the seed for future demands and future transformations of urban space. Making known the histories of actual acts of freeing land for collective use and dreams—like the history of the victory of Community Park West—is an important step. After all, this time the people really did beat the speculators. The question is how we use this history to inspire and demand more fundamental change in how urban land is envisioned and used.

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Photographer and activist Nancy Shia has documented DC's communities and events since 1972.

A year after the District upgraded Community Park West, two happy bike riders enjoy the space, 1983.

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