

COMMENTARY

# David McGrath: On the cusp of turning 13, I learned that America is the land of the free only for some

By David McGrath  
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America, land of the free.\*

But why the asterisk? I learned the reason at the end of seventh grade.

It was a summer evening in Evergreen Park, so I could stay out till dark, which didn't fully descend till 10 p.m. A month shy of my 13th birthday in 1962, I had already tasted freedom. I could go where I wished, as far from home as I dared. I decided to walk a mile to the baseball stadium at 90th Street and California Avenue where my younger brother Net, short for Kenneth, was playing for the Indians in a game against a team named the White Sox.

I never made the cut for Little League. I was good only at hockey and caught only one of the fly balls hit to me during baseball tryouts. Wary of the hardball, I would step aside and stab at it with my Wilson mitt.

Net could really hit, though, and I stood behind the chain-link fence along the third base line, feeling like a big shot watching my little brother, his baseball pants tucked into his high stirrup socks and the bill of his dark green cap bent just so.

The ball field had lights like Comiskey Park and a concession stand selling hot tamales and frozen custard.



Norris Field at 90th Street and California Avenue in Evergreen Park, formerly the Evergreen Park Athletic Association baseball stadium. (Jack Gutsell)

Grown-ups sat on the bleachers behind home plate. Kids clustered everywhere. Some stood on the benches behind their parents. Others around the food counter. Three “runners,” hands over their heads against the fence, waited to chase balls fouled off into the parking lot.

Some girls from St. Bernadette’s were gathered behind the Sox dugout, one with long black hair. Though I couldn’t see her face well from across the field, it had to be Janice.

Net, antsy to swing, wiggled the bat over his right shoulder. The first pitch skidded in the dirt in front of home plate. The left-handed pitcher aimed a strike with the next one, and Net swiveled his hips before stepping forward and smashing a deep line drive. The center fielder angled back to fetch it, and Net slid headfirst into second. Safe.

He was all business, calling time to dust himself off, not looking over when I clapped and whistled. But he knew my whistle.

Between innings, when I went to the concession for a beef tamale and cherry cola, Janice was standing by herself looking up at the white wooden menu. I had never talked to her, though she sat just two desks over in my class.

I could do it now, with no one else around. Should I? I had even brought money I'd been saving for a guitar. Loose change in my pocket, and a thin stack of bills sorted by ones, fives, and a 10 in my wallet. Money from painting my grandparents' house and a raise in allowance for my last report card. I could buy anything she wanted.

In school, Janice wore the uniform blue jumper and white blouse like the rest, but stood out for her sly smile and shining black hair. Tonight, though, I was stunned. Red shorts and long, tan legs. Like an angel in a glowing force field I dare not approach.

Better to wait till next time. I detoured around the concession stand and headed into the night. Beyond the lights of the stadium, stars saturated the sky. A chilly breeze smelled like adventure.

Skipping, floating above the sidewalk along California, I dreamed some day of skating like the Blackhawks' Bobby Hull. Or playing the guitar like Elvis, Janice waving from the audience. Or writing stories like Mark Twain. Steaming down the Mississippi in a paddleboat. Stopping with her for a picnic lunch. And some fishing.

I jumped high to pluck a green apple from an overhanging bough but came away with just a leaf. In a few years, once I'd grown, there'd be nothing I couldn't do.

Crossing at the light, I saw another boy, as thin as a blade of grass, walking past Rosangela's Pizza and carrying a white paper bag. And then this shout fractured the night:

*"Whaddya doing here?"* Followed up by a racist slur.

A man in front of Sherwood's drive-in restaurant pointed his cigarette in our direction, his other hand on his hip. The boy looked, turned and hastened his step. The man came running, and I was afraid. And then I felt guilty, knowing he was not after me.

As he got close, I recognized the white shirt and rolled up sleeves of a neighborhood tough. A troublemaker the age of my older brother.

He pulled up, panting, his engineer boots no match for the fleet-footed boy who must have been halfway to the bus stop at Western Avenue. The tough returned with purpose to the drive-in, so he and two others could renew the chase in a huffing black Ford.

I had few opinions at 13. Just the hope that the boy made it back safe to a world different from mine. A world less free in so many ways I put off thinking about, but which we all would never escape.

This July Fourth, Sherwood's is long gone, and Rosangela's has expanded. And we celebrate the fact that a similar incident is unlikely to happen today in Evergreen Park and most other places I know.

Still, we're reminded by a profusion of modern-day racial crimes, from Citrus Springs, Florida, and Minneapolis to Brunswick, Georgia, and Brookhaven, Mississippi, that the story of American freedom requires the same asterisk in 2023 that it did in 1962.

*David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage and author of "South Siders." He can be reached at [mcgrathd@dupage.edu](mailto:mcgrathd@dupage.edu).*