

1320

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Sunday, October 28, 2007

Subject: Halloween party in Wilson Garden

Location: 122nd st between Douglass and Powell

Time: 4:00-5:30pm

The party started at 3:30, but I didn't arrive until 4pm. By the time I arrived there were at least 20 children there. The front gate of the garden was decorated with pumpkins and a banner (skulls?). I later took a picture of some of the decorations, after Haja had taken some down.

514

The street was much emptier today than yesterday.

84P

As I walked in a mom was on her way out, followed reluctantly by 2 children, about 5 and 10 years old. I passed below a plastic skull hanging from the structure in the front of the garden, and a banner. To the right on the east side of the garden a small table was set up as the face-painting station. Two young women, one white and one café-au-lait, were working on a few children there. Cindy hung out of the shed. Haja stood by the fire pit on the west side of the garden, where a young white man was tending a fire and helping children roast marshmallows. Another white woman, probably in her 30s, was helping children with a "pit the head on the witch" game. She was wearing a gold-colored cardboard crown. The green table was set up with Xeroxes of Halloween-themed activities, such as connect-the-dots and mazes with pumpkins, cats, and so on.

105P

Almost all of the parents and children were black, some with West Indian accents, except for one man with two white boys, and later, a white woman and her son. The children ranged in age from babies to teenagers, most in the 6-10 age range. One young lady, who appeared in her teens, sullenly asked a young girl who looked about five if she was ready to go. She little girl whined, "Noooooo!" [There clearly was a right answer, and that was not it.] The children appeared to be having a good time, wandering around from station to station, eating gooey marshmallows and candy. Most of the adults appeared bored, waiting for the time when they could leave. When I arrived very few were speaking with one another. Many of the adults wore jeans and sweatshirts, or other casual wear. One adorable toddler wore Minnie Mouse ears, a red skirt, and yellow pumps with bows. Another toddler wore a rooster costume, with a red comb.

There was a run on the shed when Cindy began handing out bags of candy. The bags were plastic party bags, printed with Halloween designs, orange and black and green and purple. [I didn't get a close look at the bags.] A girl standing next to me pulled out a school kit from her bag, which had pink and purple glittery pencils, and what I think was a small notebook. She seemed pleased. I asked her what else was in the bag, and she showed me lots of candy. She pulled out some M&M's and answered to my question that Kit-Kats were her favorite. The older child (around 13), perhaps her sister, got her attention. I moved to another group of children, three who also seemed to be siblings. The youngest, about 3 or 4, opened her bag to show me a book. The middle child, maybe 5, showed me his tiger face painting and growled, crouching on the ground like a tiger. The

1321

oldest child, maybe 10 or 12, said something to me without turning his body toward me, like he was ambivalent about me talking with his charges, and with him. A lot of the children left soon after the candy was handed out. With the sun going down, it was getting colder quickly, and many of the adults and children weren't dressed for the cold.

I greeted parents but didn't talk with many of them. Most did not talk to one another. Some of them greeted some of the helpers, but did not get into conversation with them either. [Apparent gulf between new and old Harlem? Would like to see who shows up to block association meetings.] One mom who came in did know others. She started telling a couple about being hung over from last night, when she went to some place. "You went gambling?" She went to an adult costume party. She said that a black man dressed as Beetlejuice won, and that she was cheering him. Other than that, most adults came in and sat quietly, coaxing or occasionally yelling at their charges. I spoke with one young blond woman in a gray Columbia sweatshirt, Lucy, who asked me if I knew about what was going on with the garden. I asked her, and she asked Haja, who was standing at the fire. He said that there was a possibility of a swap. She told me that a developer wanted to develop the garden. She relayed the possibility of the swap. Her companion, a blond man who looked even younger than her, did not speak much.

As people thinned out Haja told me to speak with Cindy. Cindy had run out of Halloween bags, and stood inside the shed with only Haja for company. I joined them, and chatted with Cindy about how much the kids seemed to be enjoying themselves. I asked her if she put the flyers up on other blocks, and she said 123rd, 121st, 120th, about 3 blocks. I said that must have been a lot of work, and she said she made the flyers yesterday and a young man helped to put them up. Later she took one of those flyers, tape still stuck on either end, and told us (me, the Latina woman, and the white treasurer of the block association) that she forgot to save one for herself. [Do they keep an archive of their materials?]

As the children gathered around the pond Cindy and I chatted about the turtles. She said that they aren't active on a cold day like this. I said there must only be a few hours of sun. She said that the summer gets a lot of sun. I ask what happens to the pond over the winter. She tells me that they are tropical turtles. "They were gifted to us, by a student." So last winter they tried to take them out of the pond [and bring them inside?]. She tells me that they found one of the turtles, who have Arabic names that I can't remember. The other turtle maybe buried down or was out in the garden. When the pond froze they thought she was lost. They had a pipe going to the bottom to help gases escape; she said that it's the gases that kill the animals in the pond. [apparently the pond doesn't freeze solid] But in April, the turtle came out and acted happy to see them, "like, where were you all winter?"

Throughout the party Cindy took pictures of individual children, having them come up to the shed and posing. At one point she lamented that her battery ran out. I told her I had a camera, didn't want to take pictures since people didn't know me. She said it was ok, but I gave her the camera to use. After she handed it back I took a few pictures of the front gate, some decorations, and the last kids getting their faces painted.

1322

I also got to talk with each of the helpers, all of whom lived in the area, after most of the children left. Of the two women doing face painting, the white one was a friend of Jubal's, the guy at the fire pit and with a professional-looking camera. She looked quite young, was thin with brown hair. She was dressed smartly in a nubby light gray wool skirt and blazer. The café-au-lait woman also looked quite polished, in creams and beiges with a beautiful gold scarf. I later found out from Cindy that she was a teacher in the Bronx. The white one has done face painting before, at other parties, and had taken some painting classes in college. She joked about the classes coming in handy. The woman in the crown, I can't remember her name, turned out to be treasurer of the block association. I asked if I could come and gave her my card. A woman with black hair who spoke with a slight accent [Latin? But not Puerto Rican or Dominican, I don't think] was also at the party. Jubal, the photographer, just moved to the neighborhood in July and has planted some trees in the garden [repeated by Cindy and the Latin woman]. Billy, his roommate, showed up late. He is an undergrad at Columbia and we spent some time talking about the threats against gardens, Columbia's expansion in West Harlem, and his neighbor, Patrick, who wrote a book about the history of the block. I gave him my card as well. He told me Jubal went to Julliard and is a dancer. Many of the helpers picked up candy wrappers and other litter throughout the afternoon, made themselves useful by helping kids clean hands and faces of marshmallow goop and unwanted face paint.

The adults staying the latest included a couple with two boys. The couple was well-dressed but not expensively dressed, and had accents. I couldn't tell what the accent was. Their children did not have accents. The two boys went to get their faces painted. When one finished, he had a skull painted onto his face: white covering almost all of his face, with round black eye sockets and a row of vertical lines for teeth. His mother later said, laughing, "That looks funny!" [Where are they from, do they do Halloween there, or is she simply laughing at the painted face?]

Another adult who stayed late was a large light-skinned black woman who was there with at least one child, Amani, who was wearing a bright pink ski jacket. Cindy spoke affectionately about Amani, impersonating her as always asking questions: what, why, is the garden open. Amani was very young, probably about 3 years old. The woman seemed to know several of the white helpers, including Jubal and the woman on the block association. Later another white woman comes in with a boy about 7 yo. She looks expensively dressed, with expensive looking hair—nice cut, smooth with no flyaways like a commercial. The white woman said to the large black woman, "I remember you from the Christmas party." [ten months ago?! Or a half-Christmas party in July?]

Towards the end of the party the kids clustered in one place at a time, rather than being scattered throughout the various centers. At one point, they were all roasting marshmallows. At another point, when I was talking with Cindy, they all gathered around the pond. At the end, they all clustered around the face painters. [it was during one of their dry spells that I spoke briefly with them]

Probably around 5pm Haja announced that it was time to wrap it up. He started taking the decorations down from the gate, as the Treasurer took down one of the banners hanging

1323

in the garden. As Haja brought the decorations inside I ran out to take pictures of the remaining decorations on the gate. When we came back out to take off the rest of the decorations I followed to help. He stood back to allow me to take a picture before I told him I had already taken them. The decorations were thin plastic pumpkins decorated with ghosts; a happy Halloween sign; and a witch. They were attached to the gate by wire. As Haja and I took the decorations down he asked me what I would do with my findings. I told him that as he knew there was a lot of funding cut for educational programs, that it's mostly foundations funding out of school programs. I told him we want to encourage funding for educational programs especially and to argue for the worth of such efforts. I said for the larger picture we want to broaden the concept of education particularly to include what people are already doing. This got him talking about the presumption [my word] of people telling others what to do. He said something like, "How can we tell Iran to get rid of nuclear weapons? Are we going to get rid of ours?" He then started talking about Ann Coulter, who can call somebody a faggot.

Inside the garden the Treasurer was collecting plastic cups. Haja and Jubal put out the fire. A new person came in with lots of cat food. I helped her to put the cans inside the shed. She also prepared dried food for the cats. I did not see where the food trays were. I said my goodbyes, then got into a conversation with Billy and Jubal. [Billy had just arrived] Billy looked young, in his early twenties. One of them asked me if I lived in the neighborhood, and I said nearby, near Columbia. Somebody asked if I was a student or teaching. I said I was teaching, and I started talking about my research.

Jubal, Billy and I started talking about community gardens. I talked about the diversity of gardens. They asked about preservation and I talked about the Land Trust vs. developers vs. city land, with the caveat that I didn't know the details yet. Jubal was called to help with something, so I spoke with Billy a little longer. When I mentioned that Cindy had started the garden when the neighborhood was a lot different, he mentioned that one of his neighbors had written a book on how the neighborhood has changed over the decades. Patrick, the neighbor, apparently moved to the neighborhood when he was a child (eight?). I was quite interested, and he said I could probably knock on his door. I asked Billy if he saw his neighbor regularly, and he said he did. I asked him if I could give him a card, and if he could ask his neighbor if he'd be interested in talking with me. He said he'd give him my card. I asked him what he was studying at Columbia, and he said, oh, I'm an undergrad, and went back to talking about our previous topic (gardens?). I asked if Jubal was also a student and he said he had graduated from Julliard, was a dancer.