

# A Place to Play

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STANDING IN FRONT OF THE VOLUNTEERS' MAILBOX in the Monrovia, California, police station, I read the complaint letters in my hand. One is to the mayor of our city of thirty-six thousand. Citizens had written protests saying, "Small children from another neighborhood are playing on our front lawns. They keep coming back. Please do something about it." A note clipped to the letters says, "Give to Ralph."

I wonder, *Shouldn't this case go to Juvenile? I don't work with children. Gang members, yes. But not little kids.*

I call Mrs. Salazar, one of the letter-writers. "My name's Ralph. I'm a volunteer with the City Police Department, calling about your letter to Mayor Bartlett. May I visit you this morning to discuss your problem?"

"Yes, please do."

SESMAS STREET DEAD-ENDS AT AN APARTMENT COMPLEX. Her attractive house is on a short cul-de-sac branching off Sesmas.

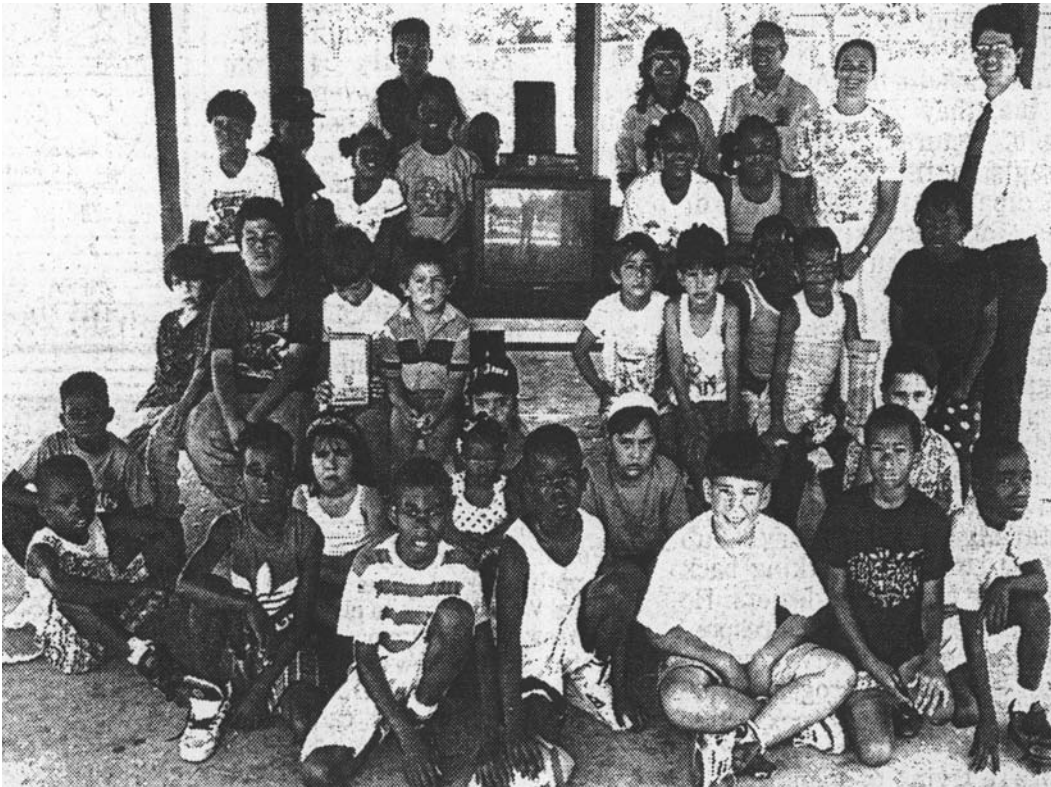
Mrs. Salazar speaks kindly, "The children come from the apartments down the street and romp about on our lawns. They look to be from four to ten or twelve years old, some barefoot. They need a place to play. They run off when I open my door."

I suggest, "We need to have a meeting between the children's parents and you homeowners. I'll call you."

"I'll help from this end."

BENEATH A STEEL STAIRCASE four children play on the concrete. The street dead-ends a car-length from the stairs.

The kids are obviously untended. Three wall-to-wall buildings have six units each, three up, three down, eighteen units. I look around for trees or grass. None. Not even any dirt. All concrete.



The growing family of children in the Neighborhood Recreation Program at Julian Fisher Park in Monrovia, California, was featured in the *Pasadena Star News*, August 15, 1992.

The mailbox panel tells me the manager is in Unit 4. The steel stairs ring like a dull bell beneath my feet.

“Yes, my wife and I manage the apartments.”

I explain the problem and ask, “How many kids live here?”

“Maybe twenty or so. Some run loose. What can I do? Nothing.”

“Will you come to a neighborhood meeting to talk about the problem?”

“Sure. Where?”

He’s cooperative. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

I need the tenants at the meeting, but they can’t be invited by the police department. There may be a few real losers here, maybe even guys on parole. “Will you notify all your tenants that they’re invited by Monrovia Neighborhood Watch?”

“Okay.”

Six homeowners show up with lawn chairs. The apartment managers and one parent come over with blankets. It’s a bust.

The next morning I ask the manager, “May I have a list of your tenants and the number of children in each unit?”

With the list in hand I knock on doors and interview a dozen adults to ask if any kids are signed up for summer events. After an hour on the premises I realize there is little parental concern. I see bumps on this road.

There's a monitored park a mile from Sesmas Street. I learn there are children's activities, free lunch, and Friday bus trips to places like museums and Disneyland.

I check out the fenced park. Kids. Green grass. Swings. Counselors. Everything. Lunch tables are grouped neatly in the shade beneath a large roofed area.

A slim black girl, about eighteen, a whistle on a cord around her neck, sees my approaching clipboard and meets me with a smile at the open gate.

"I know you, Ralph," she says with a strong, sweet voice. "My mom's Block Captain on Los Angeles Street. My name's Edison."

"Hi. I've seen you at the meetings. Who should I talk to here about bringing a new batch of kids in?"

"Me."

She's able, smart, attractive. I feel a spark of hope. "Do you have room for more kids?"

"Lots."

"Tell me what I need to do."

"You'll need a medical waiver filled out and signed by the parent. I'll show you one. Then bring the signed forms to me with your 'batch of kids'."

"Edison, you're a sweetheart."

"We'll take them tomorrow."

I wangle two dozen blank waiver forms from the clerks at Community Service, fifteen in Spanish. I go straight to the apartment manager with the forms and ask for help. He hands them out to his renters. Nothing comes back. Another bump on the road.

I type a short explanation in simple words about the park, the lunch, the counselors, and the Friday trips, then run off eighteen copies. The manager hands them out. The next day there are four sign-ups.

A day later there are a dozen forms all filled out. The kids on the concrete surround me with eager faces. But the parents are not able to transport their children.

I call Community Service. "We're ready to take twelve kids from Sesmas Street to the park. Can you arrange transportation?"

"Sorry, Ralph. No money. We can't help you."

Same with Parks and Recreation.

There's a small inner-city transit line. I call them. "Yes, we can do it. But you need a state-licensed person riding on the bus with the children."

Finding a ride for the kids is a major bump on the road. Dismayed, I go back to the park.

"Where are your kids, Ralph?" Edison asks.

“Here are the signed forms. The kids are ready, but I can’t get them delivered here. It’s frustrating.”

“That’s a shame.” She takes a long look at my Trooper suburban parked nearby.

She’s a very smart young lady, this Edison. She’s knows a volunteer when she sees one. I yield. “They’ll be here in the morning.”

Three sit in the front with me, five in the back seat, and six in the rear, fourteen in all. They spill out at the park with squeals, running across the grass like water escaping a burst barricade.

“I’ll pick them up at four, Edison, and deliver them again tomorrow.”

THE NEXT MORNING I turn onto Sesmas to see a flood of children run from the concrete toward the car, filling the street with their flashing forms and excited cries. Quite a sight. More sign-ups are coming. Nothing should stop this.

Transportation is a major problem, one I’m not equipped to deal with. One expert problem-solver I haven’t seen yet is the City Manager. I send a fax.

That does it! Like magic. The kids are taken care of.

Some days later I enter the station on my way to Crime Prevention when the officers and clerks, to my astonishment, applaud my passage.

“What’s going on?” I ask a sergeant in the protection of the division office.

“Your idea to bus kids to parks this summer really took off.”

That gives me a warm feeling. Each little challenge had been met and overcome. “I wonder how many there are now. We had fourteen kids on my last trip.”

“Ha, you’d better catch up. There are over four thousand kids in Los Angeles County entering your program in hundreds of parks. You are definitely Big-Daddy around here.”

I think of the complaint letters about the Sesmas Street kids and Mrs. Salazar’s comment, “They need a place to play.”

It was really her idea.

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Known as “Ralph” to several thousand Neighborhood Watch members, he served for nine years as a volunteer with the Monrovia Police Department Community Policing Division while receiving commendations from city, county, state, and U.S. Congressional offices. RALPH EMERSON PRAY holds degrees from the University of Alaska and the Colorado School of Mines and has traveled widely in his work in mineral-property evaluations. Dr. Pray has taught engineering at the university level and has been writing for publication for fifty years.