

KENNY FROM THE BLOCK

Q: So let's talk a little bit about what you remember about New York and the Bronx?

QUINN: I have very intense memories of the Bronx.

Q: Well, let's talk about it. I assume you lived in an apartment --

QUINN: No, we lived in a single-family house. The address was 2965 Decatur Avenue. We were on the ground floor and there were boarders upstairs. There was a young man who was in law school at Fordham named Johnny Conroy. My Dad's sister Eileen and her husband Joe Gerz lived in one of the other rooms. There was a third room with another boarder, but I don't remember the name. Our family rented the bottom floor with two bedrooms and a living room and kitchen. I have very, very vivid memories. I can still tell you the names of all the kids on the block and the location of many of the stores

Q: Well, what sort of a neighborhood was it?

QUINN: It was a very diverse neighborhood, almost like out of a movie about immediate post-war New York. Kids were playing on the sidewalks and big events were the arrival of the Good Humor all white ice cream truck. The driver, all dressed in white, with a change dispenser on his belt would dispense ice cream bars or popsicles from the ice cold compartment on the back of his truck. Other interesting events that attracted kids to watch included the coal truck that would connect a chute to a basement window of our house and send in a load of coal; and the ice truck, from which deliverymen would carry large blocks into your home to be placed in your ice box, if you did not yet have a refrigerator. Horse drawn vegetable carts were another memorable draw, as were wandering itinerant knife and scissor sharpeners. They would stand in the court yard chanting loudly that they were there, so house wives would bring down utensils to be honed on their stone.

It was ethnically a very mixed neighborhood. There were Irish, Italians, Germans, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. Everyone seemed to get along. Later I will tell you a wonderful story of going back there 50 years later in 1999 with my own family, but I don't want to get ahead of things

Q: Well, was the neighborhood a safe neighborhood or were there no-go areas or --

QUINN: No. It was safe. There were legends about tough kids on other blocks. The street you lived on was kind of your identity. This part of my biography might be called

“Kenny from the Block.” We were from Decatur Avenue. We believed that if we ran into kids from Marion Avenue, they might be toughs whom we had to fight. But we also heard that there were other kids from Decatur Avenue down near 198th Street, who would back us up, just because we had the same street identity. At least, this was the legend. Of course nothing like this ever happened. It was safe. There was no crime. There was no fear of going anyplace. It was a solid, lower middle class, working neighborhood: A true melting pot.

Q: Before we move to school, but what kind of games would you play?

QUINN: Versions of baseball were king, using pink rubber balls that you bought at Sid’s Candy Store [the neighborhood “cultural center”] just around the corner on 200th Street. Stickball, which was played in the middle of Decatur Avenue, was huge. It required about four players on a side. If there were only two or three boys, then stoopball was the game of choice. This was played by the “batter” throwing the ball against the sharp edge of the bottom building block of an apartment building, or the edge of one of the steps leading up to the entry way [the stoop] of the porch on a single family house.

Q: Mm-hmm.

QUINN: You would use a rubber ball and you would try to bounce it exactly off the pointed edge of the building’s bottom block, so it would sail far into the air. The other boys were out there playing fielder trying to catch it in the air or on the ground, in which case you were out. But, if you could aim it just right, it could fly over their heads. That would be a home run. So stoopball, stickball, and then we would play another baseball linked game called “rundown.” This was played on a little dirt strip along the front of my house. It approximated a baseball runner caught between two bases. There are two boys who have the ball throwing it back and forth. The one other kid—the runner— would be in the middle. You would throw the ball back and forth trying to tag him out before he got safely to the other base.

Hide and seek was huge. Ring-a-levio was big.

Q: Ring-a-levio I don’t know that.

QUINN: Ring-a-levio is like Capture the Flag. There were two teams. You went out to capture people from the other team. You did this by putting your arms around them and saying, “Ring-a-levio, Ring-a-levio, Ring-a-levio.” Or you said “Ring-a-levio one, two, three.” And then you took them to your jail.

Q: So they were out of the game?

QUINN: Yes, they were out of the game, unless someone from their team could sneak into the jail and call “Alley, Alley Outs in free” or something like that. Then they could escape and hide again. If the other team could seize your flag, the game was over. It could go on for a long time until it was dark.

We had another game -- the test of manhood -- which was doing the Commando Course. This was right after World War II, so there was a military flavor to some games. The Commando Course consisted of climbing over fences and up telephone poles and over various obstacles that divided the properties that backed up to each other. There were no alleys between blocks. So the properties from Decatur Avenue backed onto the properties from Marion Avenue. So you would be climbing over this fence and then you would go up over a garage roof and then jump down and crawl under a fence. It ran like that for the entire block. That was the Commando Course. It was the ultimate test!

Q: Were girls part of the game?

QUINN: No. Girls -- well there were a lot of girls, and they had their girls' games, like hopscotch and jump rope and things like that. But there were a few times when you might play with the girls, if there weren't enough boys around. So I remember playing Red Rover: This was two lines of kids facing each other holding hands to create a fence. Then one side would issue a challenge by saying “Red Rover, Red Rover, let Kenny come over.” And then I would run as fast as I could and try to break through their linked hands. If you succeeded, you brought one of their team back to your side. But if they held, then you had to become part of their team. Some of the older girls were bigger and stronger and it could be hard to break through their arms.

Q: Yeah.

QUINN: There was another game called soap-box racing or wagon racing. 200th Street was the main street going up the hill from Webster Avenue to the Grand Concourse. So you could take your little red wagon or home-made soap box cart up to Marion Avenue and then race them down the hill on the sidewalk of 200th Street, turning onto Decatur Avenue at high speed at the finish. It was terrific fun.

Q: How about the city?