
July 29, 2007
THE ISLAND

A Life Molded in Great Neck, Cut Off

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

GREAT NECK

SADLY, the news of a young black man gunned down in a housing project is not so unusual. But how about when it is a Long Island housing project, and in Great Neck, no less?

That's what happened around 1 a.m. on July 12, when Marcus Randle, 24, died in a hail of bullets outside the Spinney Hill Houses on the Great Neck-Manhasset border.

Mr. Randle was shot six times in a small parking lot and died almost immediately where he fell. Plenty of people heard the shots ring out over Spinney Hill, which slopes down to Community Drive near Northern Boulevard, but no witnesses have come forward. As of Wednesday, the police said they had no leads or suspects in Mr. Randle's death.

"I think Marcus knew who shot him," his mother, Julia Randle, 44, said hours after her son's burial. "Just from the expression on his face when I identified his body at the hospital. He didn't look surprised or afraid. He looked like, 'I can't believe you could shoot me.'"

Mrs. Randle suspects someone from her son's past. Marcus was no altar boy — there were several brief jail stints and a probation term for robbery — but he had begun turning his life around and was working as a stocker at the nearby Bed, Bath & Beyond on Northern Boulevard, she said.

He graduated in 2001 from Manhasset High School but did not have your typical Great Neck or Manhasset upbringing, she said. While most of his

classmates were sharpening their test skills, her son was being tested by bullies' fists, and scored well. Soon the skinny new kid was king of the hill.

“He was the strongest kid around here,” said Mrs. Randle, who, along with her four daughters outside their Spinney Hill apartment, wore T-shirts bearing a graduation photograph of Mr. Randle in a powder blue cap and gown. “No one could beat him up. The only way someone could take my son down was to shoot him six times.”

Most Long Islanders have never heard of Spinney Hill Houses, four rows of aging apartments with roughly 100 units, south of High Street. It is tucked away in Manhasset Valley, with no post office or map designation. Its mailing address is Great Neck and its school district is Manhasset, residents said.

It was settled by laborers — white immigrants, then Southern blacks — who tended the Gold Coast estates. Its apartments and dilapidated houses gave way in the late 1970s to rental units subsidized based on income and run by the Town of North Hempstead.

Spinney Hill was a stop on the Underground Railroad; a place where the [Ku Klux Klan](#) burned crosses; and in the 1960s a prominent example of de facto Northern segregation. A federal court ordered local schoolchildren bused to integrate Manhasset schools.

Of course, Long Island is no longer segregated, just as Spinney Hill is no longer all black, ever since one Latino family moved in some years back. Manhasset, grouped with Roslyn, is 1.9 percent black, according to the 2000 census.

“This is prime location right here — we’re surrounded by money on all sides,” said Dennis Irby, 48, who has lived in Spinney Hill for 40 years. “We send our kids to the best schools in the country, and we get to use all the amenities the wealthy people get: the schools, the parks, the pools.” But one luxury the kids miss is growing up free of violence, he said.

“You will get tried when you live here, no question,” Mr. Irby said. “You have to defend yourself, but hopefully that does not become your way of life.”

Even the rapper and actor LL Cool J had to face that. He moved into a mansion in Manhasset and his daughter was bullied in school by some Spinney Hill girls, Mr. Irby said.

Donald Rowland, 49, a general contractor, said: “All those big chain businesses and fancy office buildings you have now on Northern Boulevard used to be black-owned mom-and-pop stores. Did you know Jim Brown, the great football running back, came from Manhasset?”

But Jim Brown is the exception, he noted. In the wealthier parts, kids are recruited by top colleges. On the Hill, they are tempted by gangs and quick money. At the site where Mr. Randle was gunned down, a shrine was fashioned around his black Air Jordan sneakers, a white crucifix stuck carefully between their laces and a Bible open to Psalm 17, in which David asks God to protect him “from my deadly enemies, who compass me about.”

On a big white teddy bear, a black vest, resembling the kind used to stop bullets, bore the message “R.I.P. Bloody Black.” That was Mr. Randle’s nickname — Black — and bright bubble letters on a poster boasted, “It took six shots to drop Black.”

Nearby were 20 bulging garbage bags containing more than 1,500 bottles of beer consumed in memory of the young man killed in a Great Neck housing project.

E-mail: theisland@nytimes.com