

Childhood friendships in the Brightridge section of East Providence, RI®

by Ann Burkhardt Feb. 2020

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Our Brightridge, East Providence neighborhood in the 1950-60s, was full of young families. It was a terrific place to grow up and to develop friendships during our young lives. My closest friend in early life is still one of my closest friends today, Debra Bradley Cardozo. When we moved to the neighborhood, my mother went around to many of the homes and invited young girls my age to come to a birthday party. Debbie and her sister Nancy (Bradley Aubin) were a part of that first party. Others in my age group included the Youngberg twins Joyce (Youngberg) Panitch and Joan (Youngberg) Vanderwalker. At that time, there were also two other neighborhood girls, who move within a 2-3 year time frame (Jane Supernaut and Gretchen Lister).

One day when I was approximately eight, I went to play with Debbie (who was not at home) and met another new neighbor who also has been a close friend until this day, Donna (Desrochers) Cook. Donna’s family moved onto Dover Avenue from Norton, MA. Our backyards abutted and we often would walk a neighbor’s stonewall from back door to back door to play.



photo caption: Ann with Debbie and Nancy Bradley
before the first day at Brightridge School in 1964

I attended Kent Heights School for kindergarten. From 1st-6th grade, I attended Brightridge School. My classmates included Bob Rodericks, Donna Desrochers (Cook), Susan Alexander, Joanne Carroll, Steve Tuckerman, Andy Woods, Pam Enos, Sue Vassett, John Greene, Bruce Alexander, James Lyons, George LaCross, Sharon Sirignano, Cheryl DeJesus, Hope Kehoe, Grace Botelho, Jay Kiefer, Bernard Kiernon, Billy DeGiutis, Wayne Moniz, Sherry Calendar, Mary Ambrose, and many others.



photo caption: Talent show at Brightridge School in 1966

The parents in our neighborhood would organize holiday activities. I remember trick-or-treating door to door. At Christmas, several parents would organize a group carol sing. We each had printed words with music of the carols and we would go door to door to sing and wish older neighbors and families a Merry Christmas. Eventually we would end at someone's house where the mothers would give us hot cocoa and Christmas cookies. To this day, whenever I reminisce with those who grew up nearby, we each list this as a highlight of living in our neighborhood.

In the late 1950s, my mother organized a Cub Scout troop for my brother and his peers. My parents never left either of us with a baby sitter. My grandmother made me a Cub Scout mascot uniform and I would attend the meetings with the boys. Our unfinished basement on Rice Avenue served as a meeting place, but no one seemed to mind.



photo caption: left: Brownie Troop 977 meet with Girl Scout Troop 505
right: Ann's 5th grade school photo wearing
her Girl Scout's uniform, Troop 505, in 1964-65

Later in the 1960s, my mother also formed a Brownie and then a Girl Scout Troop. We initially met in the basement of our home, as well. After looking for a space in the community to meet, eventually, we attended activities in the Riverside Scout House on Willet Ave. Initially, my mother asked the Fire Chief for space in the Riverside Fire Station (at 66 Wampanoag Trail). The Fire Chief said 'No.' and the incident became very controversial. I recall that the East Providence Post ran the story at the time. My mother was adamant that they should allow us to meet in the firehouse. She lost the argument, but we did find a space to meet in next to the fire house in the former Church of Christ (22 Wampanoag Trail and corner of Ashburton Rd. The church existed ~ 1961-2016). We had fly up ceremonies at Slater Park in Pawtucket, RI. In the summers, we went to camp at Shady Pines Camp in Attleboro, MA.

Another close friendship developed at this time with Wendy Heckman (McKenna), who was in my Mom's section at Girl Scout camp. Wendy and I both attended St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Turner Avenue in Riverside. Eventually we were classmates at the Lincoln School in Providence and at Wheaton College in Norton, MA. We remain close friends today.

I also recall that my Mom was mentored and became a friend of Margaret Willis, who worked for the Girl Scouts organization at the time. In the 1960s, all communities, including E. Prov., were not very inclusive of

other races. Against the odds and the social tide, in E. Prov., in the Girl Scouts, Margaret was more than just a participant. An African American, Mrs. Willis was an influential civic leader in the EP community during the nationwide Black Civil Rights movement. Overcoming inequality and unfair mistreatment, she prevailed and was an excellent role model, teaching us about leadership. Her name and contributions still come up during conversations with my friends. The Willis family also attended our church.

East Providence was a wonderful community to have grown up in during the 1960s and 1970s. Friendships have endured throughout adulthood with many of the friends that were made there in childhood. This wonderful place, space and time brought us all together within a wonderful community. We lived through the transition from town to city (in Dec. 1958) as a classification. No matter the passage of time, we still are “Townies” to our cores.



photo caption: (left) the former E. Prov. red checkered water tower (courtesy of the Youngberg family archives) and (right) the present E. Prov. water tower in Kent Heights sporting the red Townie “E P” letters (courtesy of Susan Cady)

Other photos are from the Burkhardt family archives.

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Comments and inquiries sent to EPVME @ hotmail . com will be forwarded to Ann.