

Growing Up Chatham: Springing to Life

part 1 of 4

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Growing up in Chatham Village during the 1980s and into the 1990s was, to put it succinctly, idyllic. It was safe, friendly, and it felt completely isolated from the hustle and bustle of downtown Pittsburgh. When my friends from college and grad school tell me about their experiences growing up as “a suburban kid” I could easily identify with them. Chatham Village has the disconnected feeling of being out in Sewickley, while having the convenience of being right in the center of it all.

There are still a few folks here who remember when the courtyards would be filled with the sounds of Big Wheels and childlike banter. However, I’m pretty sure that I’m the only one that actually was one of those children, so I feel compelled to share such wonderful memories of growing up in Chatham Village. As I told my fellow Communications Committee members, I could write a full-length book about the adventures my friends and I had here. But in order to keep things concise, I’ll be dividing this into a four-part series; one for each season.

If I didn’t have a cast on my leg as a kid, and to be honest, even if I did (to my parents’ and doctors’ dismay) I’d be in one of the courtyards riding my Big Wheel, climbing in the Chatham Woods, tearing around the Sulgrave and Bigham garage compounds playing hockey, or in the lush greenery of the baseball field playing whiffle ball. There was always something to do, and to the consternation of Howard Parsons, there was always relatively harmless mischief to get into.

During grade school I spent most of the days in Chatham Woods climbing up the hills and trees. We had many make-believe wars, where we defended our individual territories with toy guns and mud balls. We did a lot of exploring, and we built quite a few tree forts. Some were built with cardboard boxes and plastic that we got when one of our parents bought a new appliance, and some with plywood we found. I can remember just about every location where they were built, and I’d bet you lunch at Café Cravings that we’d still find nails stuck in some of those trees to this day.

As my friends and I got a little older, we also began to hold campouts behind the Clubhouse during the weekends. They would get a bit rambunctious at times, but they never got too out of control. We would build roaring fires, cook hotdogs and shoot our BB guns at emptied pop cans. Sometimes we’d spoil the peaceful silence of the night by tossing a firecracker (or many at a time) into the campfire. If you heard various sonic booms past midnight in the mid to late 1990s, it wasn’t the Blue Angels practicing night-flying.

One of my favorite things about springtime in the Village was, and still is, just how brilliantly green everything becomes. What was a frigid landscape tinged in dull grays and whites explodes into a full spectrum of greens, pinks, and flame red flora. It’s a symbol of rebirth; it’s the neighborhood waking up from its frozen slumber. The sounds of snow plows and window scrapers gets replaced by lawnmowers and cars opened up with stereos (OK, just mine) blasting out fast-paced rock music.

The next installment in this series will be one of the highlights of the kid-years at Chatham Village during this era: Summer, and the epic Fourth of July celebrations that had bikes, Big Wheels and Rollerblades decorated for the Children’s Parade down Sulgrave and around the circle at Pennridge and Bigham.