



SAVING MISSION HILL



Theresa Parks

I grew up in the Mission Hill Project in the 1940s when it consisted of brick buildings that were pleasant to look at and sturdily built, just like the people living there. My parents were Irish. Mother was born in Belmont, the youngest of six children. When she was very young, the whole family returned to County Galway, Ireland, where she remained until she was in her twenties. Dad was born in Ireland but met Ma in America. He worked for the railroad and was a quiet family man. We were not well-off, but thought we were the richest people in the world. Neighbors all knew each other and pitched in to help. When clothes were outgrown, they were sent to another family who could use them. If a neighbor asked you to go to the grocery store, you were happy to go. Money was never an issue; there wasn't any, so not to worry.

Mother was striking in appearance. She had perfect posture, always stood up straight, and walked tall. She had smooth porcelain skin, snow-white hair, and baby blue eyes that sparkled. She always wore a smile, had a great sense of humor, and never indulged in

idle gossip about her neighbors. Instead, she spent her days helping people and teaching my sister Anna and me to do the same. From an early age, we were expected to assist other families by clearing off precious clothesline space, babysitting, or carrying bundles for women upstairs.

Once when Ma came home from work at Boston City Hospital, she asked me how I spent my day. Gladly, I shared that I'd helped a neighbor with small children by going to the store for her. Upon my return, she gave me a dime, which I proudly showed my mother. Ma immediately responded that I had to give it back. She explained that we helped people not for rewards but because we could. That was the end of that story and that dime, but it was Mother's attitude of helping that influenced me throughout my life.

I married Bob Parks who was from Jamaica Plain. He had been raised with values similar to mine, and we tried to instill the same attitude in our family. For years, when I worked at a dry cleaner in Mission Hill, the owner would give me any leftover clothing. With those clothes and other donations I received, I held flea markets to provide affordable clothing to my neighbors. I used the money to purchase turkeys and canned goods for needy families in Mission Hill and Jamaica Plain. These actions created bonds of community that came in handy one day when some Harvard medical students knocked at my door.

Up through the 1960s, Mission Hill was made up of mostly Irish Catholic families who attended the Mission Church. Families lived in two- and three-story wooden-framed houses built in the 1800s. Neighborhood children attended either Mission Grammar or the

Farragut School. Many couples met during Wednesday night novenas at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, went to dances at Hibernian Hall, and eventually got married in the basilica. Whether living on Huntington Avenue, Francis Street, or Fenwood Road, it was a tightly knit community.

In the fall of 1968, Bob and I relocated to 52 Francis Street with our four children. Three students showed up on our doorstep asking if we had heard about Harvard's plans to build the biggest medical institution in the country. Dean Ebert had announced to the papers that houses would be torn down to make way for the university's expansion. I hadn't heard the news and was shocked! We had just moved and I knew that my mother, who lived with us, would not want to leave the neighborhood. I asked the students several questions but they didn't know much more. I then said, "Well, I'm going to have to go out and organize." They asked, "Are you a community organizer?" I answered, "No, but I'll be whatever you want me to be."

Mission Hill residents were unaware that between 1963 and 1968 Harvard had bought up many properties using "straws" — people sent to the neighborhood to purchase homes deceptively. Homeowners had been offered substantial incentives to sell their houses, such as being allowed to live in them rent-free for up to one year after the sale. We were about to go up against the endowment of one of the world's wealthiest institutions.

With students Doug Levinson and Jeanne Neville, I began going door-to-door on Saturday afternoons to talk with neighbors about what was happening in our community. I was the new person on the

block, but people recognized me from walking back and forth to the cleaners. As I informed residents about the issues, the students took notes about everyone we spoke with — their name, phone number, how long they had lived in Mission Hill, and any other facts that might be useful. Even though they were Harvard medical students themselves, Doug and Jeanne helped because they were also outraged by Harvard's plans.

As our organizing progressed and neighbors began to talk daily about the situation with Harvard, my husband Bob approached the Massachusetts Mental Health Center about getting meeting space. They let us use their chapel to hold a monthly meeting on Sundays. We followed Robert's Rules of Order and created a space for people to ask questions and state their concerns. Soon architect John Shar-ratt began to help us to identify who owned land in the community and to survey residents about the types of housing they desired. We also got a pro bono lawyer to incorporate our group; we called ourselves the Roxbury Tenants of Harvard (RTH).

Our next move was to get Dean Ebert to tour our neighborhood and see its deteriorating conditions. With plans to demolish the community, Harvard had neglected its housing stock and people were living with ceilings literally falling down on them. Despite Harvard's negligence as a landlord and threats of displacement, Dean Ebert found people who were resolved to stay in Mission Hill. The media began picking up on the struggle. I appeared on television several times talking about our fight to save Mission Hill. Harvard got the message when donations to its endowment began to drop off.

With pressure shifting onto the university, we handed Harvard a list of demands, including the need for a rental office dedicated to finding adequate replacement housing in Mission Hill for any residents displaced by Harvard's plans. We added an agreement that realtors had to rent to families over college students.

For many years, we went back and forth with the university, asserting our rights to live in Mission Hill and forcing them to be accountable to us about the development of their medical campus. Over time, we gained their respect and wore down their resolve to the point that we were seemingly working side-by-side to develop the neighborhood.

In 1976, we won a major battle and were allowed to plan and develop affordable housing on thirteen and a half acres of Harvard-owned land on Huntington Avenue and the Riverway, the site of the former House of the Good Shepherd convent. Roxbury Tenants of Harvard ultimately built Mission Park, a mixed-income community consisting of 775 units in a twenty-seven-story tower, three medium-rise buildings, and several modern townhouses. Bob became the organization's first executive director, and many Mission Hill families relocated there in the 1970s. Harvard's intention to take over our community had been successfully turned around so that it actually helped update our neighborhood and strengthen our community's bonds. In 1999, Harvard passed complete ownership of the Mission Park development over to RTH. Our victory was complete!