

AARP

The Magazine

World's Largest Circulation Magazine

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MIRACLES?
OUR SURPRISING SURVEY

2009 INSPIRE AWARDS

Glenn Close

Why she's risking so much to erase the shame of mental illness

AND
9 MORE HEROES WHO INSPIRE US

Escape from chronic pain—without drugs!

Pay less for everything

Don't let money woes hurt your health



HOW TO PROSPER IN A FEAR ECONOMY

- WHAT YOU CAN DO TO REBUILD YOUR NEST EGG
- HOW OBAMA CAN RESTORE CONFIDENCE
- WHERE TO FIND HOPE
BY STUDDS TERKEL

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE!

WIN A FINANCIAL MAKEOVER

PAGE 49

The Art of Living

Passions

Good Food

Journeys

The Puzzle



COURT OF DREAMS
Norma and Willie Johnson built a basketball court, and generations of Detroit youngsters have come to play.

'No Kid Was Born Bad'

One couple gives children in northwest Detroit a gathering place and a few rules to live by

GROWING UP IN Morehouse Parish, Louisiana, Willie Johnson was grateful for the open door at Mr. Lucky's house, where Johnson and his friends gathered to play after school.

"This was back in the '50s, and there was not much money," Johnson, now 65, remembers. "It was 15 to 20 kids, and he was always serene."

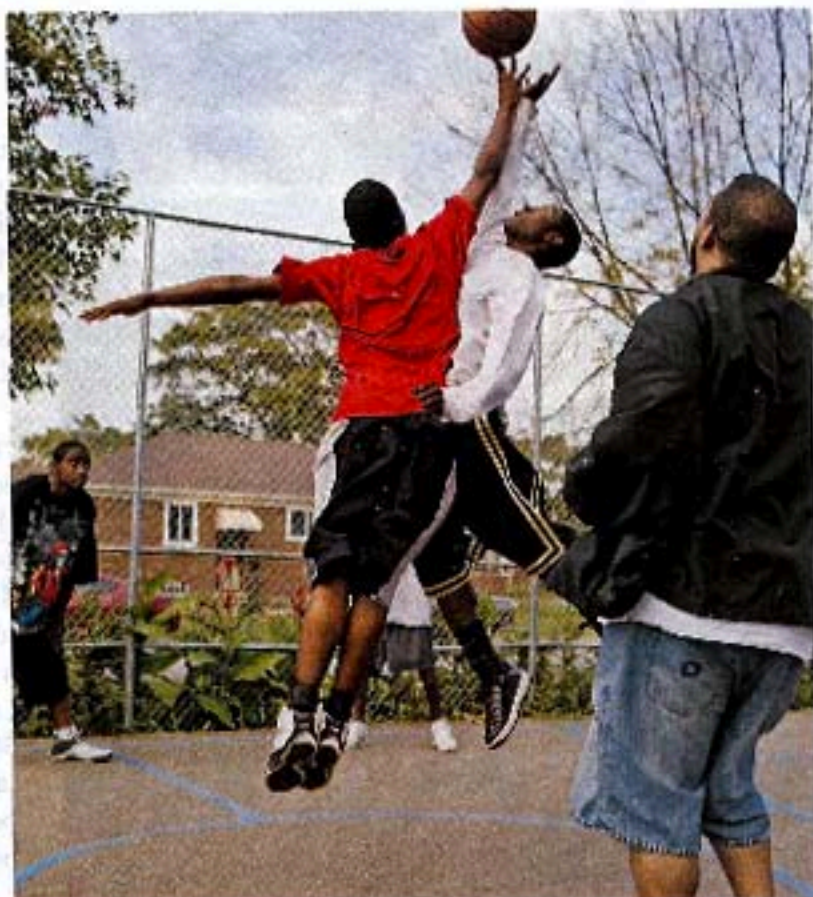
The children played horseshoes and hide-and-seek, had hot dogs and soda, and listened when their host talked. "He was a great influence about living life so you could be an asset to society, and not a liability," Johnson says. "That stuck with me."

Johnson and his wife, Norma, settled in northwest Detroit and raised five children. When their youngest, Jermell, was old enough to bounce a basketball, Johnson decided to do for his neighborhood's youth what Mr. Lucky had done for him. Nearby schoolyards were haunted by drug dealers, so Johnson paved enough of his front yard for half-court basketball. That was 28 years ago.

"He gave us someplace to go other than the street," says Eugene Frame, 36, who grew up with Jermell and still lives nearby. "If it wasn't for Mr. Johnson, that neighborhood would've gone down long ago."

The Johnsons, both autoworkers, later knocked down their garage to create a fenced full court. With no extracurricular activities at the local school and the closest YMCA ten miles away, the Johnsons' court became a magnet. Year-round, "parents bring a carload of kids and say, 'We'll pick 'em up this evening,'" says Norma, 61.

HET GAINS
Kids have flocked to the Johnsons' court since 1980. Below: Grandson Jermell Jr., 11.



"Anyone's welcome as long as they abide by the rules," says her husband, gesturing toward a laminated sign on the fence: NO PROFANITY. NO FIGHTING. NO EXCEPTION.

"These kids aren't 'ghetto' kids," he continues. "No kid was born bad. Give him attention and love, nine times out of ten he wants to do the right thing."

The Johnsons provide more than a place to relax. They inspect report cards, teach manners, and dispense advice.

"Mr. Johnson was like a dad to me," says Frame. "Kids show him love because he loves them back."

Johnson, now retired, presides seven days a week in all seasons. How long will he keep this up? "Always," he says.

"It will pass on from generation to generation," says Jermell, now 34 and a father of four. "This is somewhere to come to feel good, but when I see the kids doing something wrong, I correct them. They learn how to respect another man's call." —*Lynne Meredith Schreiber*



If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything."

—One of Willie Johnson's favorite sayings

A Gift for the Greater Good

In October the Johnsons' court got a makeover: new pavement, new goals, and space for five-on-five games. (No more four-on-four!) The angel behind it all was businessman Larry Pollock, 64, who read about the couple in the *Detroit Free Press* and lined up support from the Detroit Pistons, among others. See the Johnsons' court, before and after, on video at www.aarpmagazine.org/people.