

The Adventures of the Lawndale Gang

by
Dan McMeans

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Introduction

The “Lawndale Gang” was a group of seven girls and nine guys who gathered together on tree-lined streets in a working-class neighborhood in Northeast Philadelphia during the early to late seventies.

This was a time of political turmoil in the United States: the Vietnam War, Women's Rights, and Civil Rights movement were just a few of the challenges Americans were trying to navigate. Nevertheless, a group of thirteen-year-olds were able to insulate themselves and find common ground, laughing and crying together while enduring a series of growing pains typical of adolescents in Lawndale where they resided. Throughout this tumultuous period in our lives, we always believed we would prevail because we had each other.

Despite entering adulthood, finishing our education, beginning careers, marrying, and starting families, we kept in touch, often reflecting that somehow we came through those challenges okay, most likely because of the common values we all shared, values we have also passed onto our children. After all, love is the universal fabric that connects us all.

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These stories are about our group. “The Lawndale Gang” solving mysteries and going on adventures. The story “Coming of age in Lawndale” is entirely true, the other stories are fictional with storytelling.

I love my friends for all the memorable events I experienced as a teenager. As I have gotten older, I like to think I am wiser now and believe that love with all its intangibles connects us all, especially in the adventures with the Lawndale Gang.

The Coming of Age of Lawndale

Beginning at age thirteen, we would all meet at the corner of Magee and Oakley Streets to sit on the steps of a neighbor's house. We did this until we were 18 years old. Magee and Oakley will always hold a special place in our hearts because that's where we gathered each night. We did everything together, including many of us going to the proms at Northeast High School and Cardinal Dougherty High School in 1980.

Every Sunday, we played rough touch football with the older guys in the neighborhood. They would meet us at the top field of a park in Cheltenham, across from the railroad tracks. The girls in the group would cross the tracks to the field to support our efforts. We brought blankets, munchies, and a radio to listen to the Eagles game. It was quite the event. The older guys were two or three years older than us; sometimes they won, and sometimes we won. Those were the days.

Another sport we regularly played was Playground Hockey, where ice hockey rules were followed, although we played on an asphalt surface. As our reputation grew, it caught the attention of a group of

guys from another neighborhood across the railroad tracks in Cheltenham, Pa. This rival neighborhood's hockey team was known as a fierce, formidable opponent. Confident in our ability, we agreed to play the game on their turf. However, when we arrived, we discovered their playing surface resembled a WWF wrestling cage. It was obvious that the team with the best physical prowess and fore-checking skills would win.

I knew this would be a brutal game as we walked up to their "hockey arena" with a 14-foot fenced enclosure. We were ready for battle with the girls behind us, and our minds were set on how to prevail. We were ready!

When we practiced any sport, we could transform the elements of city life around us into an arena of athletic discipline. Curbs would become out-of-bounds markers, telephone poles would become first-down markers, and trees and cars would become boundaries for goal lines and end zones. The elements of city life became the difference between winning and losing.

It was a tough battle between two determined hockey teams, but we relied not only on our skills, but also on our character and determination. As we played, an unspoken atmosphere settled in, challenging us to work as a team, believe in ourselves, and remember the sheer joy of winning.

As the seasons changed, so did our sports. The girls continued to be supportive but were starting to feel neglected. We weren't like other guys; we played sports all the time. And the girls in our group were getting bored.

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There was another group of guys meeting on a different corner down the street who we didn't care for. They weren't fortunate enough to have girls in their group. These guys started to entice the girls in our group to join them. Then, one day, the girls didn't show up at Magee and Oakley.

At first, we thought it was an aberration; then, we saw the girls hanging out with the other group of guys. We were beside ourselves, upset and hurt. We felt the girls had abandoned us, which made us feel even worse.

Several months passed, and we realized that the girls were an integral part of our group. They were very supportive of all our sporting events and social gatherings, and it bothered us that they were gone. Then, one day, the girls showed up at Magee and Oakley just as they had done many times before — like nothing happened. Everyone sat down and talked things out. We realized there were hurt feelings on both sides but that none of us felt complete without the other.

One of the outspoken girls in the group expressed how they often felt overlooked. As we discussed it, the same girl said they realized we had something special in our group and wanted to return to continue the journey.

One memorable summer, we ran a 48-hour whiffle ball marathon for the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. My sister wrote an article about the upcoming whiffle ball marathon that appeared in a Northeast Philadelphia Times Newspaper two weeks before the event. We got a permit to close down Magee

Street and set up schedules for the 48-hour tournament.

We made giant banners that we hung on Magee Street and Oakley Avenue. A neighborhood hardware store donated flood lamps so we could play throughout the night. We slept in reclining lawn chairs in the street and ate Fanti's pizza, which the owner donated to everyone to enjoy.

Even the neighbors on the block got involved. One of the girl's parents treated everyone to donuts one morning. The girls stood on the corner of Magee and Oakley St with buckets to collect donations from cars driving by while the guys played whiffle ball. This tournament turned into a community event. The group raised \$1751 for the telethon and recognized the power of working together to achieve a goal.

Another project we undertook one summer was building a fort close to the railroad tracks on the Philadelphia side. With the money from our newspaper routes, we pooled enough to purchase wood and shingles to make a free-standing structure. We were proud of the elevated floor and roof that kept us dry in the rain. We met many nights a week, and our teenage conversations sometimes involved significant life topics. As Christmas neared, the girls prepared our spacious fort and decorated it for our annual Christmas gathering. The girls took pride in putting up the decorations that made our fort very festive over the holidays. At our Christmas gathering, much merriment was expressed for another joyful holiday. We expressed our gratitude for each other as another year ended.

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We had an older boy in the neighborhood who was considered the “music maestro” in the neighborhood. He didn’t hang out with us very often at our corner, but on numerous occasions, he would invite us to his rec room in his basement, where he had the most advanced stereo equipment around. With all his classic rock posters, he was the one who introduced us to music by bands like The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Who, Electric Light Orchestra, Aerosmith, Van Halen, and The Cars. He was the go-to guy for all the concert tickets when shows came to town. We have fond memories of his devotion to music as a teenager.

Once we learned to drive, we ventured outside Lawndale. We all loved a trip to Greenwood Dairies in Langhorne, PA, where they served the area’s largest portions of delicious homemade ice cream. This was part of our nostalgia growing up in Lawndale. We also spent a lot of time at Fanti’s Pizza and a local Dairy Queen in Lawncrest. From time to time, when we were stopped at red lights, we would jump out and circle the cars, just acting silly, hoping to let everyone know that we were having a good time.

We all knew to meet at the corner of Magee and Oakley streets at the end of the day to collaborate and enjoy each other’s company. This was our meeting place for quite some time, but it irritated a particular patrolman, Officer Fritz. He didn’t like us “loitering” on the corner, even though we were a peaceful group that didn’t bother anyone. Nevertheless, he was on a mission to disrupt us. For no reason, he would gather some of us up and charge us with a misdemeanor of disorderly conduct. The judge would then dismiss it, because it was meritless. We got tired of his antics, so we devised a plan to get back at him. About five of the

guys had a secret meeting when snow was on the ground. We waited for his patrol car to pass our corner, and as it did, we unleashed a fury of snowballs. We heard the crackling noise of snowballs hitting the side of the patrol car as we ran away. We had the benefit of knowing all the paths and shortcuts around the houses on Magee Street. In our hearts, we knew there was no way he could catch us. We all met at our fort afterwards for high fives, celebrating how successful our revenge plan was executed.

Pennypack Park was our go-to destination for picnics, co-ed softball games, hiking, and campfires. These events led to many discussions and debates on general topics and life. Over several years, we went to Holiday Lakes in Bridgeboro (Delran), NJ. It was a big lake with a beach and an awesome ladder and dive platform in the center. We would have chicken fights with the girls on the guys' shoulders while in the lake. We had terrific times!

When we were about 16, we sometimes pitched tents in one of our backyards. The guys and the girls would have separate tents. Then, at 1 a.m., we would all get up to explore our surroundings on bikes and appreciate the serenity and peacefulness of the night. We observed milkmen delivering on their routes; a time-old practice of delivering bottles of milk to people's homes has become a memory of the past. We also saw bakeries delivering their rolls to delis in the area. This is the neighborhood businesses of the night. Then we sat on our bikes and watched the sun rise over the fields at Hasbrook and Magee with awe, watching the sky come to life to welcome a new day. Then, we returned to our tents to get some sleep.

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On several occasions, we went to New Hope to see plays at the Bucks County Playhouse. After these performances, we would walk through New Hope, window shopping the quaint shops up and down Main Street.

One day, we decided to explore an abandoned mansion in Montgomery County called Strawberry Mansion. As we pulled up to the mansion, we wondered what life must have been like for this house in its heyday. The house was built at the turn of the century in the 1800s. It had a grand entrance with an impressive circular driveway and awe-inspiring front door. Walking through that door and seeing the majestic steps that led upstairs, we felt like we were returning to an earlier era.

We tried to imagine what life was like back then in this magnificent house. As we walked around, we couldn't help but notice the majestic steps leading upstairs. We cautiously walked through the house and found an elevator shaft that looked like it had gone down several flights. The cables were still intact and exposed. The guys were intrigued and wondered what could be on the lower levels, but the girls were not interested.

After some convincing from the guys, we all agreed to climb down one level using the exposed cables in the elevator shaft. Once we arrived at the basement level, it was pitch black! We couldn't see two feet ahead of us. As our eyes grew accustomed to the dark, we noticed a lot of debris around us. But there was something else.

We had an eerie feeling that something or someone was watching us. We kept hearing footsteps but

couldn't see anything. Panic started to set in; we wanted to return to the elevator shaft, but how could we when we couldn't see? We slowly moved around as a group, searching for the light from the elevator shaft. The footsteps continued. It felt as if the footsteps were hostile, which gave us a sense of urgency to find the elevator shaft. Suddenly, we spotted the light and helped the girls up the elevator cables. Once all of us were on solid ground, we breathed a sigh of relief.

We wondered about that eerie feeling. Was it a malevolent ghost? Who knows...but we were grateful to return to the safety of our cars.

Prom season provided other memorable moments. Half of the group went to Northeast High School in Philadelphia, and the other half went to Cardinal Dougherty High School in Cheltenham. Fortunately, both proms were on different dates so everyone could go to each other's proms and have a great time. We had double the prom's to look forward to! Clean and shiny cars would line up Magee Avenue, and the procession of gals in prom gowns and the guys in their tuxedos would begin. Those were indeed the days.

The final prom in our senior year was the Cardinal Dougherty gala. We knew that the end of our teenage years was in sight, and a new era was upon us. The day after the Cardinal Dougherty High School Senior Prom, we all piled in our cars for one more trip to Wildwood, NJ.

As we sat on the beach mesmerized by the ocean and the rhythmic sound of the crashing waves, we felt the symbolism of the surf, which brought in the feeling that helped us realize changes were ahead. There

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would always be ups and downs, but at least the group knew we had built lasting memories from our teenage years together. We felt prepared for our future because we understood the supportive, caring, and nurturing relationships that come from a great group of friends. No matter what the future held for each of us, we knew we would always be available to support one another.

Lawndale Athletes against the Devil's Gate

The first part of this story is true, while the conclusion is fiction with storytelling.

The Lawndale Gang met in our fort off Hasbrook and Magee Streets to discuss our next football opponent. We were surrounded by four large recreation centers where we played tackle football: Lawncrest, Fox Chase, Jardel, and Max Myers. Each recreation center had much more support levels in recruiting other players to play for them. Our nucleus had nine guys from Magee and Oakley, and we filled in with other guys from nearby neighborhoods. We were a scruffy but talented team that believed we could win against all others, even though we had to play both offense and defense most of the time. We had our girls by our side who were always loyal and got us through many games. Back then, it was common for neighborhoods to compete with their own football equipment.

Our tenacious work ethic helped us through the three recreational centers, piling up victory after victory and setting us up for a showdown with Lawncrest Recreation Center. We knew we were going to be

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outmanned at 30 to our 11. Lawncrest was considered the cream of the crop. They had many more players to pull from and better equipment than we had, but we were known as a hard-hitting team with fortitude and grit in our bones. With our girls by our side, we were ready for battle. We knew as we met in the fort that we built with our own hands that this would be our ultimate test.

It was the day that we faced Lawncrest, and the football game was about to begin. The 11 of us knew we had to reach deep within ourselves in order to beat this team. As we prepared for kick-off, there was a spiritual presence among us; we knew this spiritual presence gave us the strength, confidence, and the courage to play our best with just 11 players, against a well-represented team with the best equipment.

As the game went on, and we were ahead in the score, we noticed they were bringing in older guys off the street, suiting them up, and putting them in the game. Throughout each quarter, our wounds piled up. But fortunately, we had our girls ready to bandage us up to keep us going so we could prevail against this opponent and win the game with conviction and fearlessness.

Shortly after the game, six of the guys decided to cross the tracks to go into the top fields of Cheltenham Township, where they had a football field available for us to practice on as needed.

As we were practicing, a group member searched the woods for the football that had gotten away. As he looked for the football, he fell into a different dimension. The other group members got tired of waiting and went looking for him. We also fell into this

alternate dimension just as we found his prescription glasses on the ground. It wasn't long before the six of us were united there. This other dimension had a sinister feel to it, and it looked unnatural as well. As we descended down the path, a dark, transparent cloud suddenly appeared and kept us from walking. As we stood before this dark cloud, wondering what it was, we heard it speak to us. "I know you, but do you know who I am? Your triumphant ways of winning are no match for the Prince of Darkness — or should I say the Anti-Christ — but you may know me best as Satan."

A spokesperson from the group took a step towards the evil dark energy cloud and said, "I think I can speak for all of us and say that as long as God is with us, there is no power that can stand against us." "You insolent bastards, do you know how powerful I am?" We responded, "Here's what we do know — you're going to have a front-row seat to us getting out of here." Back at the fort, the girls noticed that we hadn't returned from practice and went to look for us at the field. The girls went to the top field and started looking for us, but all they found were our jackets and duffel bags. As the girls sat together, worried and wondering where we might be, a bright light with wings appeared in front of them and said, "Do not be afraid, for I am Arch Angel Gabriel and I have come to inform you that your friends are in trouble and need your prayers. Your friends fell into an evil dimension and are battling Satan as we speak. You need to figure out how to re-open the gate to this other dimension to help your friends come home. This is your job. Before I leave you, I will show you where they were before they fell into the evil dimension. Good luck, and let's move forward with love and purpose, for God is always with you."

While the girls prayed, Satan's evil energy cloud started to break apart and go after the individual members of the team. To our alarm, this evil, insidious energy entered us and started to rise up our legs. It was a terrible feeling, and we got the impression that this evil energy was after our hearts to kill us. We decided for the time being we should disperse. As we traveled down the path ahead of us, Satan mocked us. "How dare you disrespect me. Now you will pay dearly and bow before me."

We continued down the path as the evil energy worked its way up our bodies. We came across a separation in the path, which was a very steep drop to certain death. The only way to cross it was to take a running start and leap over it. And that's what we did, collectively. As we all landed on the other side of the separated path, one of the guys fell short and was barely hanging on by a tree root from the side of the cliff. We rushed to his aid, helped him to his feet and sighed with relief that we were on the other side of the path. But nevertheless, the evil energy clouds were still in us, trying to work their way up through our bodies so they could strangle our hearts. "You can't run from what I sent into you, for I am an expert at human anatomy. What I sent into you will eventually choke your heart and extinguish your life," Satan said. We continued down the path until we arrived at a cave. We cautiously entered the cave and explored our surroundings. We soon discovered a stone altar that must have been made by previous travelers who got trapped in this evil dimension.

On top of this stone altar was a horizontal slate with the Lord's Crucifix chiseled into the slate. We were

very moved and inspired by this discovery, but we were still feeling the effect of the evil energy clouds they moved deeper into our bodies. We looked for more clues and found an old leather scroll behind the altar. We unraveled the scroll and found information about the lost teachings of Zoroaster. He was a forward-thinking Priest of his time and had great influence on Cyrus the Great, a Persian King who liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity to resettle and rebuild in Jerusalem. This earned Cyrus an honored place in Judaism in 900 BC. Meanwhile, the girls went home to do research on other dimensions and how to access them.

They knew the urgency of time was at hand. They found interesting information on the internet regarding parallel universes that could exist in another dimension. They discovered the string theory, which suggests that subatomic particles are different notes on a tiny, vibrating string. This theory leaves the possibility of multi-dimensionality open. The harmonies of string theory corresponds to the laws of physics, according to physicist Michio Kaku. With this information, the girls ran back to the top field and looked for the entry point to the evil dimension that Arch Angel Gabriel told them about. In this alternate universe, we continued to read these ancient scrolls, and were enlightened by the teachings of Zoroaster, a Persian priest. Zoroaster believed in contemplation, reflection, and meditation on God's work and personal spiritual growth.

We learned through these scrolls that the battle of good and evil is necessary so man can achieve goodness through battling evil. We also learned that astrology, which is like a blueprint of a person's life, is

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a part of the understanding of the Priest Zoroaster who was an influential preacher of his time. We had come to understand that maybe it was our destiny to battle Satan. Together, we gathered at the stone altar and recited the Lord's Prayer. One of us remembered a quote from Jesus, that said, "If you have the faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain – move and it will move from here to there. Nothing will be impossible to you!" This really inspired us. Then we made a prayer to our God for protection and strength, to propel us forward to do His will in His honor.

After our prayer, we stood up and one of us spoke for all of us and said to Satan, "Satan, you do not scare us with your bag of tricks, for there is one Divine True Power that is Omni and Supreme and it gives us eternal hope and strength to help us conquer all our obstacles." As we concluded our thoughts, we felt a Divine Grace descend on us that helped us remove the evil dark energy clouds that were attempting to strangle our hearts. We left the cave empowered with God's strength. Satan spoke to us as we left the cave. "How dare you rise up against me"? We responded, "We're going to find a way home. Either you get out of our way, or you'll be run over."

The six of us continued back the same way we came. Meanwhile, the girls had set up a vigil at the gate that marked the entry to the dimension. They played music, hoping it would act as a beacon to guide us back home. As we navigated down the path, we could hear the music and realized the girls were trying to help us get home. Following the music, we finally found the door and gateway to the other dimension, which is our home, thanks to the girls. As we walked through the

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dimension to home, the last person through turned around and said, “Satan, from the beginning of time, and throughout all the generations, there will always be One God, One Power and One Law Forever and Ever! For you have witnessed the power of God, where He is beyond all boundaries.” Then all the boys were home and greeted by the girls and lots of group hugs and smiles ensued as the eleven of us gathered to celebrate our friendship.