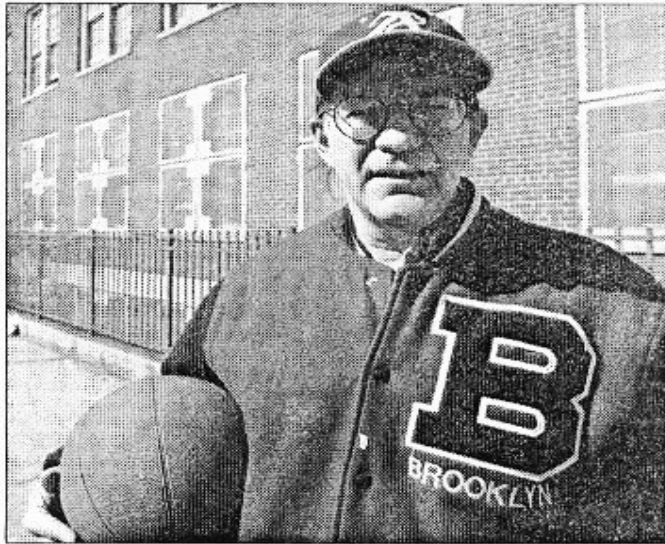




IN THE NEWS

March, 1996:
Fighting for gyms has
always been an uphill
battle - Space, Time,
Money and the
gigantic bureaucracy -
Daily New & NY Times
1996 articles
chronicle our efforts
and frustrations.



NORMAN BECKER outside IS 51, one school he says charges too much for gym rental. MARK BONIFACIO

Just try following the bouncing bill

MY LATEST LOCAL HERO is Norman Becker, who is at war with the Board of Education.

He is the president of the 78th Precinct Youth Council in Park Slope, Brooklyn, an organization that offers a basketball league of 63 teams for 700 kids, ages 5 through 18. Without this league, in a time of budget cuts, these kids will have nowhere to play ball through 15 winter weeks.

In the spring and summer, they offer the same program for baseball. But it is the winter basketball program that is a scandal and has led Becker, these kids and their parents into a Byzantine financial horror.

The Board of Education, part of the City of New York, charged the 78th Precinct Youth Council \$38,000 for the weekend use of three public school gymnasiums that would have been otherwise as empty as the callous heart of the Board of Ed.

If any of these kids did the same thing in a schoolyard, they would be charged with extortion.

Stick with this closely, because nothing is ever simple when it comes to the Board of Ed. Becker knows this, having recently retired after teaching biology at South Shore High for 33 years.

"We used three schools from two districts," Becker says. "PS 282 in District 13 and PS 321 and IS 51 in District 15. Now, I got charged \$16,000 by PS 283 for 33 hours a week, right? Okay, then I also get charged \$16,000 by IS 51 for 14 hours a week. Same-sized gyms, half the time, same money. When I ask about it, they shrug or get nasty and say different boards charge different rates."

So Becker checked into this. He found this was not true. He also asked for an itemized bill and was told that he couldn't have a bill until after he paid it. So he paid and then got an indecipherable coded bill. But he did figure out he was charged \$6.53 for every light switch to be turned on; \$6.35 to unlock a bathroom; \$35 to pull down the stands in the gym, another \$35 to put them back up. For labor charges, a fireman was paid \$71.26 an hour and a

cleaner \$83.13 an hour. On and on, fleeing children.

If this was a car mechanic shop, there would be an indictment on the way.

"There is still no explanation as to why I was charged the same price for half the hours," he says. "All I got was nasty stonewalling. Then when I questioned one bill at District 15, a secretary who had drafted the bill admitted she had overcharged by \$700! If I hadn't gone in person to ask about it, the board would have just kept \$700 hard-earned parents' dollars."

The story, which first was reported in the Park Slope Courier, got the attention of Borough President Howard Golden's office. They have scheduled an April 1 meet-

ing on the matter, which is appropriate, because the parents who pay \$130 for their kids to join the 78th Precinct Youth Council are being taken for fools by the city.

"This is a program that takes kids off the streets, and with over 100 volunteers — thus what the city should be doing — and they are charging us," Becker says. "Gouging us. Yet, we have private schools like Berkeley Carroll who give us space for free, and a public school is robbing us. It's outrageous and it is also elitist. It keeps pushing our fees up. Which means poor kids can't afford to play because their families can't come up with the \$130 per child we have to charge to meet these costs."

There is another scandal buried here. When Becker tried to find out where this extorted money actually went, he was told it went to the mayor's office. The mayor's office said it went to the schools' custodians. The custodians, the most corrupt mob in the city, said the loot went to the local school board. The local board said it went to the central school board, who in turn said it went to the mayor's office who insist it went to the custodians.

Where it doesn't go is to one single kid.

DAILY
Foul... News 3/13/96

**DENIS
HAMILL**



Gym Costs Are Dimming Hoop Dreams



Andrea Mohr/The New York Times

NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF EDUCATION
200 WEST 4TH STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10014

78th Precinct Youth Council

PERMIT APPLICATION - SCHOOL BUILDING

APPLICANT: N. Becker - 514 8451
N. Becker (725)
1023195
644 - MARK

SCHOOL: BUNN 1625
NORMAN BECKER

PERMIT PERIOD: 03/10/96

COMPLETED BY: 015 1719

GRAND TOTAL 5,576.04

Norman Becker, a retired high school teacher, didn't start battling the Board of Education until after he resigned.

As president of the 78th Precinct Youth Council, Mr. Becker runs after-school basketball programs for more than 600 children 5 to 18. He relies on public school gymnasiums and argues that the \$38,000 he has been charged for a four-month season is exorbitant and will make it impossible to waive fees for financially strapped families.

"We're doing what the Board of Education can't do," said Mr. Becker, whose program is the city's largest. "The public schools should be free."

Even by the Board of Education's own accounting system, he points out, he is being overcharged by at least \$5,000 for use of three Park Slope gyms. Now, he says, he will have to turn away more than 100

students who can't pay the \$130 fee.

"We don't want to refuse anyone who can't pay," he said. "But I'm going to have to say if you can't pay, you can't play basketball."

School officials contend that charges applied to all groups that use public school space are unavoidable because they are dictated by the contracts with the custodians who open and close the buildings. Their hourly wages are set under contract with the Mayor's office.

"We don't make these formulas," said Jesse Pincas, who oversees financing for after-school programs in Park Slope for Community School Board 15. "It changes every year the

contract is negotiated."

Enrollment in Mr. Becker's fall program, which serves eight neighborhoods, more than doubled because budget cuts had wiped out several other after-school programs. Then, a few private schools that had provided free space could no longer make their gyms available.

So in November, Mr. Becker began renting more gymnasium space from three Park Slope public schools the group had used before. He was not, however, receiving written bills, and when he went to the office of Community School Board 15 in January to get one, all that was available was a printout of the overall charge, not itemized. The local community school board collects the fees for the Board of Education, which pays the custodians and other costs. When he did ultimately get a bill from the central office, he says, he found he had been charged for labor costs plus additional tasks — \$6.53 every time a light switch was turned on and off and \$35 to move the bleachers.

"The cost is exorbitant," Mr. Pincas acknowledged. "It is our contention that the schools should be open 24 hours a day at no charge."

Still, some relief is on the way. Last week, officials of Borough President Howard Golden's office met with Mr. Becker and have promised to try to resolve some of the billing discrepancies. Mr. Golden also allocated \$2,500 to Mr. Becker's group to defray some of the school system's charges. MARK FRANCIS COHEN

UPDATE

It's a Whole New Showplace

The Pavilion, the historic Art Deco movie house on the southwestern edge of Prospect Park, opened its doors to moviegoers last Wednesday after two years of renovations and a decade of disuse.

The theater, formerly the Sanders Theater, opened with three screens that will show a mix of movies — a family feature, a blockbuster and a low-budget film, said Norman Adie, an owner. The 1,000-seat house,

which also has a cafe that overlooks the park, will expand to five screens this summer, he said.

The Pavilion, on Prospect Park West between 14th and 15th Streets, had been scheduled to open in February, but Mr. Adie said the harsh winter and construction problems delayed its debut. "We have tried painstakingly to retain some of the original ambience," he said. "It was time-consuming." M.F.C.