

After 52 years, Englewood Back-to-School Parade Cancelled

By Corrin Cobb



Every summer, just as the season comes to a close and children are returning to classrooms, residents align the streets of Halsted and Racine, anxiously awaiting the start of the Englewood Back-to-School (B2S) Parade. The festivities include performances by drum and bugle corps, dancers, tumblers, musicians, guest appearances by politicians, decked out cars, and colorful floats. The B2S Parade is a treasured tradition of the Englewood community, an affair looked forward to by many. However, for the first time in its 52 years, the Parade was cancelled.

"The money just wasn't there," states Justine Stephens, Chairperson of the Englewood B2S Parade Committee. For the past two years, the Parade has struggled financially, despite donations and out-of-pocket contributions from the Committee's members. "That's how it's always been," says Mrs. Stephens, "people supported the Parade. They believed in it, so they donated, they contributed in some way." In its heyday, the Parade was considered the second largest African-American parade in Chicago, second to Bud Billiken.

One of the most anticipated activities of the Parade is the handing out of school supplies: local businesses and organizations contribute hundreds of bags full of paper, pencils, crayons, books, and in some cases, school uniforms. "Our goal isn't to make money or sell things. The purpose of the Englewood B2S Parade is to serve the community. It is a day of caring and showing love."

The Parade's purpose is just as humble as its beginnings. In the early 1960s, Englewood was a community divided by rival gangs, but that didn't keep residents like Willie Pittman from seeing opportunity. Mr. Pittman gathered gang youth and other neighborhood children and started a drum and bugle corps. They would practice after school, marching up and down the streets of Peoria and Morgan - hotspots for gang activity.

Little did they know that their practice route would later become a parade route.

"We always ended in Ogden Park," recalls Stephens, "then Mr. Pittman would barbecue hotdogs, we'd drink Kool-Aid, and all our families would be there. It was like a family day picnic because by then we *were* all family."

Thus, the Englewood Back-to-School Parade was born.

To the community's surprise, violence declined in the area. Pittman's only requirement for being a part of the corps was simple: no fighting, no gangs. Children like Stephens longed for the opportunity to be a part of the corp: "I was in the gangs, but I got out because of Mr. Pittman. I wanted to be in the corps so I had to quit fighting. I had to leave the gangs alone."

Residents note that on the day of the parade, the violence and crime that typically riddles the community seems to vanish. Stephens attributes it to the success and legacy of the B2S Parade. On parade day, children and teens can be seen sitting on curbs, or directing onlookers to best spots to get a good view.

"Mr. Pittman would always say, 'education is the title, but knowledge is the key!'" recalls Stephens. In 1993, the Pittman family entrusted the Parade to Stephens, one of Mr. Pittman's first pupils. "I was asked to coordinate the Parade because we wanted to show that the Parade wasn't just for the Pittmans, but it was for the entire Englewood community."

Through the years, community support for the Parade has waned, yet Stephens makes it clear who was there since the beginning, "I could always count on folks like Henry Wilson, AR Leak, Sr. [of Leak & Sons Funeral Services], Bessie Trotter [of Action Coalition of Englewood], Walter Payton [of Walter Payton Foundation]...I never had to ask them, they were always willing to make a contribution."



Long time resident, Henry Wilson, lovingly known as "The Mayor of Englewood," has made significant contributions to the Parade since its start. Before it was a tradition, Wilson co-hosted the Englewood B2S Parade Breakfast at Saint Bernard Hospital. There, Wilson would welcome dignitaries, supporters and visitors to

the community. After breakfast, Wilson led tours of Englewood, highlighting the community's physical progress and rich history. Wilson's party would then join the motorcade, walking and waving from atop handmade floats.

Whenever the Parade would fall on hard times, the Committee could always look to trusted supporters such as Sis. Van Stratten of Saint Bernard Hospital, Chicago City Bank, Alderman Joann Thompson [16th Ward], State Representative Mary Flowers, even former Mayor Richard M. Daley.

"For ten years of his administration, Mayor Daley would walk the entire route of the parade," boasts Stephens. "You could see that he really loved children."

Despite the pleasant memories, the Englewood B2S Parade has an uncertain future. The Parade's Committee announced in March that it came to the difficult decision of canceling the event this year in hopes of getting back on track financially and resuming again in 2013. Upon the announcement, Stephens and the Committee asked for more support and involvement from residents, youth, and community leaders. Donating school supplies, volunteering, and even serving on the planning committee are just a few ways to help.

"It's been 52 years, it's time the community take responsibility and have ownership of the Parade," says Pittman.



Englewood's population has become more transient over the years. With younger families moving in and out of the neighborhood, few know the history of the community, let alone the legacy and purpose of the B2S Parade, which for some, may very well pass un-missed this year.

In response to the Parade's cancellation, many Englewood community organizations are sponsoring their own back-to-school themed events. For more information and to learn how other groups are celebrating the back-to-school season, visit <http://ragenglewood.org/events/>.

This article can also be found in our publication, *The Englewood Call*. For a copy, please call 866.845.1032 or send an email to joinrage@gmail.com