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North Richmond: An American story

**By Robert Rogers
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There was something about his smile.

At the right moment, it was effusive, light-hearted, the very picture of youthful insouciance. But the real Ervin Coley III was revealed at other moments. At the contemplative moments, the times when a young man considers a question, or glances around and conducts some kind of fleeting, unconscious reflection on his street, his block, his life, his very existence.

During those moments something different was on Coley's face, a mask that passed over him in a blink.

It was early February, 2011, and Coley burrowed his slender-fingers into the soft soil. The blues and purples and yellows of flowers and shrubs and herbs burst with color. He sifted for worms, his favorite garden critter.

Coley gently grasped the slimy creatures, looking at them, smiling that easy smile.

Of all the details of his 21 years, there was something strangely affecting about the worms. Maybe it was the simple gentleness with which he approached what was delicate, or his curiosity, sprouting from the seeds of his new job as a gardener. After his violent death a few weeks later, people remembered the worms.

In that vacant lot in a forlorn housing grid in what for 40 years has been arguably the most neglected neighborhood in the Bay Area, Coley mugged for news cameras. He joked and mused about the future, a future that suddenly seemed a little more hopeful for him, and for his neighborhood.

Then, like so many of these streets' sons and daughters, he was gone, long before any future could be realized.

This is North Richmond, a community forged during World War II and shunted to the margins ever since. In the early days, the rains and surging tides turned the streets to mud and swept away all but the sturdiest fixtures. Even today, not a single traffic light stands here, and the streets take on an inky darkness every night thanks to poor street lighting.

The community comprises fewer than 3,000 people, and carries the dubious distinction of having the lowest per capita income in Contra Costa County, about \$9,000, or less than one-third the county average.

The stark contrast is that this one-square mile of poorly-lit streets and aging structures is nestled within one of the world's most vibrant metropolitan areas. Within miles the largely undeveloped shore of San Pablo Bay, bridges, major highways and public transportation lines. How and when the seemingly inevitable rush of investment and development occurs could be one of the biggest stories of the next decade and a driver of area growth.

The potential exists not only for revitalization and an improvement of existing conditions, but for many of those who have lived here for generations to have a legitimate opportunity to be a part of the community's rebirth.

Or North Richmond could continue to languish, repelling investment with its incomparable concentration of poverty, violence, reputation and political division.

Old cinderblock buildings stand as slumping reminders of the robust facilities they once were and the future that never was, where people used to work in canneries or get their hair and nails done or get a drink and a meal or hear some blues music.

Violence lingers here, malignantly, just beneath the surface. Not in the frantic, breathless way that urban violence is hyped in a music video or a television show. This violence is intermittent and deadly, a burst of terror that breaks long stretches of monotony, then crackling gunfire and tire screeches, followed by screams and wails and sirens, odes to loved ones lost and then funerals where the old mourn the young.

Nearly every block has seen bloodshed at one time or another in the past 30 years. The corner store, the only grocery in the area – although it doesn't carry fresh fruits or vegetables – is a grim and puzzling testament to the insufficiency in this community.

The north-facing wall is bedecked in a swarm of colorful butterflies, painted in a happy medley. The painting, which the owner said was done by an Oakland youth group, seems the very incarnation of life and hope.

On the west-facing wall another reality exists. Letters are strung together, sometimes inscrutable, wrought by different hands. They are names, but they aren't on birth certificates or identification cards. They're names born of the streets.

"Dae." "Bezzy." "Top-Dogg." "Wax." "Big COOP."

The names may sound playful, but this is a roll call of the dead. These primitive, spray-painted memorials are somber nods to the toll that street violence has exacted here over the years.

But none of that history seemed to weigh on Ervin Coley when he worked and chatted under the sunshine on one of those days of faux spring so common in California. Coley had just turned 21, and had lived every one of those years in North Richmond.

“It’s been hard,” Coley said of his life in North Richmond. “There be a lot of negative people around here. There’s a lot of jealousy, a lot of envy, people don’t like to see people doing good, and people like to down talk people sometimes.”

Coley held a serious gaze for a moment. Then he smiled and re-affirmed: “I like to be happy.”

Just a few weeks later, Coley’s life was cut short. His violent death was marked by a maroon stain in the street, and nothing else. Sheriff’s officials said he was killed in a drive-by, and they had no suspects. The people in the neighborhood knew better. They said the shooters came from central Richmond’s “Deep C” gang, that they had ridden into North Richmond that night looking for a “mark,” that is, someone, anyone, to shoot.

Just when Coley had grown more optimistic and hopeful than ever before, he was gone.

“There is no sense in it, sooner or later the streets are going to take you,” said one of Coley’s co-workers on the garden project. He had just viewed Coley’s silver casket.

A dark past

North Richmond is distinguished by both bad reputation and bad luck.

Around the turn of the century, North Richmond was a tiny enclave of flimsy dwellings near the shore of San Pablo Bay. Italians, Mexicans, Asians and other immigrants who had come to the West Coast made up most of the population, along with a handful of African Americans.

Local historian Donald Bastin’s book, “Richmond,” features one photo from North Richmond, a black and white shot from 1930, shows a group of Italian and African American men, women and children. The people stand on weeded earth, and their position is bracketed with slanted telephone poles. In the caption, Bastin notes that nearly all of Richmond’s pre-war African American population – less than 1 percent of the total – resided in North Richmond.

According to a 2008 Contra Costa County study, early North Richmond “remained relatively undeveloped due to its isolation from Richmond’s industrial uses, which were located farther to the south and west.”

The study goes on to say that the area was blessed with rich soil, ideal for agriculture, but was prone to flooding because of its low elevation and proximity to creeks.

But things changed drastically with the onset of WWII, which profoundly transformed Richmond and many other American hubs of war industry. North Richmond’s story has always been intertwined with Richmond proper, but with its own distinct evolution.

The changes were just as profound, but far less noticed or recorded, in North Richmond, which had already established a civic, cultural and political identity all its own.

It was rural, and multi-ethnic. Particularly before the war, when the city was small and transportation even more spotty, North Richmond felt removed from Richmond, linked principally by a slender strip of road called 7th street.

In her book on the history of Richmond, "To Place Our Deeds," (2001) Sacramento State history professor Shirley Moore describes prewar North Richmond this way:

"By 1940, therefore, most of Richmond's African American population was concentrated in and around North Richmond, one third of which lay inside city limits, with the rest located in the unincorporated area. It was in close proximity to a garbage dump, it had few street lights, and its unpaved streets became muddy quagmires in the rain. North Richmond lacked adequate fire and police protection, depending on a single sheriff's car to patrol the entire county section. Before the war North Richmond had been a rural, ethnically diverse area where blacks lived alongside Portuguese, Italian, and Mexican americans. However, by 1943 North Richmond had become virtually all black. By 1947 nearly 14,000 African Americans lived in the city, one fifth residing in North Richmond."

And so went the transition: Hectic, tumultuous, haphazard, North Richmond grew from rural outpost with an eclectic mix of ethnic farmers and fisherman to a full-blown, bustling blue-collar community of hard-working African Americans.

The change came in the span of less than 5 years.

Little written history is devoted to North Richmond. One of the better explorations was published by Moore, perhaps the foremost expert on Richmond history. In researching and writing several books on the city of Richmond over the years, Moore's work also explored North Richmond, most of which is in the unincorporated county territory.

Moore's "Notes on the Black Community in Richmond, California 1910-1987," is a 103-page monograph that the city commissioned Moore to produce in 1989.

While the work is devoted to the black community in Richmond, North Richmond is discussed at length in several passages.

Among the main points Moore argues is that unrest developed in Richmond during and after the war, and that it emanated from inequitable conditions in housing, schooling and other public services. Some of that restiveness was linked to conditions in North Richmond.

One of the key moments in North Richmond history was a two-week period of riots that roiled the city in the spring of 1966.

Moore writes that the riots were "a significant factor in advancing black political, economic and social programs."

But the advances came at a price. Many observers have noted that the unrest and agitation among African Americans in urban areas may have accelerated the "white flight" that had already begun during the postwar era.

The 1966 riots were sparked by fights between involving black, Mexican American and white students at Richmond High School.

The outbreak "led parents and students to meet at North Richmond Neighborhood House to prepare a list of grievances to be presented to school officials," according to Moore. The Neighborhood House, which still operates in North Richmond, has been one of the few enduring gathering points in the community.

That point was also made by Lucretia Edwards, a longtime local activist whose work and writings have had a profound influence on Richmond and North Richmond.

City Councilman Tom Butt wrote in an obituary after her death in 2005 that Edwards "worked hard in the race riot years of the 1960s fighting racism in Richmond, where she was one of several founders of the North Richmond Neighborhood House."

Edwards herself wrote, in an essay that is still used today by the Richmond Progressive Alliance, that "... in 1956, the North Richmond Neighborhood Council was formed, the first neighborhood council in the San Francisco Bay Area."

Residents formed neighborhood councils and worked to improve conditions.

The activism may also have been influenced by the construction of nearby Parchester Village, a development built just to the north east of North Richmond and envisioned as an integrated suburban community, itself a novel idea in 1950.

But the idea proved ahead of its time, and instead of an integrated community, Parchester Village emerged a solidly black – and emerging black middle class – community, with many of its first-time homeowners being veterans of the good jobs in Richmond's shipyards and who had formerly lived in the less desirable confines of North Richmond.

Part of this social migration was Ervin Coley III's great grandmother and her family, who had come from the South in search of work. They moved into a house on Sanford Avenue, where Ervin would later spend some of his early years.

According to his mother, Mariecelle Lowery, also a lifelong resident and known in the neighborhood as "Reeseey," the family also bounced in and out of several apartments and public housing units over the years.

Another point Moore makes in her 1989 work is that a key North Richmond leader called for more police protection in the neighborhood from the city as early as 1943. The drastic increase in population citywide without an increase in police fed a growing crime problem.

"James Chase, a North Richmond resident and member of the Negro Protective League, went before the city council to plead for more police services to the neighborhood beyond the one patrol car assigned to the area," Moore wrote. "His attempts were unsuccessful."

It was a plea that would foreshadow a tension that exists in the community to this day, not only in terms of a community that has felt deprived of adequate resources, but has special challenges in lobbying its local leaders.

Chase took his concerns to the city, just a mile or so away. County government, which is responsible for public safety in most of the unincorporated neighborhood, was and is based in Martinez, about 20 miles away.

Moore's research also provided an important insight into how faith and the religious institutions brought from the deep south helped to serve as a base of stability and common ground to thousands of people enduring rapid change.

"North Richmond Missionary Baptist Church and McGlothen Temple provided religious continuity and sense of community to the transplants from the south. During late 1940s and 50s McGlothen's congregation increased dramatically, to over 300," Moore wrote.

Both churches remain in the community today, although with smaller congregations – many members commuting into North Richmond on Sundays, from the places to which they've moved.

But there is a key distinction between African Americans born within larger metropolises like Chicago or Detroit, with good jobs and relative freedom to move and buy within the city, and the early residents of North Richmond – and to some degree their descendants.

"It would be a mistake to think of African Americans coming into North Richmond thinking of a community of their own, or establishing a community of their own," Moore said during an interview in early 2011. "As blacks came into North Richmond, other groups moved out, and the places where blacks could live became very defined."

It was a place borne of the grim prejudices and brutal housing policies of the time, Moore said.

"North Richmond was where blacks were shunted to, put in, during the war," Moore said. "They were directed to North Richmond, they essentially had no choice, that's the context in which you have to examine this."

But Moore was careful to mention that North Richmond was the home of what had been a tiny African American population in Richmond before WWII would transform the city forever.

“A small population of African Americans lived in North Richmond before the war and liked it for a number of reasons,” Moore said. “It was more rural, people built their own houses. There was a community there. But the residents of North Richmond didn’t want to isolate themselves to the rest of the community, nor were they newcomers. Racial segregation was such that that was what tended to happen.”

According to Edwards’ writings, it was a tiny collection of families in a four-block section of North Richmond, with land and shoreline aplenty surrounding them. Beyond that, Edwards described the cauldron of racial and cultural ingredients that brewed in North Richmond during the tremendously destabilizing period that followed:

“The development of Neighborhood Councils in the City of Richmond came about, because of the upheaval of the city, occasioned by the Kaiser Shipyards that were located in Richmond during World War II. In 1940, prior to World War II, Richmond was a tidy industrial town of 23,000, centered on the western terminus of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, the deep-water port, and the Standard Oil Company, which would later become Chevron Corp. The African American population of the city at this time was 270 persons, almost all of whom lived in a four-block area in the northern part of the city. Then World War II brought the Kaiser Shipyards to Richmond, and in 1942, the population jumped to 50,000, in 1943 to 93,776, and by 1946 it hit its peak of 110,000. To house these workers 17,000 units of Lenham Act War Housing units were built on the empty lots on the south side of town. The shipyard workers were recruited throughout the United States, and a great number came from the southeastern part of the country. A high proportion was African American, primarily from the rural areas of Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mississippi. From the same states and at the same time, Caucasian workers were recruited, and southern blacks and southern whites carried their historical and cultural frustrations and hostilities with them.”

What was happening in Richmond and the small plot of land called North Richmond was not unlike what was occurring in other communities in America during the war years, Moore said.

“You saw the hardening of racial lines in many other cities” as labor demands and war mobilization drew new people, often African Americans, into communities.

Life in the new North Richmond of the war years was hard and bustling.

"They had very little control over conditions," Moore said. "The lighting, the roads, the storm drainage, etc. during the war, when it became so overcrowded."

Long-term plans for North Richmond were non-existent. While other areas of Richmond were in various stages of planning and developers were poised to undertake massive

projects for the new populations, North Richmond was expected to be a temporary domicile for a population of people that was simply unwanted.

"The city officials were planning to destroy the housing out there in the name of urban redevelopment, to tear it down after war to push black people out of city and out of county," Moore said.

But something changed.

"During the war, the 'Double V' concept grew and empowered African Americans to really take a stand and attempt to change conditions," Moore said.

The "Double V" was a turning point for African Americans. While America was engaged in a battle against the Axis powers abroad, the war fueled energies that began to resist segregationist policies in this country, thus two victories.

North Richmond would not be leveled and returned to rural harmony after the war, as some had hoped, nor would improvements come quickly. The city was in a full-scale expansion of housing stock and amenities after the war, but the poor, virtually all-black and off-the-beaten-path North Richmond would not be a high priority.

At the same time, class divisions were widening in the city's new black community, as some families did better economically and held onto postwar industrial jobs longer than others.

Parchester Village was, in part, a manifestation of this. With the help of white developers eager to provide housing for an emerging black middle class - and beyond the outskirts of city limits - Parchester Village was opened in 1950 and drew many of its residents from North Richmond. A small portion of the area's new black population had moved up in class with purchases in the new community.

"Parchester village was a community of people who understood their political power and what it would take to begin to fight for equality and equity," Moore said. "Some of the same happened in North Richmond, but to a lesser extent because the most influential and energetic people tended to leave for places like Parchester."

North Richmond has, even before the war years, been afflicted by unfortunate environmental circumstance. Standard Oil, today Chevron Corp., has refined oil just a few short miles away for more than a century, and the air-borne pollutants are regularly carried by onshore breezes right into the community.

"The environmental factors, the pollutants, are absolute negatives about the community," Moore said. "The whole city of Richmond has been looked upon by people in the surrounding communities, black and white, as an undesirable place to live. But North Richmond was probably the least desirable place to live in Richmond, because of the physical elements."

A music scene also emerged in North Richmond, featuring a strong, bluesy, country twang in the Bay Area that represented not only the influx of southerners but also other unique geographical and cultural heritages.

“You had not only African American musical and cultural traditions from the south, but also white Americans working class really taking root in Richmond as well,” Moore said. “Country music. Honky Tonks. You had people bringing in their cultural tastes with them.”

The music represented not only a curious blend, but also a rare harmonious point in race relations in a city where tensions often ran high.

“Richmond has always been a working class town, and these were the expressions of black and white working class people,” Moore said. “The food, the music, the entertainment all of it was a surge, an influx in a very short period of World War II, that created a unique and energetic cultural expression.”

The city of Richmond was taking on its own character, going from a small and quaint town in the shadow of massive oil refining operations to a big, bustling working class city. But North Richmond began this period with a slightly different cultural identity, and those peculiarities were only magnified.

“North Richmond, with its location on the outskirts, partially in the county, had been known even before the war as a place of borderline businesses, drawing gambling and prostitution from all over the bay area.”

North Richmond, during and after the war, was the location of several nightclubs that hosted performances and dancing, including the Savoy Club and Minnie Lou’s.

Many local African Americans still remember the raucous, vital scene at some of these dance and music joints in North Richmond, a memory that stands in sharp contrast to the perceptions of a younger generation that has grown up in a North Richmond marked by bleak poverty and virtually no nightlife.

“This was it, right here, where we had the old Minnie Lou’s,” said Joe Fisher, a prominent local businessman and lifelong Richmond resident. Fisher was standing on the corner of Third Street and Chesley Avenue. Today, it’s the building is refurbished and a county health center, but 30 years ago it was vibrant nightspot and a diner that served a rich breakfast.

“It was the most lively place that you could believe,” Fisher said. And Minnie Lou’s wasn’t alone. The Savoy Club, another night spot, was also on Chesley Avenue.

“They played Jazz, Rock n’ Roll, James Brown, all kinds of great music. Minnie Lou’s was first class, some of the best food you could get in the entire Bay Area. People here were a part of something great,” Fisher said.

But by the 1970s, the music scene was dead.

“Like everything, musical tastes change, blues music had this connotation as lower class, and as African Americans became more upwardly mobile, newer generations drifted away from that type of music,” Moore said. “People didn’t want to be with what was perceived as country bumpkins.”

And there was another, perhaps even more powerful influence that sped the decline of the raucous nightclub in North Richmond: television.

“Popular media, particularly the advent and availability of television, took a tremendous toll on mom and pop operations and live entertainment across the U.S., and North Richmond was no exception,” Moore said.

And so the music died. Today, Chesley Avenue is quiet and dark at night. An occasional car rolls by. Little distinguishes it from anywhere else. The history here is hard to know.

But perhaps it should not be. North Richmond is a historic African American community, in some ways a powerful distillation of the literal great migration from the South during World War II, and the cultural and social journey toward upward mobility that black men and women in America embarked upon at the same time.

Yet there are no statues here. No historic districts. No libraries. A few murals on the walls of a teen center and a community center are about the extent to which public art and historical celebration come together. A health center stands where Minnie Lou’s once pulsed with activity. There are some photos and other monuments to the past.

“There needs to be a recognition of the effort of the black community in North Richmond and what they did,” Moore said.

The title of Moore’s most acclaimed book on Richmond, “To Place Our Deeds,” comes from longtime Richmond resident Margaret Starks, who used the phrase when Moore was interviewing her about the history of African Americans in Richmond.

“I asked her about black people in Richmond,” Moore said. “And she said that when talking and recounting the heroic efforts of the people who came to Richmond to work, you have to reassess the notion that there wasn’t much there, or that it was just simple people working. You have to place our deeds in the right light in order to understand what we’ve accomplished, Starks told me,” Moore said.

“Those places and people in North Richmond specifically deserve recognition and commemoration,” Moore said.

North Richmond would always differ from Parchester Village. On the surface, one sees two similar places – both small communities with tracts of bungalows on the northernmost outskirts of town, noticeably demarcated from the rest of the city. For decades, both were solidly African American.

But the neighborhoods represent different origins, aims and perceptions. North Richmond grew in an unplanned, capricious manner, sprouting from tiny pre-war seedlings into a bustling neighborhood that overwhelmed its crude infrastructure. There was never much regard for strategy or future considerations.

Parchester Village, on the other hand, was a postwar housing development set down with a clear vision.

“Parchester was a deliberately planned community, at first planned as an integrated community,” Moore said. “The people who moved in were mostly African American, and they voted and were engaged more than many other parts of the city right from the beginning. There was a community of politically astute people, many of them solidly middle class and very active in their community.”

As it eased past the war’s frantic pace and transitioned into a peacetime economy, it was clear that North Richmond needed major investment.

“After the war much of the old housing was declared dilapidated and inhospitable,” Moore said. “They wanted to tear it down and replace it with other uses, including industrial. That kind of attitude has prevailed for a very long time.”

But what replaced much of the rickety, temporary housing was something that would leave a longer, but not necessarily better, legacy.

Infrastructure of poverty

When he was hired on with the “Lots of Crops” program in December 2010, Ervin Coley III was living with his mom and baby brother. They stayed in a public housing unit on the first floor of the Las Deltas Housing Projects, a cluster of 224-public housing units notorious for crime and saddled with chronically insufficient funding, scant security and a months-long backlog on maintenance.

“This place is garbage, you know, but people up here got to deal with what they be given,” said Lowery, pacing around the first-floor unit she shared with Coley before his death. An impassive technician from Comcast worked to fix her cable connection as Lowery spoke. “We make do, cause that’s what we got to do.”

In the 1940s and 1950s, the growth of public housing projects was a fact across urban America. North Richmond was no exception, and construction on the sprawling Las Deltas Public Housing Projects began in the late 1940s. When it was completed in the 1950s, the cinderblock structures occupied several North Richmond blocks and comprised 224-low cost housing units, almost all of which went to black residents.

By the 1980s, the projects, like the community surrounding it, had become rife with crime, poverty and blight. News clips from the period portray North Richmond as a violent, crumbling community of crime and neglect.

“After the war, there was an influx of government-funded housing projects for poor people, and Richmond seemed to be a magnet for that kind of housing. That kind of housing proliferated in North Richmond, and it has outlived its usefulness,” Moore said.

As in North Richmond, the bulk of the nation’s public housing was built in the 1940s and 1950s and is now in poor condition. Federal funds consistently fall short of what is required to maintain the system, so some counties are simply tearing down older units, often replacing the capacity with housing vouchers for private dwellings.

During the last 15 years, the nation’s public housing units have been downsized by more than 150,000 units, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In North Richmond, about one-third of Las Deltas’ units are shuttered.

Residents of Las Deltas say service is poor.

On a cool January morning, longtime resident Janet Polk, who is in her 50s, points to the kitchen ceiling of her unit. The paint is peeled and flaking and some boards are exposed. The damage is caused by small leaks in the pipes of an upstairs bathroom.

Mold has taken root in the walls and under her kitchen sink, Polk said.

“They don’t do nothing, nothing,” Polk said of the housing authority. “I call and complain all the time, and they only come out if there is an emergency, like a plumbing clog, and even then it takes them weeks.”

Walking the courtyard outside, a visitor sees residents peer from the windows of their upstairs units, eager to yell out and criticize the county’s housing authority.

The dissatisfaction is likely to continue. According to a 296-page assessment report produced in January by EMG Corp., a consulting firm hired by the housing authority, Las Deltas requires about \$3.5 million in immediate repairs, ranging from fixing faulty smoke detectors to trimming overgrown trees and rectifying unreadable signage.

When EMG officials were inspecting the site in July 2010, work was already underway on a \$2.3 million exterior modernization project, paid for by the one-time infusion of funds from the stimulus package, known officially as the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act. The housing authority contracted with Bayview Painting and Construction, a Burlingame-based construction company, to beautify the outside of the buildings and do some interior rehabilitation, said Joseph Villarreal, the executive director of the county Housing Authority

But that project stirred up its own controversy among residents, because it employed only two North Richmond residents.

“This was stimulus money, and it is local officials’ job to ensure that the money is used in a way that benefits the residence of the communities where the money is used,” said Saleem Bey, a local organizer and community activist in North Richmond. “This is simple construction work that local residents could have done with a few skilled support staff. Instead, they gave millions of dollars to people who don’t live here.”

Villarreal acknowledged that not many local workers were hired, but noted that in the competitive bidding process, the contractor was under no legal obligation to use local labor.

“We encouraged [local hires],” Villarreal said. “They are better than most, they tried with an open [application] process. We’re happy with them.”

Still, despite the recent work, the complex remains drab, under-occupied and forbidding. Given current funding, and the unlikelihood that Congress will look to restore public housing across the nation, Las Deltas’ future is in doubt.

Back at her unit, Lowery is rummaging through boxes, looking for old pictures of her son. He had lived with her here, lived with her in more cheap houses and apartments in North Richmond than she could remember. Now he was dead, and she needed to scrounge up some images of him for a slideshow to be shown at his funeral.

Lowery is what you could call a prominent citizen in North Richmond. Her family was part of the wave of immigrants who came in during the war, and she has dozens, maybe hundreds, of cousins scattered through the projects and surrounding housing stock.

A tiny wisp of woman, she moves like a humming bird, and lets fly with stream-of-consciousness harangues that break only for breaths.

“This is home, we always have been ready to live here and live it to the fullest but we’ve always known that the system and the conditions from the powers that be are infecting us with something that’s at work out here,” Lowery said. “Where we going to go? This is all we know so we best make it right here.”

Another woman, a childhood friend, looked on from the a black couch a few feet away, smoking a long menthol cigarette, humming a reassuring “uh huh.”

“Don’t you see? We aren’t powerful, we have nothing,” Lowery said, raising her voice. “If Ervin was white and dressed like a stockbroker and he got chased down and shot down in the street, we would have the National Guard up in here!”

About five miles away, at some county offices in El Cerrito, officials have a different view.

County Supervisor John Gioia, like Villarreal, said Las Deltas is destined to be replaced, not restored.

“The future of Las Deltas is that its days are numbered,” Gioia said. “It’s a question of coming up with a financing plan to basically demolish and replace it with something that will add benefits and higher quality housing to the community.”

Gioia summed up the circumstances.

“Housing authority doesn’t have the funding to improve the properties, and the reality is that is very unlikely to change,” Gioia said.

The politician

Sitting in his El Cerrito office in late 2010, County Supervisor John Gioia isn’t happy, but he’s hopeful.

A trim, unfailingly polite man who recoils at formality (“call me John,” he insists), Gioia is the de facto political voice of the 2,300 or so souls who call unincorporated North Richmond home.

While not universally supported by local leaders, particularly those who see the county as a hindrance rather than a supporter of progress, Gioia has amassed numerous achievements in representing a community that amounts to a politically insignificant share of his overall constituency, and surely a lower ratio of voters.

“Politically, Gioia is awfully strong,” said Vernon Whitmore, publisher of the Richmond Globe, one of the Richmond area’s two black-owned newspapers. “He’s seen as a guy who can get things done, get resources to Contra Costa County.”

Gioia says he has a particular fondness for North Richmond, and ticks off his accomplishments there with verve. He even brings up that he met his wife, who came to North Richmond to work on a federally backed community service project in the late 1990s, while they were both working in the community.

With a broad coalition of support and deep roots to the area – his father was a longtime teacher at Kennedy High School and a highly respected Richmond resident – Gioia has a history of working with political leaders in the city and bringing in resources from the county.

In the late 1990s, he made headlines by criticizing Chevron Corp. for not having a preparedness plan in case of a disaster, the fallout of which would acutely impact North Richmond residents.

He also is credited with creating a mitigation fund, paid for by the nearby landfill – which emits airborne and other pollutants into North Richmond – and aimed at investing in the neighborhood. The fund has brought millions into the neighborhood since 2006.

And in 2007, he earned resounding support from the community, and from some of the leaders who now oppose him, for his lead role in forcing the closure of “Golden 7,” a liquor store in the 500 block of Market Street that had become a magnet for drug sales, loitering and violent exchanges.

Gioia has been in office since 1998, a grim time in North Richmond’s history to be sure, but a period not without effort and even some notable successes.

“The sad truth is that North Richmond has been isolated, historically,” Gioia says.

Like many residents and historians, Gioia makes special note of how “vibrant” and “lively” North Richmond was during the immediate postwar years and the 1950s. As he chats, he breezily flips through several books on Richmond that he keeps on the shelves of his El Cerrito offices, pointing out sections that refer specifically to North Richmond.

But the reality is that the heyday is long gone. The community has been in a long slide, aided by unfortunate geography, history and political configuration.

“Certainly, being near a landfill, near a sewer treatment plant, near Chevron, near General Chemical, surrounded by railroad tracks, these things have all contributed to North Richmond being perceived as a less than desirable place for investment,” Gioia says. “And this is an area that would flood periodically even after World War II.”

The history of the past decade has been one of fits and starts, little victories and disappointing setbacks.

In the early 2000s, as the ill-fated housing boom was just taking off, North Richmond seemed poised to prosper, Gioia said. Nowhere had cheaper land in the Bay Area, and values were on the ascent, usually a recipe for eager buyers to be more likely to look in places they otherwise would not in search of affordability.

KB Homes, the national housing developer, built a major development of single family homes in the in the early 2000s, hoping to capitalize on the upswing in housing demand

and prices. Prices for homes in North Richmond were scaling unprecedented heights, moving well over \$500,000 for a basic 3-bedroom home.

Instead, Gioia says, sales were sluggish and prices fell drastically in the ensuing years.

Residents and buyers quickly began having misgivings about the tract's neighbor - the Las Deltas Housing projects - and demanded that walls and fences be built to provide a clear dividing line.

Today, even with some of the cheapest land prices in the Bay Area, interest is tepid.

"People were looking at moving in or investing in property for a time, but that has changed," Gioia says.

Meanwhile, according to the county Assessor's Office, similarly modest homes are scattered all over North Richmond for less than \$100,000.

Any development, county-supported or otherwise, is exceedingly difficult to get off the ground.

Gioia said there is an aging building at in the 1500 block of Third Street, next to the Sheriff's substation, that is particularly bothersome.

"We've been trying to get a market into that building for a long time," he said, pointing to the approximate spot on a map of North Richmond that hangs on his conference room wall. "It has been really hard to get someone in there."

Why the trouble?

"No one wants to move in there without an alcohol permit, and we don't want to give them one," Gioia says.

Gioia said that the county has had to close businesses in recent years.

"One store went from a family-owned and operated to ownership by unscrupulous owners," Gioia says. "It had numerous code violations."

The neighborhood is changing, most evident on the Richmond city side, where streets bordering the southern railroad tracks are dotted with homes that fly the flag of Mexico.

"The neighborhood is nearly half Latino now," Gioia says, adding that the continued infusion of new, working families must be part of the neighborhood's growth in the future.

“Crack ravaged families in North Richmond in 1980s” chirps Luz Gomez, Gioia’s chief of staff, dropping in to offer a few points before ducking out to work in her office. Gomez also works as Gioia’s liaison to the North Richmond community.

Gioia firmly believes that North Richmond will have a future of growth, particularly in housing and retail and commercial investment. He said that he’ll push for a vote in 2011 to rezone the largely vacant, formerly industrial lands to the north of current housing stocks, an action which would allow for developers to build homes and retail centers in the area.

The spot could become a magnet for new homeowners and young professionals looking for affordable housing in the Bay Area.

The location’s proximity to Bay Area job centers and the nearby San Rafael Bridge could be a strong incentive. Regional transportation infrastructure, like BART and Amtrak lines, have been developed nearby in recent years. Specific plans developed by the county lay out an enticing vision of North Richmond as the Bay Area’s next hot spot for affordable housing and new homebuyers and working families.

“We want to be ready for when the market turns around.” Gioia says, “because the area is well-positioned.”

Gioia is not alone. Richmond City Councilman Jim Rogers, in a guest column that appeared in the Alameda Times Star on March 13, 2010, argued that North Richmond’s shoreline is a misused jewel.

Rogers noted that much of the city’s - and North Richmond’s - extensive shoreline was long ago claimed by industrial interests in a hasty land grab that did not take into account the public good.

But to Gioia’s critics, all the explanations amount to excuses for neglect and poor political representation.

Mister Phillips, a local attorney, is one of Gioia’s most vociferous critics. Gioia trounced Phillips when he challenged the incumbent for his supervisor seat in 2010.

But his unsuccessful campaign did highlight the plight of North Richmond, as Phillips railed against what he called “horrible” conditions and inadequate public safety, problems he laid firmly on Gioia’s doorstep.

“Those of us who have spent significant time in North Richmond know the county has failed to provide North Richmond basic public services like street lights, which has contributed to crime in the area,” Phillips said.

Phillips' campaign against Gioia was unsuccessful in part, some observers believe, because he spent too much time focusing on the plight of North Richmond. A community so poor and so small doesn't pay much in terms of ballot box dividends. Phillips said he has no regrets.

"The county has under-served North Richmond, because North Richmond's county supervisors have allowed the county to under-serve North Richmond," Phillips said. "When a county supervisor tells the people there is little to nothing he can do about poor service by county departments, he is not being honest."

A people

On a warm night in May, 2010, four men tinkered with a car near the corner of Truman Street and Silver Avenue. Like all the blocks in North Richmond, the nights are dark. Street lights are far apart. The glow is dim.

A red minivan with dark windows rolled south on Truman Street.

Witnesses recalled hearing dozens of shots. When the fusillade ceased, the smell of cordite and rubber lingered, and all four men had been shot.

Lawrence Gadlin, 23, of Berkeley, Gerald Jackson Jr. 34, of Richmond and Tony Albert, 51, of North Richmond were all killed, and the fourth victim survived.

With this act, 2010 became yet another year in which the homicide rate in North Richmond would be as high per capita as any community in the state, even the country. Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department, which found the suspect van days later, but not the killers, said it was the deadliest single attack since the late 1990s.

From 2005 to 2010, at least 28 homicides occurred in the county area of North Richmond alone, an area with a population that has averaged about 2,300. In four of the six years, there were five homicides, while in 2009 there were two and in 2010 there were six.

Using the FBI's standard for homicide measurement, five homicides in one year in an area this size equates to a rate of 217 killings per 100,000 people.

To put this in perspective, the city of Richmond, which has just over 100,000 residents, has averaged about 34 homicides a year during the last decade, a time during which it has consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in California.

Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, was declared the world's "murder capital" in 2009 by the Citizen's Council for Public Security, a nongovernmental organization, for a rate of 130 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.

Caracas, Venezuela, and New Orleans followed, with 96 and 95 homicides per 100,000, respectively.

So, in terms of homicide, North Richmond's rate of 217 homicides per 100,000 is more than six times higher than the city of Richmond, and nearly twice that of Ciudad Juarez, the focal point of a long drug war.

Complicating the numbers is the fact that in 2009-10 alone, seven more people were killed in a few block-area commonly viewed as part of the North Richmond neighborhood. But since the killings took place south of Chesley Avenue or on Brookside Drive between the railroad tracks, both on the other side of the arbitrary city boundaries, the deaths counted toward the overall city total instead of North Richmond's unincorporated community.

The political boundaries divide not only the resources, but the statistics, blunting what would be even more troubling numbers.

The numbers indicate that this has been one of the most murderous square miles of streets, buildings and houses in the United States.

"There's a mentality, a weariness, it's like Gaza or some war zone out here," said Saleem Bey, who has also worked as a supervisor in the Lots of Crops urban farming program, where he worked with and mentored Coley and a half dozen other local youths. "This is life in a war zone, and the kids are numb, like they're dead to the stress, before they have even become adults."

Joe McCoy also senses the impact of a life steadily menaced by fear. McCoy, who grew up in North Richmond during the 1970s and 1980s, now works in the community as an agent for the Operation of Neighborhood Safety, a city of Richmond-funded agency that aims to reduce violence by mediating neighborhood disputes.

"The kids here live in a different reality," McCoy said. "They don't feel safe, they don't even know what it is to feel safe. They don't feel safe in their own neighborhood, and they definitely don't feel safe going to outside neighborhoods, whether it's going to school, going to the mall, whatever."

Since April 2009, the Sheriff has increased patrols in North Richmond from three deputies to six. Law enforcement experts, including area commander Lt. Mark Williams, have credited the increase in part for a modest reduction in overall crime.

"We're definitely headed in the right direction," Williams said during an interview in late March. "And I'm optimistic about the future."

"With double the police staff out there, we can spend much more time building relationships in the community, building trust," Williams said. "We are able to address violent crime and quality of life with more focus."

The dissatisfaction over public safety resources is nothing new. Residents have groused about inadequate public safety staffing levels in North Richmond since WWII, when the neighborhood went from a few scattered farms to a bustling community of mostly African American shipyard workers and their families.

One of the grievances promulgated by community members at Neighborhood House in 1966, in response to local rioting, was that the county provided North Richmond with inadequate public safety. The recent increase of sheriffs in North Richmond bucks the historical trend, which has generally seen North Richmond as an underserved outpost in the Contra Costa County Sheriff's sprawling jurisdiction.

But the extra patrols came with a cost, and with questionable effectiveness.

In a curious twist, the poorest community in the county helps subsidize additional positions in the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department, which has faced tight budgets for several years.

The money comes from a "mitigation fund" established in an effort led by Supervisor Gioia to impose a fee on a county transfer station and landfill on North Richmond's coast.

The charges are based on tonnage that comes through the West Contra Costa Sanitary Landfill transfer station. The money, about \$600,000 annually, is overseen by a committee that includes three Richmond City Council members, three community members, and Gioia.

More than half of it goes to the Sheriff's Department, and the other half is split between several local nonprofits, including the garden program on which Bey and Coley work.

Money from the County Housing Authority, which operates Las Deltas, also pays for Sheriff's Department staffing. Many residents are pleased to have more security, but others believe that it shouldn't come at the cost of reducing other basic services.

"Every year we get less money for youth programming and we watch that sheriff and his \$100,000 plus salary and benefits sit in his car across the street," complained one volunteer in the youth center operated by the housing authority.

And the death toll ignores assault victims like Kamari Ridgle, who was 15 when he was shot 22 times in broad daylight while walking near the corner of Silver Avenue and Fourth Street.

Ridgle's injuries: A mangled arm. A shattered elbow. Bullet scars and surgical cuts cover his torso. He uses a colostomy bag to replace his mangled intestines, and his legs have badly atrophied. One bullet tore through his spine. Ridgle is now a paraplegic.

Somehow, Ridgle survived. His story was covered only with a several-sentence news brief in area newspapers.

What has North Richmond gained by spending much of its community development mitigation funds to fund Sheriff's patrols? While Lt. Williams asserts that overall crime is down, killings are not.

In 2010, the first year of increased patrols, was also the deadliest year since at least 2004, with six killings. Five months in to 2011, there were two killings, and only by luck were two other young men injured and not killed in drive-bys.

To some local leaders, the money should be spent on other programs.

"It's just stupid to think that paying \$300,000 to guys who don't know the community is going to be beneficial to our people here," said Rev. Kenneth Davis, a North Richmond activist and virulent critic of Gioia and the county. "That money could put dozens of young men to work building and improving our little neighborhood. Now that would reduce crime."

The persistent violence occurs against a backdrop of deep poverty, isolation, poor services and failed education.

In 2008, ESRI, a company that produces geographic information systems, did a demographic profile of North Richmond's unincorporated county community, which comprises all but a few blocks of the neighborhood.

The data it produced painted a picture of a community that is one of the most impoverished and crime ridden in the state.

Of 815 total household units, the median income was \$27,340. The per capita income was \$9,213. In Contra Costa County, the median household income is about \$78,815, and the per capita income is \$53,938, according to the county's 2010 economic forecast.

Of particular importance, only 27 percent of the overall households in North Richmond were owner-occupied, and just over 10 percent were listed as vacant.

Just 1.2 percent of adult residents had attained a 4-year college degree. and 46 percent did not have even a high school diploma. Countywide, 34 percent of residents have college degrees and only 16 percent drop out of high school.

In 2008, the unemployment rate in the neighborhood was 21 percent, a figure that is almost surely higher in 2011, as unemployment has risen at the state and local level. In Contra Costa County, the unemployment rate was 11 percent in December 2009.

Two thirds of the housing stock was constructed before 1969.

And there is further evidence that some of the numbers, particularly employment and income, are even worse today.

According to “Measuring What Matters,” a report published in 2009 by a coalition of area environmental and other groups, median household income in North Richmond was listed even lower, at \$24,131, the lowest of more than 20 of the most impoverished communities in the Bay Area.

The report also found that the community had little ethnic or economic diversity, save for the influx of Latino immigrants over the recent decade.

More than 95 percent of residents were listed as “people of color” in the report.

A filmmaker’s eye

The North Richmond documentaries air regularly on local television, and abridged versions are posted on a popular YouTube channel. They feature interviews with local elders, analysis by historians and grainy, black and white footage of a people and an area, dating from World War II.

The images bear out the reminiscences of many of the neighborhood’s older residents: Shots of an almost exclusively African American community, lined with dusty dirt roads, small, ramshackle houses and rural flourishes such as small windmills.

It doesn’t delve too deeply into the crime and poverty that plagued the community as the war industry demobilized and unemployment soared, but it doesn’t have to.

This collection was created by a former city of Richmond recreational director and a team of youthful collaborators.

Before he was a filmmaker and local historian, Doug Harris worked at Shields Reid Community Center in North Richmond for three years beginning in 1993.

If historian Moore explores Richmond’s history in granular detail, Harris focuses his lens on North Richmond, and tells history through the kinetic flash of video.

“I began to learn about North Richmond and all the history, and I was kind of blown away,” Harris said. “There were so many kids in the neighborhood, and I felt that they were in an extremely tough, almost impossible situation. It was a fractured community.”

Harris said that by 1993, North Richmond was in dire shape.

“The business community had pretty much died by the time I got there,” Harris said. “The transportation infrastructure was part of the problem, I think. There were just a couple routes in and out of the community. The people, the families, were very close knit, but the community was dying for some leadership.”

Shields Reid Park was a hub, especially for youths, Harris said, but community gathering spots were scarce.

“The old blues clubs, they were all gone by then,” Harris said. “There was no more entertainment.”

Harris emphasized that when he worked in the portion of North Richmond that is part of the city of Richmond, public services were inadequate and poorly-coordinated between the county and city.

Harris was transferred out of North Richmond in 1996, and soon after he resigned his position with the city.

A budding filmmaker, Harris was commissioned by Contra Costa County in 1999 to develop a history program documenting the community, and training local kids in using media tools to help telling their own story.

From 1999-2005, Harris oversaw the production of three documentary films about North Richmond’s history.

“My little academy, it’s called Digital Technology Academy, gives kids in the neighborhood a chance to train with media technology and be part of the production teams in a way that helps them not only learn, but be part of telling the story of their own community,” Harris said.

“In 1993, the violence wasn’t too out of control, the crime was more about drug sales and prostitution,” Harris said. “As I understood it, the real violence had really happened in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, when North Richmond was known as the murder capital of the country.”

But, as he was easing out, the crime seemed to be ramping up, Harris recalled.

“The shootings started to return in the late 1990s and 2000s,” Harris said. “I can’t really say exactly why, but a high majority of the violence and killings were being caused by people who would come into North Richmond, looking for people in the neighborhood to target.”

Looking back, Harris realizes that those were the days when the feud between North and Central Richmond were heating up, and when North Richmond in general was taking on a stigma powerful enough to brand all the families who lived there. The bloodlines are strong. As the years have ticked by and the neighborhood has deteriorated, those who had

the chance already left for outlying areas. Those left behind were the most hopeless and, increasingly, related by blood.

“One thing that always strikes you out there is how many people are cousins,” Harris said. “It’s not a figure of speech, people really have family trees that spread out that far.”

Harris said the smallness and familiarity of the community is part of the explanation for why violence has increasingly been between rival neighborhoods, why feuds have simmered and memories have grown longer and the drive for vengeance can last years.

The latest episodes of violence may all trace to an incident as trivial as a 2003 fender bender involving men from rival Central and North Richmond cliques, Harris said.

“it’s a close knit group in North Richmond, so they don’t kill each other,” Harris said. “And they remember those they’ve lost.”

The Bay Area’s dump

From the corner of Filbert Street and Chesley Avenue, the unofficial center of North Richmond, a visitor gets the full sensory onslaught that the community has endured for decades.

To the west, the largest oil refinery on the west coast spews plumes of white smoke that spout during “flaring,” a process that releases airborne gases generated during the petroleum refining process.

To the north, one may hear the rumble of trucks, which incessantly roll by loaded with various wastes, en route to the nearby landfill.

To the south are the empty buildings and the noisy railroad tracks.

On any given block at any given time, there may be a pile of discarded trash – mattresses, paint cans, diapers. While not quite the nuisance it was in the late 1990s, dumping remains a menace.

In the late 1990s, the neighborhood was literally a dumping ground for private and commercial interests all over the Bay Area looking for a place to unload garbage for free. Newspaper accounts from the time describe entire blocks and vacant lots covered in flotsam and jetsam, the toxic loads dumped under the cover of night.

“You’ve got to understand what that does to a psyche of a community, and it still persists,” local activist Bey said. “We have literally been the garbage can for everybody else. The disrespect is just total.”

Bey sees it all daily. He has been an activist in North Richmond for just a few years, but he's made an impact, both good and bad. He started working in the neighborhood as a county employee in youth and educational programming, but soon ran afoul of Gioia and Barbara Becnel, leader of the Neighborhood House.

"Saleem is one smart, strong brother, and he's a Muslim, but most of all he is just someone who is not going to be a yes man to anybody," said one county employee who asked not to be identified. "It was only a matter of time before the powers that be would have enough of him."

Speaking in a small community building at that corner of Filbert Street and Chesley Avenue, Bey admits as much.

"The county, and John Gioia, they want to keep things the way they are out here, which is basically a source of funds to keep employed a whole structure of county workers who benefit and make money from this poverty," Bey said. "I wanted to see solutions, to see progress, and so they cast me off because I wouldn't play the game."

Gioia says Bey has tried to intimidate the county into providing him funding for unproven programs.

The result is that the community's progress in improving its environment has slowed.

In March, 2011, Becnel opted to return \$175,000 in county grant money which had been meant to develop a North Richmond "Eco-Academy" to employ young people and expand on agriculture and beautification in the neighborhood.

Becnel alleged that Bey threatened her with organized protests if she didn't give him the reins to the program. Bey said he developed the program and was tapped by Becnel to lead it, but that Gioia directed Becnel to remove him.

"It's divide and conquer out here," Bey said.

The ugly squabble over funding for an eco-program is just the latest misstep. The environmental predicament in which North Richmond finds itself is a recurring theme that has degraded quality of life and marred the area's reputation for decades.

The reputation for air, water and soil pollutants - regardless of how serious the dangers - may have hurt investment and prospects for the community.

But precisely how bad, or how dangerous, the pollution in the area is difficult to gauge. The problem may be more aesthetic and psychological than physical.

Richmond City Councilman Rogers, in his memorable guest column that appeared in the Alameda Times Star on March 13, 2010, argued that North Richmond's shoreline is a wasted asset.

“Locating a firing range in the middle of what should be a major recreational asset for nearby low-income neighborhoods is only one of the many zoning mistakes that can be corrected,” Rogers wrote.

The firing range, called the Richmond Rod & Gun Club and located on San Pablo Bay just off Goodrick Avenue, has occupied large swath of the shoreline since at least the 1980s.

Rogers wrote that noise and pollution from the shoreline shooting range squandered the area’s broader recreational appeal. He proposed dedicating a specific tax income stream from shoreline properties to be used to reclaim or subsidize relocation of the interests currently occupying the land.

“Having a detailed parcel-by-parcel vision is only the start. We need a vision of shoreline access, which gets all kids introduced to what our shoreline has to offer, whether that is windsurfing, kayaking, marine-based biology educational programs, beaches, the Bay Trail, etc. Having a thriving shoreline is a triple bottom line: Good for recreation, good for local jobs and good for the environment by reducing some lengthy recreational car trips to other shorelines,” Rogers wrote.

The Community Air Risk Evaluation (CARE) program produced a 2008 report that offered assessment and recommendations on the areas in the Bay Area most vulnerable to air pollution. North Richmond was on the short list, along with West Oakland and the city of Richmond.

Ralph Borrmann, public information officer for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, said that while North Richmond faces several environmental challenges, the risks are not necessarily more extreme than in many other communities in the state, including West Oakland.

“With the rail transport, and the highway, and the Chevron and the landfill, there are a number of sources” of emissions in the area, Borrmann said.

Borrmann said North Richmond is in part spared from further pollution because of its relatively remote location.

“When you look at what your risks are, usually one of the main culprits is, where is the highway? Where is the truck traffic?” Borrmann said. “In this case, the traffic from Richmond Parkway is not particularly heavy or close.”

As for Chevron, which is less than one mile away, Borrmann acknowledged that those emissions may affect residents, but noted that “Refineries are heavily regulated, probably as much as any industry in the country, and as much in California as anywhere in the country.”

Another 2009 report, “Measuring What Matters,” states that the way in which industrial development was conducted without community input has created a curious twist of logic – a shoreline community with no access to the shoreline, and a heavy dose of pollutants.

“The Richmond Parkway—a major transportation corridor for trucks—divides most residential neighborhoods from the coast. Union Pacific train tracks run parallel to the parkway. In addition, industrial facilities, ranging from a commercial nursery to a regional landfill to Chevron, line the parkway. For residents, these structures have cut off the recreational, aesthetic, and educational opportunities created by open spaces and have harmed the local ecology and environment.”

The chronic pollution says nothing of the hazards from accidents.

In July 1993, a railroad car carrying sulfuric acid from General Chemical Corp. ruptured in North Richmond, spewing tons of the highly toxic chemical into the air and sickening thousands of residents. In the aftermath of the spill, General Chemical pleaded no contest in to misdemeanor charges that it was at fault in the discharge and agreed to pay \$800,000 to build a health clinic in North Richmond, as well as claims for residents that averaged about \$3,000.

The Center for Health opened in 1999 and is considered one of the community’s more important assets.

Dr. Henry Clark, a longtime leader and activist in North Richmond and the executive director of the West County Toxics Coalition, said the history of pollution in the area has always sent a foul message to residents.

“People of our community have always known that we are to some degree seen as expendable, that our lives are less important and more ready to be subjected to such dangers than other people in other places,” Clark said. “That’s why we have and will continue to struggle for our rights here.”

In the garden

“It’s hot,” Ervin Coley said as he rinsed the dirt from his hands under a water spigot. A moment later he was chomping on a crisp red apple.

Looking out from the garden on that February day, Coley’s gaze was set on Third Street, a corridor which has seen it all over the years. The blues clubs, the trash, the floods under torrential rains and brown muddy streets. The altercations. The shootouts. The drivebys.

Coley had been shot at numerous times as a teenager and young adult, his mother said. Coley himself, belying that sweet smile, sheepishly offered that he had suffered a gunshot wound to the head when he was a teenager.

“Me myself personally, I’ve been shot in my head,” Coley said. “It took me a month (to recover), and they thought it would take me six months.”

No one thought of Coley as a gangmember. He certainly didn’t. But he grew up in North Richmond. Worse yet, in Las Deltas. These housing projects are known as “Project Trojan,” territory, named for the crew of young men and boys that have grown up here and loosely associated themselves into what law enforcement would classify as a “gang.”

For decades, these roots have shown like a badge of dishonor in other parts of a city. To some, a target. McCoy, the ONS agent, mused that when he was a kid in the 1970s, being from North Richmond was a source of pride.

“Now these kids carry an ugly stigma when they go out into central Richmond or Pinole or wherever,” McCoy said.

But Coley hoped all that drama would be behind him. He was in the vacant lot on Third Street, in the 1600 block, working with the Lots of Crops program.

The program, which aims to take some of the dozens of vacant lots scattered through the neighborhood and convert them into community gardens that produce fresh foods for residents, is funded through the county, the dollars left over after the mitigation fund is sliced up among sheriff positions.

Instead, the drama would find him again, and this time he wouldn’t survive. Sheriff’s officials said Coley suffered “multiple” gunshot wounds. Bey said Coley was hit with at least eight bullets.

His strong, athletic body, which his mother said he would spend hours honing with pushups and weight training, was left lifeless on the street that night in late March.

At his funeral, his photos, so many of which were of him shirtless and smiling, flashed on a big screen above his coffin.

A few days after Coley’s death, Bey and Davis and about a dozen other activists protested outside Gioia’s office, demanding that funding for Lots of Crops be restored and that less money be diverted to the Sheriff’s Department.

By this point, the dust-up involving Becnel and Gioia had assured that Bey would no longer be working with the urban gardening program, regardless of future funding.

Coley’s mother was there. She was confused and sad, but she was there.

She didn't fully grasp what the purpose of the protest, or even how Gioia or the nebulous entity called Contra Costa County related to her problems. Chiefly, she was concerned with how to properly lay her son to rest.

"We can't have the funeral in the neighborhood," she said, squinting into the afternoon sun. "There's too much drama, so we have to go have it at Hilltop Church, like a neutral location."

In Coley's place, the activists brought a faceless cardboard cutout in the shape of a human head and torso. They sat the crude prop on a bench on the sidewalk while they protested in front of Gioia's closed office. All of the blinds in the windows were drawn tight. Davis yelled at the building through a megaphone.

A community apart

Those civic leaders who seriously grapple with the question of how North Richmond can break the ruinous cycle of crime, poverty and decline nearly always come to the conclusion that the current political arrangement is untenable.

"Any way you look at it, it makes no sense that North Richmond is not part of the city," said City Councilman Tom Butt.

Although Butt is a successful businessman in affluent Point Richmond, he had his own blunt encounter with the wall of opposition that has met many city leaders over the decades when they've floated the idea of annexing a neighborhood that is surrounded by city borders.

A councilman since the mid-1990s and arguably the elected official with the safest seat, Butt called on the city study the feasibility of annexing North Richmond and El Sobrante in 1996.

"I introduced a resolution for city staff to study the feasibility annexing North Richmond and El Sobrante," Butt said. "The council was very pro-development at the time, and it seemed like there might be opportunities."

As a white politician with a secure political base of affluent voters, Butt had little motivation to court future votes in the mostly African American enclave of North Richmond.

"I wanted to know what it would mean," Butt said. "The population out there was very poor and everybody thought it would be a problem, a drain, at least at first on the city."

It was something else, Butt remembered. The council may have gone along, and developers may have seen some opportunity, but that there was a powerful interest group working against any movement toward annexation of North Richmond.

“It was the big property owners, the industrial types, that wanted to avoid being in the city,” Butt said. “They’d start spreading money around, making contributions to influential organizations in the neighborhood, the same thing they have always done.”

Butt said he had trouble recalling who exactly pushed to avoid annexation, but he mentioned Color Spot Grower, a nursery company that ceased operations in North Richmond in 2007.

“You had a lot of the greenhouse operators who used a lot of energy, they’re all gone now, and they didn’t want to pay the utility tax in the city so they worked hard against annexation,” Butt said.

The city of Richmond has a 10 percent utility user tax on energy usage, while the county has no such tax.

Butt shook his head.

“I saw that (resolution) wasn’t going to go anywhere,” Butt said. “There was too much political power on the other side.”

That has been it, the recurring theme, for decades – along with a strain of rugged isolationism that traces back to the pre-WWII rural outpost days.

But it was during the postwar period when annexation came up often, Moore said.

"There were people who very much pushed for annexation, because they would be brought under purview of law enforcement, sanitation, and other services provided by the city that residents were dissatisfied in the level of service provided by the county."

Moore said the people have never been happy with services, but the question of how to improve was always murky.

"But there has always been a faction that preferred to live outside of the jurisdiction. It’s a tale of two cities in many respects."

Near misses with annexation occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

Two major movements were occurring in Richmond. First, African Americans had emerged as a new political power, thanks to the demographic shift brought on by WWII and the enlargement of participation thanks to the Civil and Voting Rights Acts.

Second, the city looked to expand, mostly northward, as the old downtown withered and retailers and other businesses looked to set up in the outskirts, closer to the consumers who had fled to the newer suburbs.

The trends seemed poised to lead to the annexation of this poor, isolated and solidly African American community.

Enter George Livingston, an African American councilman in the 1960s and 1970s who later became the city's first elected black mayor.

Livingston played a leading role in seizing the land for Hilltop Mall in the mid 1970s.

"We had to jockey against Pinole, and San Pablo was trying to get it," Livingston remembered during a lengthy conversation.

Now 76 and suffering from kidney failure, Livingston spends most of his days relaxing and thumbing through books and papers in his south Richmond home.

Livingston said the land for the mall was owned by Chevron, and other area cities were looking to annex it in order to get the tax benefits of a vibrant new retail center. But there was resistance from business leaders in the fading downtown district who saw the mall as a threat to siphon away their customer base.

"We had to make a political decision, and I thought the best decision was to get the shopping center," Livingston said.

But while securing Hilltop Mall for Richmond was a great coup, it did not solve the quandary of North Richmond, the dull side of the city's shiny new coin.

The rural, unwanted, neglected patch of poverty and pollution just northwest of the Iron Triangle and southwest of Hilltop. About 2,500 poor people, virtually all African Americans, lived there.

As mayor, Livingston wanted to bring North Richmond into the city.

"I said we need to bring those individuals in that were not getting what they deserve," Livingston said.

By any logic, it should be part of Richmond, not unincorporated county jurisdiction. Instead, a pencil-thin line runs through North Richmond, the space between two railroad tracks. It serves to connect the central city to Hilltop Mall, and thus satisfy state law that city lands must be contiguous.

"There was some feeling on the council to annex North Richmond, but there was a split group on the council," Livingston said. "At the time we had nine members and there were

some industrial interests out there who didn't want to be annexed to Richmond because they thought they would have a better political system to be just the county."

It was clear why the county was seen as preferable.

"They saw themselves as paying more taxes and having more scrutiny as far as regulations if they became part of the city, and they didn't want that," he said. "So they worked hard to lobby the council and to build support at the community level."

What followed was a tough, tricky battle that has been waged several times before and since, Livingston recalled. Major manufacturers, chemical processing companies, waste collectors and absentee landlords lobby to remain subjects of the county, and they always win.

Suspicious ran high that bribery was occurring, and even today, many insist it did, but can't tag the charge on any one person.

"All I can say is I never received anything," Livingston said.

He mulls the question further. To this day, North Richmond doesn't have a single traffic signal. Homicide rates there have, over the years, been some of the highest in the nation.

Maybe it could have all been different.

Was the political process corrupted?

"I don't know. It was so many years ago. There are some questions that you pass on, you know, I'm going to pass on that one," he said.

Councilman Nat Bates was a part of the process, and remembers it similarly.

"The big property owners didn't live out there, and they didn't want to pay the city property taxes, so they got together and did what they could to make sure the residents didn't vote for annexation," Bates said.

At the same time, North Richmond wasn't all that attractive, even to a city council that was well-represented by minorities.

"From a financial point of view, obviously annexation didn't resonate with council members," Bates said.

Still, Bates felt that they could have had a majority on the council, a point on which Livingston and he differ.

"We could have had the majority of the council, but we couldn't get the vote of the people, and the property owners were behind that," Bates said.

It was a familiar refrain: The people of North Richmond, poor and unaccustomed to participating in their local government because proceedings are conducted 20 miles away in Martinez, were easily dissuaded from supporting annexation.

Bates, Butt and Livingston, at different times and from different perspectives, each attested to how powerful interests used money and information campaigns to help stir opposition to annexation among the people.

Livingston, long out of power, and Bates, still in power, see the future differently as well.

As in most things, Livingston says he's optimistic. In the current council, he sees a group of eclectic but solidly progressive leaders who seem as likely as any to take on the task of annexing North Richmond, Livingston says.

Bates, the longtime political power player, isn't so sure.

"North Richmond would be a subsidized community, a net loss to the city," Bates said. "Got to put in streets, sidewalks, lights, who knows how much in repairs and upgrades. It's a tough sell to the voters in the rest of the city."

Butt said there would be a higher tax burden in the area in the event of annexation, but that "the trade off is you'd get more services if you were in the city. Some problems would likely be ameliorated . . . a county is set up to govern unincorporated areas that are sparse, not to provide municipal government to urban areas that require a range of services, and the fact is that with the borders the way they are the city is providing a lot of services out there to county residents, services that we aren't collecting taxes for."

Whether North Richmond would be a net fiscal loss to the city, especially long term, is not necessarily a given. City Manager Bill Lindsay is skeptical about whether North Richmond would ultimately profit the city, especially given development potential.

"There would have to be some work done in terms of assessing the situation," Lindsay said. "It's not a no brainer one way or the other."

Lindsay said the analysis would comprise three key areas: A fiscal analysis of initial costs and tax benefits, an analysis of redevelopment project areas and a look at land use policies.

"The county has recently done a specific plan, and the question is whether that is consistent with the city's view of land use in that area," Lindsay said.

Gioia has said that the northern lands above the current housing area, long marked for industrial development that has not happened, could be rezoned for housing and commercial and retail as early as this year.

Like many others, Lindsay is loath to approach the political aspects of annexation.

“The key is, we can’t be seen as doing a hostile takeover,” Lindsay said of annexation. “There has to be grassroots support in the community.”

But there is little doubt that such a move is afoot. Bey, along with Davis and others are already using community meetings and other forums to preach the benefits of annexation. Clark, the environmental activist and long a staunch opponent of annexation, has softened his position.

Lindsay said splitting the neighborhood politically has policy consequences and inefficiencies.

“There is a little bit of an extra burden in terms of coordinating the services, out there,” Lindsay said. “Especially the Police Department, which has a very complicated task in the sense that it is policing around the unincorporated island of North Richmond and they have to coordinate a lot with the sheriff.”

Richmond Police Lt. Arnold Threats agrees with Lindsay’s assessment.

“One of the challenges we have in addressing the violence is that one-half of the problem is jurisdictionally under the control of the sheriff’s office and the other half of the problem is ours,” Threats said. “Our bad guys go over into their jurisdiction and commit murders, commit crimes in retaliation, and their subjects do the same.”

Basically, both sides make the best of an imperfect arrangement, Threats said.

“We don’t work together as much as we can, quite frankly,” Threats said. It’s just a resource issue on the part of the county, they just don’t have the resources that they should to address the problem.”

Lindsay said ancillary issues of public safety and aesthetics were complicated by the abutting jurisdictions.

“Code enforcement and blight abatement is also a challenge,” Lindsay said. “We try to coordinate that with North Richmond mitigation fund, a lot of coordinating with a lot of different departments. It does create some complexity.”

While Mayor Gayle McLaughlin has not come out publicly for annexation, she routinely attends events in the county area of North Richmond, including a graduation from students in a youth program in 2010.

At the time, she said it made no sense to not treat the community as “Richmond” just because of an arbitrary political boundary.

New Councilman Corky Booze said repeatedly during his 2010 campaign that North Richmond should be annexed.

“These are my people, our people, and we should be fighting for them in our local government,” Booze said while campaigning in the neighborhood.

Councilwoman Jovanka Beckles sits on the mitigation committee and made numerous forays into North Richmond during her campaign in 2010.

One of the most powerful voices against annexation has been Clark. For years, Clark has opposed annexation on the grounds that the city would be no better than the county in providing for North Richmond.

Clark is one of the community’s most respected members. Tall and bespectacled, with a gentle manner and choppy eloquence, Clark sits on the committee that oversees spending of the mitigation fund as well as several other community boards. Clark played a lead role in rallying the community for redress after General Chemical Corps.’ toxic spill in 1993.

Clark’s critics concede that he may have had a point during the darker days of Richmond, the days of corruption in the Police Department and fiscal mismanagement, but say that now not only is the city more efficient and better managed, but that the distant county government has never been worse.

“I respect Dr. Clark, but I disagree with him on this issue,” Bey said. “He has worked closely with the county over the years, and I don’t know if that has affected his perception on the issue.”

Clark has, of late, distanced himself from the county. During the protest at John Gioia’s office, Clark was there, alongside Bey and Rev. Davis and members of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, a group that backs the coalition government in the city and favors annexation.

At that protest, Clark shifted position slightly, but still opposed annexation to the city.

“Now, I have come to the conclusion that we would be better off as our own township,” Clark said. “But in the short term, we need to take advantage of the resources we get from the county.”

Clark’s subtle shift – away from county, in favor of township, but not in favor of city – may reflect a building momentum toward annexation, a momentum he senses.

Momentum has never mattered much to Fred Jackson. His energy is sapped by his battle with liver cancer, but the 73-year-old Jackson has always been a man secure in his positions. A Korean War veteran who moved with his family to North Richmond in the

early 1950s, Jackson is arguably the most widely-respected man the community has ever produced.

“A great man, an icon,” Gioia said in February, just before the city and county agreed to rename Filbert Street “Fred Jackson Way” in honor of his decades of nonviolent activism.

While recuperating from a session of chemotherapy at a family member’s home near Hilltop Mall, Jackson said that with the passing years he has come to see a hazy issue more clearly.

“I’m going to take a walk, not a real walk but a walk in my mind,” Jackson said, reclining low in a sofa, his feet elevated. “Every step I take, I am crossing some new line, South Richmond, Central Richmond, North Richmond, the county area. I have come to wish that we could tear all these lines of demarcation asunder.”

Jackson, like many other longtime residents, ruefully recalls the pride that North Richmond residents once felt. But, as their community suffered disproportionately from economic malaise and racial and political isolation, that pride turned into a bitter badge of shame, Jackson said.

“Now I am of a mind that what North Richmond connotes has become such a liability that being incorporated into a greater Richmond, or a one Richmond, must be part of our future,” Jackson said. “The stigma has become oppressive all by itself.”

As respected local leaders have become more amenable to the prospects of annexation, the mood has taken hold within advocacy groups and political elites.

Mike Parker of the Richmond Progressive Alliance said that during a March 28, 2011 meeting, the group discussed the idea of supporting an annexation movement in North Richmond.

“North Richmond, as a community, is getting organized now,” Parker said. “I see the movement as something that emerges from the community and RPA acts as body that assists, as an asset to their cause.”

It was not certain that the RPA was behind annexation, Parker cautioned. To anyone from the outside – city council members, political groups, city residents – the fear is overreaching, in being seen as foisting on the community something that a majority of them don’t want. Parker said.

“The assumption is we’re all for it at the RPA. I can’t say exactly when, but we’ll be considering a formal motion to approve this at some point. We want to help the leaders in the neighborhood.”

Parker spoke during a parade in downtown Richmond in April. Davis, who was at the March 28 meeting, hovered over the shorter Parker as he talked.

Rev. Kenneth Davis is an enigma. An angular, lanky senior citizen, Davis walks with a hunched gait today, but is still an imposing presence at well over six feet. Davis doesn't lead a church, doesn't wear nice suits and doesn't always say nice things.

He has been known to attend City Council meetings cloaked in camouflage, and often berates members of council with an ire that tests the bounds of decorum. During a 2009 meeting during which the council approved more than \$300,000 for a bulkhead to divide a new pool in affluent Point Richmond, Davis openly accused bulkhead supporters of racism.

On his Facebook page, Davis has written incendiary attacks against Gioia and his allies, calling them "poverty pimps" and "slavemasters" in their approach to governing North Richmond, language that earned Davis the condemnation of local newspaper editorials.

But that same readiness to jump into the fray and harangue local officials has endeared him to many longtime North Richmond residents.

Up close, Davis is every inch the blunt-speaking activist, a force of a man fond of jutting his sharp features right into the face of his startled political opponents.

"The county has the blood of my people out here on its hands," Davis said the day after Ervin Coley's death, which he spent walking the blocks and meeting with residents.

But on this day, at the downtown parade days after the bloodshed in North Richmond, Davis was on the hunt for elected leaders.

Booze walked by, chatting with several residents in tow. Davis beelined across the City Hall parking lot to intercept the councilman.

Time to go to work on behalf of North Richmond, Davis told Booze in no uncertain terms. We need you to push the campaign for one Richmond, Davis said.

"We have got to make the move this year, I am tired of these poverty pimps being over us out there Corky and you got to be a part of this," Davis said, wagging an index finger. "Our time is now."

Booze nodded agreement, but remained passive during the exchange. During his campaign and prior to it, Booze repeatedly stated that he felt the unincorporated area of North Richmond ought to be part of the city.

"The RPA is with me, the people are with me, we are going to make this thing happen," Davis said.

Death of hope

The kids walked east on Silver Avenue, tossing back and forth a frayed, half-deflated football. It was the afternoon of March 30, 2011. Silver was lined with empty lots overgrown with trash-tangled weeds. The sun was bright and strong, pitched west, casting long shadows off the two little boys' four-foot something frames.

The ball kept moving between them, as did the banter. It was tough, street-slang and inflected.

As they began to round the corner to go north on Second Street, the boy who threw the tight spirals with his left-hand said to the other – “Yo, that it?”

The other boy, smaller, perhaps 8 or 9 years old, shot a glance at the long, faint maroon stain, then ran a few steps over on bent legs, arriving just at the moment his face was barely two inches from the ground.

He sniffed.

“Yup, that’s blood, that’s where he got hit right there.”

Then he bolted north, with the tacit assurance that his left-handed playmate would loft the ball in his direction.

All of the hope and the optimism and the goodwill that had built since the triple murder in early 2010 was snuffed the night before, as was the life of Ervin Coley III.

Coley had left his mother’s apartment in Las Deltas to walk to a friend’s house on Market Street.

Coley was killed about a block from his home when a car swung by that same corner and sprayed him with bullets. Bey, talking with teary eyes a few days later, said that Coley never had a chance.

He had no cover, and was riddled with a flurry of bullets.

“I can say that I suspect that this was done by people from Central Richmond who come into North Richmond,” Lt. Williams said in late April. “Whether (Coley) was a direct target, or was specifically targeted, I just don’t know.”

As of early May 2011, no suspects had been arrested. But the streets have an intelligence about these matters.

The people in the neighborhood also say the shooters came from Central Richmond, but no one offers any names.

It's part of that long running, deadly feud, marked by slights and simmering beefs and senseless violence that leaves lifeless bodies and motives more obtuse and baffling than ever. Coley just happened to be a young black male on the street in North Richmond. A target.

Coley's shooting followed the shooting and wounding of another young man at the corner of Fifth Street and Chesley Avenue the night before, and the killing of central Richmond native Joshua McClain, who was shot and killed in San Francisco the day before that.

It was McClain's killing that sparked the bloody retaliation. He was a somebody in his neighborhood, a 23-year-old whose name evoked awe and fear in some circles of the city.

Weeks before his death, police officers cruised around the Iron Triangle in Central Richmond with McClain's mug shot and rap sheet taped to their sun visor. He was wanted. For what was hazy ("That's information the detectives keep pretty close," said Officer Anthony Diaz), but McClain was marked, and considered extremely dangerous.

Somebody else would get to McClain first.

But as sad as Coley's death was, it was another notch in a deadly competition.

The mayhem of the next night was even more shocking.

The long way down

It was closing on 24-hours since Coley was left bleeding to death in the street, and the blocks were hot.

Cell phones were abuzz. Social networking sites, like Facebook and MySpace, became bulletin boards of odes to the dead and cryptic threats to the living.

"Man cuz dis is weak, r.i.p. Ervin ... macho keep yo head up ... im prayin fa u," read one post on Coley's Facebook page just a few hours after the shooting.

About 12 hours after his death, another friend posted: "It ain't ova bra."

Local residents said it's a familiar pattern: A confrontation of some type occurs, then tension builds. The dense network of Internet and cell phone communications provides a platform for heated rhetoric, innuendo and rumor.

“When you’ve been around this long and you’ve seen it this many times, you just know,” said Lucky Braimah, who owns the store on Market Street that has all the names of the dead on the wall. “When it gets this hot, you actually have people not wanting others to stand next to them, stand in front of their houses or whatever. It’s like ‘stay away from me you could be a target.’”

Joe McCoy, the ONS agent who grew up in North Richmond, prowled the streets the day after Coley’s killing, gathering intelligence and dissuading people from retaliation.

Much of what he and others in the office do is a secret, even to the police.

They have to maintain street credibility in order to operate. The moment people think you’re working with the cops, your pass is revoked. What McCoy does is a complex balance of mediation and negotiation. It’s “intervention” as opposed to suppression or reaction, and it’s been judged a success in several big cities in recent years.

Killings, McCoy says, beget more killings. It’s all related in a poisonous web that even he doesn’t fully understand.

As night fell, McCoy retreated from the streets to catch a quick rest inside his brother’s house, located on Third Street between Chesley and Grove.

“It was so tense out there, I had seen it like that before but this was maybe even more on edge, it was like Beirut or something,” McCoy said. “A firecracker would have everybody scattering.”

While McCoy was in his brother’s house, Stella Kelley rested in her bedroom. A grandmother with a strong body and pleading eyes, Kelley lives in a small, earth-toned bungalow with an iron gate.

The house sits in the 1600 block of Third Street, fewer than 20 paces from the community garden where Ervin Coley III had been working for the past few months.

Kelley was thinking about Coley that night. His death seemed senseless; it made her feel sick.

“He was such a nice boy, always waving and offering to help with taking out the trash or anything,” Kelley would remember later.

But she also thought about her grandson, in his early 20s, and his safety. Kelley asked him and his friend, 22-year-old Jerry Owens, to come inside several times. Instead, the two men insisted on staying “posted up” in her front yard, chatting, watching the streets.

McCoy was barely a block away when the shots rang out. Looking back, it seemed almost inevitable. McCoy hit the floor, face down.

“30 shots, minimum, semi-automatic,” McCoy recalled, deadpan.

The next day found Kelley sobbing on her porch, a steady stream of neighbors and friends showing up.

What happened remains confused. From what direction did the car come? Which one of the limited escape routes did the car use? Where were the sheriff’s deputies, their salaries paid for by the neighborhood’s mitigation fund, and on high alert after two straight nights of shootings just blocks away?

Rev. Davis and others said from the beginning that a deputy was parked in the lot at the corner of Chesley Avenue and Third Street, as usual.

The spot is the unofficial center of the neighborhood, and on any given day you may see a patrol car sitting there, the deputy stopping and watching during breaks from routine patrol.

It’s also just one block south from where the torrent of bullets hit Owens and his friend, a torrent that McCoy said took about 45 seconds to unload before he heard the screeching tires of the getaway vehicle.

“Think about it,” Davis said. “These sheriffs live far away and make good salaries, they don’t care what happens to people out here, and they sure as hell aren’t going to risk their lives by running into a shootout. They just sat back and waited for the gun shots to stop, then they rolled up nice and slow.”

The Sheriff’s Department has denied that it acted in any way but the most professional manner.

Still, spokesman Jimmy Lee declined to go into detail about how the response proceeded. No arrests have been made. No suspects named.

Some parts of the night are unclear, but McCoy is clear that he sprang from his brother’s living room floor and bolted out the door. He was among the first on the scene.

Screams and cries had already filled the void of dark silence that descends for a few seconds after the last shot cracks off. The acrid gunsmoke hit McCoy’s nostrils.

Jerry Owens, a spindly young man with long dreadlocks, lay on the grass just in front of Kelley’s porch, hit with several bullets. McCoy knelt to him.

“He was lifeless,” McCoy said. “There was no question that he was gone.”

Kelley was still inside, hysterical. Her grandson had narrowly escaped death, having been grazed in the lower back with a bullet while diving for cover in the house.

McCoy stayed at the scene as the crowd swelled. Somebody called Owens' mom. The paramedics were worked on his lifeless body in the grass. People cried. Young men rushed away in packs.

Owens' mom arrived before her son's body had been taken away. McCoy remembered that Owens had an older brother who was shot and killed about three years ago. Come to think of it, McCoy said, Owens' brother was murdered near that bus stop on Third Street, less than a block from where this brother lay dead. Their mother grieved.

"I left when his mom got there," McCoy said. "She was crying. I couldn't take it anymore."

The next morning, Kelley stood in her doorway, staring at the dark red patch of matted grass that marked where Owens died. Bulletholes pocked the stucco to her left. The sun was bright. No clouds in the sky.

Kelley held her hand to her mouth, and her eyes watered again. She picked up a long stemmed flower and laid it on the matted grass.

"I haven't been able to sleep," she said. "I just don't know, I can't calm down."

She glanced over the garden where Ervin Coley worked.

"How many do we have to lose? We are going extinct out here."

The flower on the grass would be the only memorial marking the night before. The corner where Ervin Coley III died was never adorned with anything more than his blood.

Bey would sum it all up with typically blunt cynicism days later. He sat alone with a barren stare in the garden that he and Coley had built, absently waving a water hose over some wilting flowers.

"This kind of stuff wouldn't be tolerated somewhere else, but here death and murder have become a part of the routine," Bey said.

More than 500 people would attend Coley's funeral a week later. He was eulogized in glowing tones. Mourners remembered Coley's curiosity and his love of worms and bugs. Bey told the crowd the community was under siege. Pictures of Coley in a cap and gown during his high school graduation slid by on an automated slide show projected overhead.

Most of Coley's close friends stayed outside, smoking marijuana and listening to music. Many wore T-shirts embossed with Coley's picture.

Sadly, the brazen shootings and unsolved cases, the gunfire and chaotic scenes, the mourning and the vengeance, had all become part of the routine, like a song loop that never stops. The quintessential North Richmond experience.

A future

North Richmond's wartime birth and post-war decline is not unique in the Bay Area.

Perhaps the most apt comparison – and indication of the perils and potential of future development – sits just right across the bay. And it's a comparison that yields clues about the looming challenges.

Marin City's history, like North Richmond's, essentially begins at the start of World War II, when cheap housing was erected to bivouac the African Americans who had streamed in to work the shipyards.

Like North Richmond, Marin City is not a city at all, but is an unincorporated area isolated in part by transportation corridors, in this case demarcated from the affluent city of Sausalito by Highway 101.

And like North Richmond, the separation isn't just physical or geographic. Marin City was for decades the only community in its county that was primarily poor and African American. While North Richmond is not as starkly different racially or economically from its neighbors as is Marin City, the stigma of living in the tiny, tightly connected projects of North Richmond has evolved into its own kind of demographic. Both communities comprise just over 2,000 residents.

At the same time, Marin City dealt with political isolation as well, with some sharing of services with Sausalito but a reluctance of politicians there to campaign in Marin City or reach out to its constituents.

But by the mid-1990s, Marin City was on the verge of a major transformation.

Enter "Marin City USA," a consortium of developers who came together to launch a \$100 million plus project, which included retail space, townhouses and apartments. Flea markets were out, and new construction was in.

More than a decade later, the results are mixed, and could portend what the future holds for North Richmond.

The community has become more ethnically diverse, particularly with white residents moving back in to take advantage of new condominium and housing developments at much lower prices than surrounding communities.

The African American share of the population is down to less than 40 percent, much of which is still concentrated in Golden Gate Village, the 300-unit public housing complex that is comparable to North Richmond's Las Deltas.

The Gateway Shopping Center, a centerpiece of the new development, has been a moderate success. There are several major retailers and chain restaurants, but no grocery store.

According to a study produced by the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley, the project was a net success for Marin City, helping to reduce crime, boost tax revenues, diversify the community and dilute the poverty that had become so concentrated. It also provided much needed employment opportunities in the community.

But there were also areas where the development left something to be desired. Fewer than two dozen public housing tenants were able to make a move into the new affordable housing developments, the report found. Also, the retail center's revenues fell far short of projections.

Still, the report concluded: "The experiences and accomplishments of Marin City U.S.A. provide an excellent case study for how to create a successful mixed-income, multi-use development. The lessons from Marin City U.S.A. are that a strong local partner, effective leadership, an efficient partnership structure and the availability of funding sources are essential to success."

Enter North Richmond, which may have steeper challenges than Marin City in terms of industrial pollutants, a substandard infrastructure and a physical isolation. The community has long had the feel of a territory of exile for a few thousand unfortunate souls.

Levees prevent the area from flooding as it did regularly through the 1940s and 1950s. The streets are paved, and no longer melt into muddy rivers during storms. Regulations and advances in technology mean that Chevron's refinery emits far lower emissions than it did just 10 years ago.

But as of 2011, North Richmond has not a single restaurant or grocery. There is a liquor store, and Lucky Braimah runs a small general market. But neither provides fresh fruits or vegetables, and the prices run high, thanks to neither store being able to benefit from economies of scale.

There is no Post Office or high school. One bus line runs through here, and as recently as January 2011 drivers threatened to refuse to drive the North Richmond route after several shootings left buses riddled with holes.

There has never been a streetlight in this community.

As Fred Jackson puts it, with typical poetic verve: “What happened to North Richmond didn’t just happen yesterday when the rooster crowed. It has been evolutionary. To say it’s the county’s fault, without looking at the city, the city’s fault, without looking at the state, the state’s fault without looking at Congress, Congress’ fault without looking at ourselves, all of that fails to understand how we got here, and how we can rectify.”

While Jackson stares at his own mortality – he vows to survive his battle with cancer – and ponders the tragic history of his own community, he remains hopeful.

He is not alone.

Even during the darkest moments, like the deaths on consecutive nights of Ervin Coley III and Jerry Owens, hope remains, and for good reason.

Situated in one of the most vibrant metropolitan areas in the world, the Bay Area, and near an untapped waterfront, major highways, and the San Rafael Bridge, North Richmond’s eventual turn for the better seems an inevitability.

To some, gentrification seems equally certain, but planners and other observers insist that development does not have to come at the expense of the present inhabitants.

Today, because of the perception and reality of crime, pollution and poor services, prices of old homes here can be had for well under \$100,000. This is the Bay Area’s cheapest coastal real estate, a fact that pro-development leaders think serves North Richmond well, and may compensate for another area where the community is less favorably positioned than Marin City, the “spillover effect” that Marin City has, thanks to being situated adjacent to extremely affluent areas like Sausalito.

North Richmond’s neighbors, chiefly Richmond and San Pablo, are working class towns as well.

The county is busily preparing a development plan that officials hope will trigger inflows of new homebuyers and renters and improve the area’s image. Hopes are high that Las Deltas will be razed and replaced with a mixture of affordable housing and Section 8 vouchers, scattering the indigent residents now concentrated in the public housing projects.

Gioia is bullish on North Richmond’s prospects.

“The future here, I think, is more housing,” Gioia said. “If you look at North Richmond, it’s well-placed. There’s not a lot of vacant land available anymore in the urban areas of the Bay Area. North Richmond is one of those last areas where there is a sizable amount of undeveloped land that is near good transportation infrastructure. The future is moderate priced housing.”

In early 2010, county officials gave a presentation to Richmond city planners outlining what the future could look like.

As of Spring 2011, county Redevelopment Director James Kennedy said a draft of a specific plan and environmental impact report (EIR) would be unveiled by Summer 2011.

“The draft EIR and draft Specific Plan will be in circulation for public comment over the summer, and initial hearings on the draft Specific Plan late in the summer or Fall,” Kennedy said.

Billed as a “comprehensive vision and strategy for promoting new development” in North Richmond, the presentation given to the city called for 2,100 residential dwellings, and 11-acre retail center and 30 acres of “employment land,” which would presumably be attractive and low-cost office space.

The plan also calls for improving many of the conditions that have plagued North Richmond since WWII, including bolstering the flood control system, creating truck routes that steer heavy industrial uses and waste disposal out of the community, adding an off-ramp to the Richmond Parkway and increasing bus services to the area.

The goal, as stated in the plan, is to “transform a former industrial area in North Richmond into an attractive, safe, healthy and vibrant new neighborhood with residential, commercial, public, park, and open space uses.”

The keystone of the whole project, of any possibility of breathing new life and investment into the community, is a 200-acre patch of land bound by San Pablo Creek, the Union Pacific Railroad track, Wildcat Creek and Richmond Parkway.

The area, formerly industrial land, is occupied mostly by dormant nurseries and junkyards. The county analysis says that there are more than two dozen property owners within the area.

But there is no doubt that the analysts are bullish on long-term development prospects here.

“The residential development in the planning area could tap into a significant market of potential homebuyers seeking affordable ownership in West County specifically and relatively central areas in the San Francisco Bay Area more generally,” according to a 2008 real estate market analysis commissioned by the county.

The report also makes clear that North Richmond’s chief draw will be its Bay Area location at a price well below the area average, a price that will face further downward pressure due to its historical reputation.

“The urban location . . . means new housing developments must offer lower prices relative to many other housing developments in the West County.”

The report also suggests that the community would be able to support a medium-sized grocery, 20,000 to 40,000 square feet, which would play a key role in drawing residents from outside the neighborhood, marking a key break in the isolation from which the community has suffered for years.

So the plan is clear. North Richmond has the potential to be a place booming with affordable housing in Bay Area. But when the investment will come is not so clear, nor is the political future set.

On the score of what will happen to the poor residents, many of whom have been in North Richmond for generations, Gioia said that the idea is to integrate the new with the old, with the exception of the moribund Las Deltas.

“The challenge will be to make sure that the older parts of North Richmond are integrated with the new housing,” Gioia said. “You don’t want two communities to develop, and that’s always a risk. It has to be built in a way that ensures that the areas are integrated.”

Gioia added that in addition to streets that link the old housing stock in the south to new developments to the north, the substantial number of vacant lots in old North Richmond must be used for in-fill development and community resources, like parks and walkways.

Gioia and other county officials are hopeful about the prospects of North Richmond becoming a hotbed of investment and development, and for obvious reasons would like to retain control during this period.

But Davis and Bey and others are gaining influence among residents and pushing the city for support. The city’s new leadership seems amenable to the idea of annexation once again.

The long unwanted patch of real estate in the Bay Area is slowly becoming more desirable.

And, as they always have, the people of North Richmond go about their lives. They face pollution and gunfire, isolation and stigma, and most of all an uncertain future.

Perhaps the person who saw the future best is one of those who is no longer here. Before he was one of the dozens of young black men who died in his neighborhood and wound up with his name on the market wall, Coley was becoming a perceptive, self-aware young man.

More than 500 people, mostly from that one mile square area of North Richmond that has seen all too much since the World War wound down, turned out at Hilltop Community Church April 14 to lay Coley to rest.

Coley didn't talk about the county or the city or a development plan. The notion that shrewd investors may have assessed his neighborhood as some kind of potential future bonanza would probably have not made much sense to him.

But Coley, in a more instinctive way, had become optimistic about his future in North Richmond. Right before he was shot and died on that street corner, Coley had taken an interest in building new life in the same soil that had seen so much death and decay.

“We called Ervin the ‘Worm Man,’” remembered a tearful Iyalode Kinney, Coley’s manager and mentor on the urban gardening project, “because when he first came out, and I taught him about what purpose the worms served, he just loved that philosophy of enriching the ground so more life would come out of it.”

On April 23, just as North Richmond seems poised to enter a new era, the garden where he worked his last days was dedicated to Coley. It was a vacant lot, and now it’s being developed for a new use. The garden was dedicated with a rectangular wooden plaque with Coley’s name carved in it.

And a peace symbol.