



BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK



The WORLD in a CITY

—
TRAVELING THE GLOBE THROUGH THE
NEIGHBORHOODS OF THE NEW NEW YORK

—
Joseph Berger

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Berger, Joseph.

The world in a city : traveling the globe through the
neighborhoods of the new New York / Joseph Berger.
p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-345-48738-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. New York (N.Y.)—Description and travel. 2. Ethnic neighborhoods—New York (State)—New York.
3. Immigrants—New York (State)—New York—Social life and customs. 4. Berger, Joseph—Travel—New York (State)—New York. 5. New York (N.Y.)—Social life and customs. 6. City and town life—New York (State)—New York. 7. Pluralism (Social sciences)—New York (State)—New York. 8. Cosmopolitanism—New York (State)—New York. 9. New York (N.Y.)—Ethnic relations. I. Title.

F128.55.B46 2007

917.47'10444089—dc22 2007017314

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

www.ballantinebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

FIRST EDITION

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman

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my traveling companions for life*

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Chapter 2

Melting Together in Ditmas Park

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ASTORIA, AND OTHER NEIGHBORHOODS LIKE IT, WHERE GREEKS cluster in one section, Brazilians in another, and Arabs in a third, illustrate the mosaic theory of ethnic integration. New York, that theory holds, is really an arrangement of different-colored ethnic tiles often co-existing amicably but separated by the sturdy grout of chauvinism and suspicion. And so, the theory continues, the fabled melting pot is a fanciful myth, never true for the immigrant Jews, Italians, and Irish in its own time and even less true since the ethnic identity movement of the 1960s made ethnic aloofness a virtue.

But in some places in New York City cultures do seem to melt into one another, suggesting ever so tentatively that Americans are more ready to get along today than ever before. Indeed, in New York the amount of actual mingling that now takes place in so many places is striking. Perhaps no neighborhood better showed me this quite radical shift than Brooklyn's Ditmas Park. Even many seasoned New Yorkers have never heard of it, at best confusing it with the rest of Flatbush, but it is there, among the graceful Victorian houses and stout apartment blocks south of Prospect Park, that I saw the new face of New York taking shape.

Whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos share this softly shaded patch, and no one ethnic or racial group is dominant. Moreover, the neighborhood's population of 8,243 is not cut up into discrete ethnic swatches but is significantly interwoven. Residents such as Fred Siegel, urban affairs professor at Cooper Union, like to stand on their verandas and proudly reel off the races and nationalities that flank their porches and backyards.

"The people two doors down are Guyanese Indian," Siegel told me when I visited. "The woman diagonally behind us is from Grenada. The people in that brown house are from Yugoslavia. There's a family nearby that are Moroccan Jews from Israel. Then we have a former ambassador from Grenada four or five houses down."

The variety of ethnic groups and economic classes is immediately evident on a stroll down Cortelyou Road, the shopping spine, where within seconds I passed a black man with cornrows, a Muslim woman with a head scarf, a white mother in Birkenstocks, and a man wearing a skullcap. The street's car service is Mex Express, but the nail salon promises a European pedicure. The canopy at R & R Meats advertises "Productos Mexicanos" as well as "West Indian Products." The Associated supermarket, owned by a Polish Jew, has a heaping Mexican section. Cinco de Mayo is a restaurant where diners include not only yuppie and boomer foodies but lots of actual Mexican construction workers as well. The neighborhood tavern, the Cornerstone, is rough-and-tumble, but its blue-collar regulars are black and white. "We generally all get along," said Matthew McLean, a neighborhood resident and teacher at Edward R. Murrow High School. Vladimir Popov, the sixty-seven-year-old clerk at the video store, can wax effusive on the varying tastes in film of his West Indian, Chinese, Russian, and southern black customers, even if his generalizations—for example, which ethnic groups prefer triple-X-rated films—should be taken with a grain of salt.

I rambled the well-shaded side streets with evocative English names such as Westminster, Argyle, Buckingham, Rugby, and Marlborough roads and saw lovely gabled Victorians and Queen Annes, some with colonnaded porches, looking especially beautiful on a spring day when fallen cherry blossoms dusted the ground and crimson and yellow tulips were blossoming in front yards. Here and there were also sturdy white- and redbrick apartment buildings. Westminster Road could have been a street in an old Westchester suburb like Pelham. But immediately I was struck by how many different kinds of faces I saw. There were young Chinese men playing basketball at a driveway hoop, a blond woman talking to her Pakistani neighbor, and Professor Siegel.

As I talked to residents, I was struck not just by how many different cultures were living in those houses and apartments but also by how

many cross-cultural friendships there were, so many that they had become run-of-the-mill, suggesting that the diversity was not merely cosmetic. A prime example was Mavis Theodore and Hynda Lessman Schneiweiss, apartment dwellers who have been friends for more than ten years, though their backgrounds could not be more dissimilar. Schneiweiss, a woman in her early eighties, is a Chicago-born Jew, the daughter of a men's pattern maker who lost his job in the Depression and was forced to move to Brooklyn for work. Until she retired she was an engineering assistant at the company that sold heating and cooling equipment to the World Trade Center. She has lived in the neighborhood since 1942, for many years with her husband, Saul, a handball player and swimmer, on East Eighteenth Street. Theodore, who is single and in her fifties, is a black Trinidadian, the daughter of a builder who taught her the importance of community service by helping village women earn money selling their crocheting and pottery. A single woman, she moved into the neighborhood twenty-five years ago and since 2001 has worked at Wiley, the publisher, granting licenses to colleges and hospitals for online access to the company's scientific and medical journals.

Schneiweiss and Theodore met through community work. When muggings and drug dealing sent many old-timers packing, Schneiweiss stayed put. "I always had hope," she said. "I wasn't going to move. I don't like to be pushed, and I pushed back." She joined the Seventieth Precinct Council and the community board and forcefully let the police know crime was eroding the neighborhood's viability. When the city finally appointed police commissioners who deployed patrols effectively, the neighborhood reaped the benefits. "Crime in this neighborhood has gone down to practically nothing," she said.

Theodore, meanwhile, was busy keeping the neighborhood flame alive from her own angle. She recalls a time when Ditmas Park was largely filled with Jews, Italians, and blacks who carved out their own turfs, and when she felt the sting of that checkerboard isolation. "If black people came into the area, people used to ask you where are you going," she recalled. But she got involved in community work too, and it was at a meeting of the Newkirk Area Neighborhood Association that she met Schneiweiss, its president. She convinced the organization to

get involved in providing packages of school supplies to children in homeless shelters, some of whom wind up in Ditmas Park schools. In 2005 she, Schneiweiss, and helpers gave out 1,200 packages to fourteen shelters. But they socialize outside as well, going together to concerts at Carnegie Hall. Indeed, Theodore calls Schneiweiss "my dearest friend."

"Everybody has to learn and live together, and you can't learn to be in a democracy if you live in Borough Park," says Schneiweiss, referring to an overwhelmingly Hasidic enclave in Brooklyn. Mavis replies, "This neighborhood is going to demonstrate what Rodney King said, 'Can't we all get along?'"

Friendships like these are also common among younger people in Ditmas Park. Daniel Shaw, who is white and was a Cornell University senior when we spoke, went to the neighborhood's public schools and Midwood High School and has been friends since kindergarten with Miguel Valiente, a Panamanian, Etan Marciano, a Moroccan, and Elizabeth Hui, a Chinese. "When my friends and I walk down the street, we look like a UN summit meeting, no joke," he said. In high school, they hung out at his house on Friday afternoons. Miguel, whose father is a building superintendent, and Etan, whose father is a real estate developer, helped Daniel, whose father is a psychoanalyst, move into Cornell. "As soon as I moved to Ithaca it was painfully apparent—I had never seen so many white people before," Daniel said. Daniel and Etan went on spring break to Myrtle Beach. While Daniel told of some unpleasant consequences in the mix of rich and poor—he has been robbed at knife-point and his father was beaten by young men trying to steal a briefcase—he was glad he had been raised there.

"I've been thankful even for the muggings," he said. "It keeps me in check because as much as I grew up in a comfortable house, I know I'm lucky. I can't get too cocky."

Karali Pitzele, a history teacher at the School of the Future in Manhattan, is in her mid-thirties and white, the daughter of a Jew and a Christian who raised her as a Buddhist in New Paltz, New York. She chose the neighborhood ten years ago in part because her boyfriend then was Jamaican and as an interracial couple they would not stand out. Now one of her friends is Dawn Eddy, a twenty-five-year-old Trinidadian teacher, and she has a warm relationship with her Pakistani neigh-

bor. The neighbor borrowed her dining room table for an evening's entertainment and she borrowed masala spices back. For the Muslim holiday of Eid ul-Fitr, which ends the Ramadan fast, Pitzele left a bag of chocolates dangling from her neighbor's doorknob, and the following Christmas the neighbor gave her bracelets and a Pakistani dress and scarf. Typically, though, she worries that "white people like myself may idealize" the ethnic harmony "from our position of privilege in the mix."

Many residents remark on the number of interracial couples or families in the neighborhood, for example, Joe Wong, a twenty-eight-year-old grandson of Chinese immigrants, his wife, Ellen Moncure Wong, a native of Virginia, and their blond-haired toddler, Yates. Wong, a systems analyst for New York University, grew up in Ditmas Park and went to Public School 139. Now he lives in the top two floors of his parents' house. "As you're growing up you're getting exposed to the diversity and this becomes second nature," he said. "You wouldn't choose to move here if you weren't interested in that type of diversity."

The two census tracts that make up Ditmas Park are remarkable for their ethnic palette. In 2000, the racial breakdown was 40 percent black (almost half from the Caribbean), 23 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, and 16 percent Asian. There are third- and fourth-generation Irish and Italians, Jews who were born in Russia and others who moved over from Park Slope, and significant smatterings of Bangladeshis, Mexicans, Pakistanis, Chinese, Tibetans, and Nepalese. In a neighborhood where in 2000 the median household income was \$37,670—and a fourth of residents live below the poverty line—there are houses owned by well-heeled lawyers and executives.

"The reason why this works is there's no majority of one—there's a majority of many," Susan Miller told me. She is a mother of four who lives on a block of Victorians with neighbors of Indian, Pakistani, Polish, Italian, Jamaican, and Orthodox Jewish backgrounds as well as a discrete group she identifies as "Caucasian left-wingers."

Others speculate that Ditmas Park works as a neighborhood because it is wedged among more monotone enclaves: Caribbean East Flatbush, Jewish Midwood and Borough Park, Chinese and Latino Sunset Park, the South Asian pockets along Coney Island Avenue, and the neighborhoods of professionals surrounding Prospect Park. People from each of

these distinct enclaves spill over and mix in Ditmas Park. "This area belongs to no one, so you have a lot of everyone," said Siegel. "This is very much diversity by accident."

The outlook for such neighborhoods, according to a Department of City Planning analysis, is bullish. The 2000 census indicates there were 220 melting-pot tracts among the city's 2,217, or one of ten; in 1970 there were only 70 such tracts. According to the Department of City Planning, a "melting pot" contains at least three racial groups, each with more than 20 percent of the population and none with more than 50 percent. In 2000, melting pots were also found in Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and Flushing in Queens. For decent, convenient housing, middle-class New Yorkers are far more willing to live next to projects, seedy tenements, and drug dens than they were twenty years ago. That means that rich and poor, black and white, native and immigrant, have grown accustomed to one another's faces and races in ways unprecedented in American history.

"People are living side by side in a way that a hundred years from now we may take for granted," said Joseph J. Salvo, director of the planning department's population division in a speech at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service that inspired my visit to Ditmas Park. New Yorkers, he added, are more ready to say, "I'm going to live next to the guy even though he's five shades different than me."

In part, this openness to mixing is the result of the post-1965 wave of immigrants that reshaped the city. The city's liberal tradition, and the sheer habit of encountering different cultures, has also made New Yorkers more open.

"Anybody who rides the subway is going to have a multicultural experience," said John H. Mollenkopf, director of the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York. "One senses that people who can't handle that sort of thing moved out of New York, or don't move in in the first place. All these people may not love each other, but they certainly have found ways to tolerate each other."

Ditmas Park is part of Victorian Flatbush, which extends from Prospect Park down to the Long Island Rail Road tracks on the south.

By some estimates, Flatbush contains the largest concentration of free-standing Victorians in the United States. These are roomy, rambling houses, almost mansions, with broad, covered porches and plenty of gables and turrets on the outside, and fireplaces, parquet floors, oak wainscoting, deep window seats, and stained-glass windows on the inside. Some of these homes were built for such prosperous businessmen as the owners of Carter Ink and Ex-Lax and such movie stars as Mary Pickford. A house at 101 Rugby Road was the Pink Palace in the movie *Sophie's Choice*, the rooming house owned by Yetta Zimmerman where Sophie and Nathan meet and die in such heartrending fashion.

The cornerstone of Victorian Flatbush is Ditmas Park. Until the twentieth century, it was farmland owned by the Dutch-rooted Ditmas family. Then the subway line (now the Q) came along and the neighborhood sprouted Victorians along with London planes, Norway maples, and linden. In some streets, traffic medians were put in and landscaped, giving the area a parklike feel. In 1981, the eastern half of Ditmas was designated a historic district by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Most residents use words like "utopia" in describing Ditmas Park, but the harmoniousness shouldn't be overhyped. Friendships, I also discovered in talking to dozens of residents, seldom extend across class lines. Indeed, while outsiders may be dazzled by the diversity, the neighborhood abounds with cynics or at least agnostics.

"I notice that the people who live in the apartments and rent and are of a lower income tend to keep to themselves and the homeowners who live in the albeit diverse community of homeowners also tend to be exclusive," was the gingerly observation of Claire Beckman, a forty-four-year-old actress.

Neil DeMause, a *Village Voice* writer, said, "Homeowners relate to other homeowners, white Slope [Park Slope, a nearby upscale brownstone neighborhood] refugees hang out with other Slope refugees, East Indians with other East Indians. I doubt this is any more pronounced here than in other parts of the city but it's an indication of the degree to which you don't create a melting pot just by dumping a bunch of disparate groups in the same geographical area." Pitzele put it this way: "I

think we're mostly cohabiting in this neighborhood and not melting. Most people are friendly with people of their own ethnicity and social class."

Gideon Levy, a young employee at a bohemian coffee shop called Vox Pop, notices that when schoolchildren walk home "you tend to see the races, cultures, skin tones, falling into their economic separations, which sadly often correspond to traditional racial stereotypes." Louise Moed, a white fifty-one-year-old lawyer for the city's corporation counsel's office, also pointed out that friendships occur when there are professional commonalities, like the relation between her and her husband and two black couples on her block. At least one spouse in each family is involved in law. Moed thinks the insularity is particularly striking among recent immigrants. She told of a Pakistani woman whose daughters wanted to play with her twin girls, but the mother was reluctant, "even though it was obvious her girls were having lots of fun with mine."

Paul Feldman, a website editor, contends that the "diversity works against a strong sense of community." He and his actress wife, Christine Siracusa, have a three-year-old son, Sam, and have lived in Ditmas Park for five years. "Maybe there is such a thing as too much diversity," he said. "Or too much too soon for one neighborhood to accommodate without splitting into microneighborhoods. A mix is happening, but there's no personality that is asserting itself."

Then too, the neighborhood is fairly self-selected, drawing people such as Beckman and Wong, who are willing to grapple with discomforts that might arise out of cultural differences. Beckman, who has had parts in Hollywood movies such as *The Door in the Floor*, said, "I think the multicultural friendships are very real, but I seek them out." She observed that the kind of misfits and unconventional types who in the 1950s were drawn to Greenwich Village are now drawn to Victorian Flatbush. She might know, since she grew up on the Village's Bank Street in the 1960s. She had lived for a time among the brownstones of Carroll Gardens but found the neighborhood had become "too white" and shifted to Ditmas Park, first into a rental on East Sixteenth Street, then into a rambling Victorian on Westminster Road that she and her husband bought with another couple. Flatbush, though, represented a return to her roots, since her grandfather was a Russian immigrant who

settled in Flatbush in the early 1900s. She thirsts for intimacy with other cultures, and her best friend on the block is a Jamaican nurse.

Graham and Chelsi Meyerson moved into an 1890 vintage Victorian on Glenwood Avenue after the birth of their daughter, Olivia, who was twenty months old when I interviewed them. "When Chelsi and I had Olivia," Meyerson said, "we wanted her to know a lot of different people." Meyerson, who is Jewish, grew up in Forest Hills, where most of the people he would see on his walks were Jewish. A former cook at the chic Union Square Cafe, Meyerson in 2004 opened the Picket Fence restaurant on Cortelyou, and now when he walks to work, "I get to see white, black, Chinese, tall, short. Even in Park Slope and the Upper West Side you don't get to see the diversity that this city is famous for." He is happy that the children at the school Olivia will attend, PS 217, speak thirty-five languages.

But even if the neighborhood is self-selected, it did not just fall out of an idealist's dreamscape. Neighbors work hard at sustaining its distinctive alloy. Around Christmastime, the neighborhood holds what they call, with no double entendre intended, progressive dinners. Courses are served at a succession of homes chosen because they represent a spectrum of ethnicities. On Thanksgiving, a black minister holds an open house and serves a breakfast of flapjacks and bacon for all comers. Dan Shapiro, a Jewish data consultant who has lived in a fifteen-room Victorian for twenty-five years, said every neighbor is invited for weddings, funerals, and bar mitzvahs. "When Dennis Mooreman, Melba Moore's brother, died, the funeral was held in the black church and everyone showed up," said Shapiro. "When I had my bar mitzvahs for my son and daughters, I invited everyone on the block and everyone showed up. And that's very common."

Beckman runs a dramatic company, Brave New World Repertory Theatre, out of the ground floor of her home, and in September 2005 she put on a production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* using her porch and five of her neighbors' porches as the stage. Her daughter, Taylor, eight, played the impressionable southern youngster of the film, Scout; Beckman played the narrator, the grown-up Scout; and her husband, John Morgan, played Bob Ewell, the father of the young white woman who falsely accuses a black worker of rape. The rest of the cast was made up

of professional actors and volunteer neighbors. On a later summer night, a thousand people crowded the sidewalks and roadway of Westminster Road to see the show, and most were exhilarated by the experience. "In a quarter-century of theater-going in New York, never have I seen an audience as integrated as the one that took their folding seats on Sunday: black and white, old and very young, with a healthy sprinkling of neighborhood teenagers," wrote one freelance reviewer. "This was street theater, people's theater, of the highest order."

A four-year-old organization, Friends of Cortelyou, sponsors ethnic tastings and pairs recent immigrants with fluent English speakers as "conversation partners." At Picket Fence, Meyerson intentionally hires a diverse staff, including Justin Alexander, a waiter from Trinidad, and Dana Nagler, a Jewish cook from Long Island, to prepare and serve his cheeseburgers on brioche, crab cakes, and pear gorgonzola bread pudding.

Vox Pop, the idiosyncratic combination coffeehouse, bookstore, and print shop, holds open-mike evenings, where rappers, poets, or political activists express their views. The crowd at one evening of poetry organized to raise money for a women's shelter was filled with black and South Asian women. With its blunt motto—"Books, Coffee, Democracy"—it's the kind of place where women feel comfortable breastfeeding their babies as they drink their lattes and eat their organic turkey baguettes. Vox Pop's earnest owner, Sander Hicks, whose goatee makes him look like a young Trotsky, styles himself a "rebel bookseller" who fights the chain stores and offers a "voice to people who don't have one." But whatever the ideological trappings, in his coffee shop people of different stripes rub up against one another in ways that are sure to leave some lasting influences on the neighborhood.

There are some who worry that a diverse Ditmas Park may be fleeting, that the motley place I wandered into was a snapshot frozen in time that was sure to be a very different place if I visited five or ten years from now. It is true that the history of Ditmas Park, unlike, say, Bensonhurst or Howard Beach, is one of perennial change. The 1970 census showed a neighborhood that was 95 percent white; Rugby Road was known as Doctors' Row. But when that count was taken, the tectonic plates under the neighborhood were already shifting. There were vacancies in some

large apartment buildings—created by people who had moved up in the world or fled—and the city, struggling with a mushrooming and clamorous welfare population, filled those vacancies with broken families. Some of these families introduced drugs and muggings. White homeowners began selling, and middle-class blacks, not as put off by welfare families, bought up Victorians at fire-sale prices, effectively integrating even the neighborhood's affluent parts.

The upsurge of crime throughout the city in the 1970s and 1980s and a shaky economy meant more departures. Neighborhood-improvement groups such as the Flatbush Development Corporation and the Flatbush Tenants Council, led by Marty Markowitz, now the Brooklyn borough president (who lived at 400 Rugby Road), managed and repaired hard-pressed buildings and evicted troublesome tenants. Young whites starting families, such as Shapiro and his wife, Ruth, a junior high school teacher, were able to afford a fifteen-room Edwardian-era house for \$53,000. Other pioneers included Geoffrey Stokes, another writer for *The Village Voice*, and the jazz pianist Kenny Barron. Orthodox Jews overflowed from Borough Park and Pakistanis from the area around the mosque on Coney Island Avenue.

But crime was still festering and almost no one would have chosen Ditmas Park as an example of congenial ethnic relations. In fact, they were more likely to write about ethnic tensions, for instance, an ugly boycott in 1990 by black residents of a Korean market on Church Avenue not too far from Ditmas. A Haitian woman had claimed she was pummeled trying to buy some plantains and peppers. The grocers claimed she had tried to leave without paying. The protest featured a gauntlet of pickets led by the provocateur Sonny Carson and the Reverend Al Sharpton. Demonstrators shouted threats and spit at anyone trying to patronize the store. Leaflets urged people to avoid shopping "with people who do not look like us." Mayor David Dinkins did little to intervene, and the neighborhood was stigmatized—not that it was all that attractive. The sidewalks in front of apartment houses on Rugby Road were littered with crack vials, houses were routinely burglarized, and drainpipes were removed for their copper.

"In the early nineties, this neighborhood was going to go," said Siegel. "A stolen car was dumped right in front. A guy came and

stripped the car and then vultures came for the cheaper items, and you were afraid they would try your house. A Russian woman was mugged. Someone told her, 'What do you expect if you live in a neighborhood like this?'

But things began to turn around, and Siegel believes much of the credit belongs to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's commitment to stronger enforcement. Siegel was a policy adviser for Giuliani's 1993 election campaign and wrote a book about his administration called *Prince of the City*. Throughout the period, parents worked with the local school board to maintain classroom quality and fought successfully against a plan to eliminate gifted programs. They cajoled the parks department to turn a burned-out lot on Cortelyou into a playground called the Cortelyou Totlot that became an ethnic meeting ground. Black, white, and Asian families grew close in the process.

Siegel's wife, Jan Rosenberg, a sociologist at Long Island University and local real estate broker, deserves credit for helping revive seven-block-long Cortelyou Road by attracting restaurants—a decade ago it didn't have a single sit-down spot—and upscale shops such as Cortelyou Vintage, an antiques store with mid-twentieth-century furniture. In 2006, the Farm on Adderley restaurant, started by a South African, opened and received a warm review from *The Times*. Rosenberg is still trying to attract a bank. She's also sponsored events for getting cultures to know one another such as "Cortelyou Is Cooking," where residents from Mexico, Pakistan, China, Israel, and the Caribbean sample one another's cuisines.

The patchwork of efforts has been so successful that artists with children from gentrifying Greenpoint and Williamsburg are turning to this once-genteel and bourgeois corner of Brooklyn, stimulated by its variety. "It's always artists and liberals who are drawn to these communities," said Beckman. But now, with prices of some homes surpassing \$1 million, Beckman and people like her fear that only well-heeled buyers will consider the neighborhood and that Ditmas Park's multicultural character could dissolve—meaning that in a decade the neighborhood's snapshot may be very different.

"What's scary," Beckman said, "is that it could change."

DITMAS PARK

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