

**Testimony before the  
New York City Council  
Committee on Parks and Recreation**

**January 31, 2007**

**Re: Randall's Island Proposal**

Good morning, my name is Vince Coleman, Baseball and Softball Program Director at Harlem RBI, and I am here to testify on behalf of the organization in regard to the Randall's Island Proposal.

Briefly, Harlem RBI is a 16 year-old community based youth development program, located on 100<sup>th</sup> Street in East Harlem. The organization, which was founded in 1991 when we turned an abandoned lot into two little league baseball diamonds, now serves over 650 girls and boys, age 7-18, with year-round educational, enrichment and sports programming. The primary goal of the program is to help at-risk youth graduate high school and matriculate to college. Of course, each summer, all of our kids still play on a baseball or softball team, since that is our "hook." Participation at Harlem RBI is free of charge, and virtually all program participants are low-income, minority children from East Harlem, Central Harlem and the South Bronx.

I want to begin by thanking the City Council and the Committee on Parks and Recreation, under the leadership of Chair Helen Foster, as well as East Harlem Council Member Melissa Mark Viverito, for allowing me to testify. Also, please accept apologies from Harlem RBI's Executive Director, Richard Berlin, who was unable to attend this hearing.

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Speaking well here today presents a real challenge for Harlem RBI, because we consider everyone in the room to be an important friend and ally in our work.

From the City Council Members, the Borough President and other elected officials who support and advocate for more and better youth service opportunities,

To the Department of Parks and Recreation -- whose visionary Commissioner, Adrian Benepe has been a vital friend and true believer in our work throughout Harlem RBI's existence, and who has in fact provided Harlem RBI with a License to build, maintain, operate and fund its own beautiful Field of Dreams on East 100<sup>th</sup> Street in East Harlem,

To the Randall's Island Sports Foundation, who has helped provide literally thousands of Harlem RBI girls and boys with a place to play, learn and grow each spring, summer and fall for each of the last 15 years,

To New Yorkers for Parks – whose predecessor, The Parks Council, was actually Harlem RBI's fiscal agent when we opened our doors in 1991,

Everyone in this room is friend of Harlem RBI, and we could not do our work without you.

And naturally, like any good youth agency, we hate to see our friends fight.

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At the same time, the issues at stake here today -- of access, equity and public trust -- are real ones that impact our work and the children and families whom we serve.

Against this backdrop, it is important for Harlem RBI to speak to three issues that it sees as vital in this conversation.

- First, some of the public characterizations of the Randall's Island Sports Foundation leadership seem unfair. RISF is and always has been a Public/Private partnership whose mission is to provide the children of New York City with a great place to play. While Harlem RBI has real some concerns about the length and structure of the proposed agreement with the private schools, our long experience with RISF is that they see service to East Harlem and the Bronx as a top priority, but one that – given limited land and resources – requires some tradeoffs. While we think it right that these tradeoffs undergo real public scrutiny, to suggest that RISF is trying to shut out low-income kids does not compute, in Harlem RBI's experience. As stated, the history of thousands of East Harlem children who have played in our program and thus, on the Randall's Island ballfields over the last 15-years, is proof of that.
- Second, as eloquently expressed over the last few weeks by Jai Nanda of the Urban Dove, one of the biggest barriers in place – transportation -- is not even *on* Randall's Island. Rather, it is a simple reality that public schools, non-profits and low-income youth often have trouble just getting to Randall's Island. Part of the solution to this controversy, which everyone in the room (and some people not in room, probably) should be responsible for, is insuring that kids and teams and families can easily get to Randall's Island.
- Finally, there is the issue of private subsidies for public goods. While good people may disagree about the merits of the public/private approach, this policy “solution” is probably here to stay. And in that case, perhaps we should focus on ensuring as much inclusiveness as possible in the discussion about what the public good entails. In the case of Randall's Island, that would require more seats at the decision makers' table for more and more different voices. It would also require those who come to the table to do so in good faith, with the trust and belief that *all* of us want what is best for *all* of our children.