

Practice

The teenagers ran in cleats. They chased each other, sweat-slick and panting, around the blue rubber track, some of them sprinting in the straightaways, others merely enduring the turns of the oval, pushing themselves for another lap, fighting through the bright agony of shin splints and fiery lungs and whatever misery might have writhed that day out of the city and into their individual lives. Was it pain that aged them so quickly? In Hartford, as in so many cities like it, crumbling cities where men and women on assembly lines once manufactured money but where factories now made nothing, in such cities children were teenagers and teens were grownups and grownups, if they were smart and talented and capable, had too often moved elsewhere.

My home. The city of my birth. My parents had moved our family when I was a boy. A stranger to Hartford, now, at last, I was home.

The school year had yet to start, but the Inner City

Striders commanded the track at Hartford Public High. The club was open to anyone wanting to run, jump, or throw, though most practicing through the muggy August afternoon were black or Hispanic. On the field, the bustle looked scattered and casual, like a street fair; athletes gathered here and there in clumps, strolling and chatting, a girl flinging a discus, some boys seeking distraction through the girls. Harvey Kendall spent most of his time near the jumping pit, practicing the timing and technique that had already made him the best high school triple jumper in New England, and one of the best in the nation. All the other Striders knew him, and strolled by to visit, not so much because of what he had accomplished but because of how he carried himself. Harvey was mayor of this little town of teenagers in T-shirts and shorts. They knew he might entertain them with a dance. He might ask about their workout or tell a joke. Harvey smiled and laughed often, and his joy defied the sweat and the pain, countered sore feet and defeated postures with hope and possibility. The way he fooled around, his showmanship and marquee manner, would in college earn him the nickname “Hollywood,” but because he also stretched when he was supposed to, ran drills as necessary, and always demanded of himself one more inch on his jumps, he gave the Striders much of their drive and spirit.

I was there that day in 1989 to interview him for the *Hartford Courant*, the city’s daily, which had just hired me away from a newspaper in Tucson to cover sports. I’d arrived in Hartford frightened and excited and in love with the city without understanding why, tingling with the romantic’s sense that fate or destiny or God or whatever it was made decisions for the world had sent me back where

I began. That sense of fate intensified when I learned that of nine young sports reporters hired to cover the state's high schools, my beat would be my hometown. The other new hires found apartments outside the city, but I ended up in a neighborhood south of the newspaper plant. Within a day or so, my editor made Harvey Kendall and the Inner City Striders my first assignment. The sky was overcast and mottled that day, and though the sun was still high, the light seemed nearer to dusk when I parked my Jeep with Arizona plates in the high school's lot.

Hartford itself seemed near to dusk. For more than four hundred years, people had used this city, and though Hartford had been reinvented over and over, it showed signs of age: rusted handrails and chipped concrete steps, copper statues gone aqua; even the air felt exhausted. I didn't mind. Fresh from Tucson's unrelentingly blue skies and sleek shopping-mall palaces, I was grateful for the overcast gloom and for this familiar, grit-encrusted place. Familiar, yes, because though I had never before visited Hartford Public, my grandfather had graduated from there. My family had lived in Hartford for four generations, and I was born in Hartford Hospital. But when my parents moved I was young; I hadn't lived in Connecticut since I was nine. Now twenty-five, I knew my way around a few parts of the city, especially the neighborhoods near where my grandparents still lived. But the Hartford I knew was their Hartford, glimpsed in photo albums, a place where young men still wore overcoats and ties on picnics and where women always wore hats. Looking for apartments, I'd driven into neighborhoods I'd never seen before, neighborhoods that might have been safe or might have been dangerous, but struck me as both because I couldn't yet tell the difference between poor and criminal. I drove until I got lost,

and stayed lost until I grew scared. And then I pointed myself back toward what I knew to be safe, and I drove, eyes wide and adrenaline-alert, until I recognized downtown and regained my bearings.

Harvey Kendall, who lived in one of those neighborhoods where I found myself lost, a neighborhood my grandparents likely hadn't visited since the 1950s (if even then), was to be my introduction to a city my grandparents knew only from headlines, and I knew not at all.

Though he was eighteen years old, Harvey already stood taller than my six feet two. His haircut was a low flat-top; the tone of his voice disaffected, cool, quite different from the tone he used with his teammates. He looked west over my shoulder at nearby apartments called Clemens Place, named for Hartford's most famous resident, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who wrote under the pen name Mark Twain.

Harvey started our interview by asking the questions.

Nice to meet you, he said. You from Hartford?

I've been gone a while, I said. But I was born here. My grandparents still live here.

You live in the city now? he asked.

Yes, I told him. Near Barry Square. In the South End.

So you understand, he said.

Did I nod in agreement? Maybe. I can't remember. Maybe I just asked, "Okay, can you spell your name for me?" The truth was, I had no idea what Harvey was talking about. *Understand what?* Here I was, fresh out of Tucson's desert of Circle K convenience stores and gravel-packed yards, and this kid was talking to me as though I knew his life and his city. It was as if we had survived the same burning building, escaped the same plane crash. Harvey and I. We happy few.

After Harvey established to his satisfaction that I would understand him, he spoke freely, as if he trusted me. I didn't understand but I wanted to, and I recognized a gift when I saw one. Harvey's trust made me glad that I'd chosen to live in Hartford over any of its suburbs if it meant so much to somebody. It struck me on a personal level, even as I made use of his trust on a professional level. I did my job—asking questions, scribbling in my reporter's notebook—but I found myself wanting to know what had just happened that led Harvey to trust me. Was there something about Hartford, about living here, about claiming it as home, that really did connect us? These questions would stay with me long after that first interview.

Harvey was a talker. He listed for me Hartford's problems, the mantra that afflicts so many post-industrial American cities: racism and poverty, the sirens and the blood spilled by knives and guns. He bragged on his coach, Melvin "Butch" Braswell, the founder of the track club and the track coach at Hartford Public. Butch was an unassuming man whose trim beard followed his neck down to his T-shirt's collar. He wore a pair of gray pants and shabby Nike sneakers, and his T-shirt was so thin it was nearly transparent. "Most of the coaches at the school don't even know where we come from," Harvey told me. "Butch, he lives in the city. He always tells us, 'You can do this.' He picks us up. He teaches us more than about track—like, the way of life itself."

Braswell was more modest. "I don't even consider myself a good coach," he said, but something in his words rang falsely humble. He knew what he was doing mattered. He understood that young people trusted him, that in the midst of Hartford's bad actors—the dealers and the

gangbangers and the crackheads—he gave his athletes a different model of how to live. He knew that when Harvey talked to me, much of what Harvey said had first come out of Butch’s mouth.

“Track can carry me on into college,” Harvey told me that day. “If I get me some good grades, get me a good major, make me some good money, I can help my mom and the people I love.”

People I loved, my grandparents, Walter and Helen Petry, were native to the city, the children of Polish immigrants, and had lived in the same house nearly fifty years. Hartford held them tight, where Walter had been raised in poverty by his widowed mother, where Helen had learned kitchen tips from Italian friends. They had raised their own three children—including my mother—in the city’s South End and could imagine living nowhere else. It was my parents’ generation that broke the ties that had bound my family so closely to Hartford.

When my parents moved out of the city, when I was three years old, they traded a narrow railroad apartment near Hartford’s Royal Typewriter Factory for a Cape-style white house with black shutters in nearby rural Glastonbury on the east bank of the Connecticut River. The drive from Glastonbury would take a little less than a half hour, depending on traffic on the Putnam Bridge.

You’re moving across the river? said my horrified grandparents. Why so far?

My parents eventually took us farther—from Glastonbury to Vermont, and then to Tucson, always seeking better work for my father, better opportunities for the family. It wasn’t easy. My father had dropped out of high school, and the equivalency exam he’d passed and the few col-

lege credits he'd accumulated weren't enough to land him a profession. Instead he worked his way up through grease and car parts and sweat into management positions, but his jobs were vulnerable to downturns in the economy and to layoffs. The move to Arizona was meant to temper those. The economy there seemed always booming, and higher education was less expensive than in the northeast. Even if my father didn't return to college, he could more easily help his children pay tuition at one of the West's state universities. Indeed, in Arizona, I graduated high school, then college and started my journalism career. Over more than a decade in the Southwest, I learned not only a profession, but how to live through summer desert heat, how to pry cactus spines from my dog's paws, and how to eat spicy Mexican food. I suppose time and geography made me an Arizonan, and it is true I felt comfortable in Tucson's colonial, Catholic, Mexican, and Indian influenced culture. But to feel at ease is not the same thing as to feel connected. Tucson could not bind me. Some nights I dreamed that I hiked east over Tucson's Rincon mountains and there found another city, one with leafy deciduous trees and slender lanes and houses with peaked roofs. Hartford remained for me the home that should have been home, a place I knew hardly at all, a place made more mysterious, more necessary by its distance.

My old Ross ten-speed had racing handlebars and a frame painted black. I'd bought it when I was in high school with money from my grandparents. In Hartford, after I moved back in 1989 to work for the *Courant*, it became my anti-nostalgia machine. With it, I could combat that romantic perception of my hometown that grew out of

childhood memories of Christmas lights arrayed at downtown's Constitution Plaza, of tobogganing with my grandfather down Goodwin Park's one big hill. In a car, that nostalgia was easier to maintain. Through the raised windows of a car, Hartford could become for me a music video, providing visuals to whatever played on the radio, to whatever memory I chose to relive.

But it was my job to cover Hartford's high school sports teams, to tell the stories of the city's children, of Harvey Kendall and hundreds of others. I could not do that honestly while harboring a sentimental fiction, or a truth that was only a fraction of Hartford's particulars. Hartford was more than my family photo albums, more than the church where my parents married, the restaurant where they met, the factory where my great-grandfather had worked. When I rode my bicycle, the city forced on me its present realities: pork kebabs and rice, the sourness of trash dumpsters, homeboys in white T-shirts driving Toyota Corollas with dashboards decorated by air fresheners made to look like gold crowns, and men pushing shopping carts full of soda cans. Hartford was more complicated, more ruthless, and kinder than I knew.

Take, as proof, the hallway marred with graffiti and perpetual dusk and the smell of piss outside an apartment where a coach lived. Or the high school girls who cradled a teammate's infant daughter and cooed while Mama ran her heat in the 100 meters. Or the young man, so in need of soccer he used a Ginsu knife to saw the cast off his leg before his doctor could say, "the bone isn't healed." The same young man, spit on during a game, spitting back. The shooting guard, coached by his father, who helped the basketball team at his Catholic high school win a state championship just before the diocese closed the school

and put his father out of work. The soccer-playing twins from Puerto Rico who took special education classes and who taught a team of Laotians and Jamaicans and Poles to shout “*Mira! Look!*” whenever an opponent sprinted toward the goal posts. The teenager with dreadlocks whose name meant Prince of Peace.

Neighborhood centers. Gymnasiums. North End, South End. Clay Hill, Keney Park, South Green, Flatbush Avenue, Barry Square. Kids cried and snarled and loved each other as I watched and learned to love them. Bulkeley High School’s Bulldogs. Weaver’s Beavers. South Catholic’s Rebels. Prince Tech’s Falcons. Hartford Public’s Owls. I came to know the teachers and the security guards and the fans. But it was always the kids. So many stories.

I made mistakes. There was the time I printed the bragging of a Bulkeley quarterback who guaranteed a victory over Weaver only to lose a few days later, his team scoreless, humiliated. Weaver players repeated his boast as a taunt throughout the game, and then his fellow students at Bulkeley kept the words alive, too, so that “guarantee” echoed in the halls, punctuated by laughter. His coach was angry with me. These are kids, he said. You’ve got a responsibility. You’ve got to be careful with what they tell you.

And behind his words, this message: they may act tough, but so many of them, they’re frail. Beautiful, precious.

I was reminded of that—and heartened—when I pedaled through the crowded, littered streets of Hartford.

Early one morning in June, I chained my bicycle in front of Harvey Kendall’s house on Oakland Terrace, a street in Hartford’s North End. It was midweek, and early enough

that traffic was light. Despite the street garbage and houses with shattered windows and graffiti, the just-waking city seemed washed clean, full of potential.

Harvey had enjoyed a spectacular senior year, and the *Courant* planned to feature him on the cover of its high school All-State section. While my first story about Harvey was as much about the Inner City Striders, this one would profile him alone. Harvey had agreed to let me spend the day with him at Hartford Public.

Inside the Kendall house, while Harvey finished getting ready, I met his mother: a towering woman with a face shaped by the hard years of Southern childhood, by raising eleven children, and by the death—not yet five years past—of her husband. Jessie Kendall spoke in a rural Georgia accent, lush and tangled to my ears, and I strained to make out her words. She opened a clear plastic bag full of track and field medals and let them spill onto the kitchen table as she shook her head, marveling at all this treasure, wanting to share her honest delight that God could grant her such a blessing as this child, Harvey. She showed me a trophy case and how she'd arranged his plaques and awards, dozens of miniature athletes running, throwing, hurdling, each one labeled so the Kendalls would remember how Harvey won it.

Harvey and I walked to school, taking a long route out of our way so Harvey could pick up a friend. Eric Shorter and his mother had recently moved from a ramshackle apartment near Harvey's house to newer condos a few blocks east. I knew Eric a little. He was the quarterback of the football team, a smart, good-looking kid with the remnants of a childhood hearing problem that caused him sometimes to slur soft consonants or to overpronounce words.

At Hartford Public I sat through classes with Harvey-Harv (classmates called him that), listening to unremarkable teachers say unremarkable things. I sat with him at lunch, when he ad-libbed songs to make students laugh. He laughed, too. He laughed all the time, easily, as if laughter were his normal state and anything else was an act.

After school on the steps outside, we met Eric and three others, and here Harvey's hallway make-believe ended. His demeanor changed, his star status vanished. He relaxed. Clearly these were his peers. When we came upon them, they were trading the dates—August 16, September 16, August 26—that they'd leave for college. Harvey introduced me to his friends, all seniors looking forward to graduation, each serious under the afternoon sun, backpacks full, blue jeans baggy, a couple of them paging through the new yearbooks. All around us students slipped toward school buses or gathered in cliques for the walk home.

This was the moment Harvey chose to tell me about the promise he and his four friends had made, a pledge to each other and to their city, not just to give something back, but to give everything back, and then to give more. Hartford needed them: not just the money they'd someday earn, not a part-time commitment, but an effort that would last all day, every day. "I'm not the smartest guy," Harvey said, "but in August I'm going to college. I'm going to do the best I can and come back and help this community." The others nodded—yes, yes, all of us, we'll all come home.

As they talked, as I wrote what they said, I became struck with the possibility that Harvey had opened up to me that first day we met because he thought I would understand this pledge. Because I'd been born in Hartford, because now I lived there. Because I'd gone away and

come back. We were a team after all—the sons of a city that needed us.

Harvey recalled the trophy case from that morning, the plastic bag of medals. “All the awards don’t mean nothing,” he told me, “until our mission is accomplished.”

There are assurances, and there are promises, and there are oaths. Harvey spoke with a zealot’s belief, a belief strong enough to reverse reality, to make two plus two equal five, to change the color of the sky. He and his friends could even change Hartford, make it right. But he was nineteen then. In ten years he would be changed, as would his friends, as would Hartford. In many ways, the city would be worse. Hartford would demand more of Harvey and his friends—and yes, of me—than any of us expected on that afternoon in June. Who knew whether they would return, whether I would stay, whether we could make lives to keep faith with this place and its people?

This, then, is how those five young men began to teach me about the city of my birth and what we owed it. Their lessons would be compounded by those of other Hartford teenagers. But those five in particular—and their stories and their pledge—would stay with me, posing a challenge and raising questions. Over the next decade and beyond—when my grandparents, old and in failing health, needed family the way old, failing Hartford needed people like Harvey and his friends—those five and I would work to understand the answers. What do we owe the people and places who made us? And how much must we sacrifice to pay that debt?

Then, times would come when each of us would choose: to stand by Hartford or abandon it.