

Prologue

“All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother”

—Abraham Lincoln

Ann Arbor, Michigan • February, 1955

“Where am I?” I repeated the question over and over as I peered through squinted eyes in the early morning half-light. My brain fought to shake off the cobwebs, and I slowly took in the rows of military-style cots filling the spacious basement. It all rushed back to me. I was in the East Quad along with several dozen other freshly minted freshmen, all about to begin our stints at the University of Michigan. The basement of the dormitory had been converted into temporary housing. This is where we would bunk, I had been told, until we received our permanent billets.

My disorientation was compounded by the novelty of this unfamiliarity. At age sixteen, this was the first time—aside from my stays at Chickawah Summer Camp—that I had ventured away from my home in the Bronx. As I sat upright, I struggled to make sense of the past few days. Was it really only yesterday that I, as one of the top five graduates in my class of nine hundred, had delivered the commencement address at my graduation from Dewitt Clinton High School on Mosholu Parkway?

I recalled looking out at my all-male peers, who shivered under the cold January sun. I saw the sea of robes and caps and felt the whole world opening up before me. My graduating class was smaller than the June class, as January classes always were, but I didn’t mind. I was pleased to be able to finish high school one semester early. I had earned enough credits to receive my diploma and was, after all, a young man in a big hurry.

I was driven by a hunger to fulfill my mother’s deepest desire. Muriel’s dream—a dream shared by countless mothers who had come to America seeking a better life for their children—was to see her son become the first college-educated member of her family. A “College Man,” as she put it.

My hunger was complicated by the fact that my mother was not well. After receiving her disheartening diagnosis, we were unsure if she would live long enough to see me graduate from high school, let alone college. I promptly decided that, instead of waiting until June, I would graduate early and find a college that would let me to begin my studies in the middle of the school year. I rejected the University of Pennsylvania in nearby Philadelphia—it was too similar to the environment in which I had grown up, and I was on the hunt for new experiences—and narrowed down my choices to the University of Michigan and Indiana University. Both schools may have just as well been on the moon as far I was concerned. I did not have the means to visit either campus and knew only what I had read and heard about them. I had been accepted by both schools, so it was now up to me to decide whether to become a Hoosier or a Wolverine. I wasn’t really sure what a Hoosier was, and not having much else to go off of besides my admiration for

U of M football great Tom Harmon (aka Ol' 98), I decided to make my way to the wilds of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

As I sat there on my bunk collecting my thoughts, the hectic hurly-burly tumult of the previous day replayed in my mind. After completing my commencement speech, I whipped off my cap and gown and jumped into the car where my suitcase and parents were waiting. It was a mad rush to LaGuardia Airport to catch my Detroit-bound flight. I will forever remember that trip aboard a Northwest Airlines Boeing 377 Stratocruiser as my virgin airplane adventure.

"Here I am, Mom," I thought to myself as we glided in for landing. "I made it. Your son's a college man." I had slept the sleep of a satisfied man that night.

On that first Michigan morning, I stretched and gingerly made my way to the common bathroom. I was overcome by an eerie and unfamiliar feeling. I think they call it anomie: the feeling of being completely alone in a strange crowd of people. It was odd and distinctly uncomfortable to have been awake for more than an hour and not have spoken a single word to anyone. I had a list of things to do on campus, so I grabbed a doughnut and ventured out for my first look at the campus grounds, following the whole way by a lingering cloud of loneliness and homesickness.

As I bounced from the dorm to the registration office to the bookstore, it didn't take long for me to find my way to the fabled Diag, with its giant brass "M", located in the middle of Central Campus. It was the busiest spot on the grounds and often served as the site for concerts and pep rallies. I was careful not to set foot on the "M" itself; I had read that U of M students who stepped on the "M" prior to taking their first bluebook exam were destined to receive an F.

Despite the bustle of activity I encountered during my wide-eyed meanderings, I could not shake the feeling of isolation that trailed me as I walked. It was a feeling I would encounter again and again throughout life, each time I struck out in a new direction or solitarily embarked on a new frontier or venture. The feeling is best described as a sense of encroaching terror tempered by the resolve that I was headed towards a worthwhile goal. Fortunately, by the time I returned to my temporary quarters in East Quad that evening, I had managed to make my first friend.

Sam Weinstock was an affable and outgoing fellow freshman who had just arrived from East Orange, New Jersey. I'm delighted to report that he and I remain friends to this day, in 2021. Having come from similar backgrounds, Sam and I bonded quickly and spent the next few days orienting ourselves to our new surroundings. When our permanent housing assignments came through, Sam was sent to South Quad while I wound up at West Quad.

My new digs represented an eye-opening experience for this "Boy from the Bronx." The dorm was truly an international Noah's Ark; it seemed as if there were at least two students from every nationality and every ethnic group imaginable living there: two Catholics, two Chinese, two East Indians, two Blacks, and, of course, two Jews, one of whom was me. Being thrust into this potpourri population was something of an awakening. Growing up in the Bronx, my world had been divided into three distinct demographic segments: Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, and

Jews. Although our cultures were quite different, all three were tied together by one cherished belief: the value of the family. After all, it was my own devotion to my family, and especially to my mother, that had brought me to where I was. As I got to know more of my classmates, I discovered that my situation was not unique. Many of the young men living in West Quad, whatever their heritage, were, like me, the first in their families to attend college. It was this underlying connection that, despite the diversity, unified us and allowed us to find common ground.

Over the coming days I began to attend classes in pursuit of my BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) degree. In those days a BBA was about the equivalent of a trade school degree in terms of earning power, but it was nevertheless the field I felt I was best suited for. I did not have the means to attend graduate school and earn an M.B.A., so whatever business training I was to receive had to happen at the undergraduate level. My one regret is that I was exposed to only two years of humanities courses before my studies began to focus entirely on business and management. I feel I could have benefited greatly by a better acquaintance with literature and art. It is perhaps a desire to make up for this deficiency that has, to some extent, prompted me to write this book.

The most valuable lessons learned at college, I must admit, took place outside of the classroom. My exposure to these experiences came at first not out of a plethora of free time but out of necessity. I was not the beneficiary of any sort of scholarship, and funding my tuition and housing placed a huge financial burden on my parents. If I wanted any spending money for life's little luxuries—like food and clothing—I would have to earn it. And that's exactly what I set out to do.

My campus years saw me engage in every variety of menial odd job available. I waited tables at upscale sorority houses, lifeguarded at a nearby pool, and worked as a librarian. I soon learned about something called “occupational hazards.” For example, one of my part-time gigs was working behind the counter at Miller's Ice Cream Parlor and Sandwich Shop on East University. I'd work about two hours per day during the lunch hour fixing sundaes, phosphates, and malted milk shakes. I also did short order work preparing loaded grilled cheese sandwiches and greasy hamburgers. The job paid a princely \$1.25 per hour—plus all I could eat. But there was a serious occupational hazard to this: after one semester, I had put on 30 lbs.

Fortunately, the university had a need-based student loan program in place for which I qualified. Unlike the government loans of today, such notes had to be paid off each year. They were a sort of “bridge financing” that got you through from one semester to the next. Hence, the summer months saw me working two jobs in order to raise the money for repayment.

Another source of both financial, as well as spiritual support originated with an extraordinary gentleman named Howard L. Wikel. Wikel was a pharmacist who, during my junior year, opened a drug store on South State Street, near the main entrance to the U of M campus. This location made him one of Ann Arbor's most well-known business personalities. While he surely did not

know every single person living in the city, legendary Michigan football coach, Bo Schembechler, once said about him: “Anyone from Ann Arbor who says he doesn’t know Howard Wikel must be living in a cave.”

One of my many odd jobs at that time was delivering prescriptions from Wikel Drugs to homebound customers. For this I was paid a pittance but made out handsomely from the tips I received. Impressed by my industrious work habits, Mr. Wikel became something of a mentor and, as such, made me a beneficiary of certain so-called “fringe benefits.” These included what was then called “check-kiting.” Should I find myself, on any given Monday, a bit short due to some extravagant week-end spending, I knew that I could turn to Mr. Wikel and proffer my personal check for twenty dollars which he would promptly cash and agree to hold until payday on Friday.

I learned from Mr. Wikel the value of helping ambitious young people achieve their goals in life and I am proud to say that I have emulated him often over the years, both informally and through various internship programs I have helped to establish. Howard Wikel and I remained friends through his death in March, 2013 at age 89.

While I was never a slacker, what such immersive and intensive experiences at U of M taught me was how to develop the habits of success. Waiting tables for a gaggle of stuck-up sorority sisters was an onerous chore at first. But, after a time, it became routine. The work-a-day world also succeeded in developing in me the habit-forming virtues that would serve me for a lifetime—virtues such as thrift, money management, diligence, and determination. By the end of my stint at U of M in January 1959, these had coalesced into a formidable work ethic that would guide the course of my future career. It is for this gift of a positive and formative experience that I am most grateful to the University of Michigan.

I returned home to the Bronx upon the completion of my first semester in June of 1955. I arrived in time to see my mother shortly before her death two weeks later. She had been bed-ridden since attending my high school commencement ceremony back in January. Although losing her caused my heart to break, I was comforted by the fact that she died with her devoutly desired dream fulfilled. Her only son was now a full-fledged “College Man.”

It is for that reason that I dedicate this account of my life’s journey to her beloved memory.

J. Ira Harris
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