

ROCHESTER

WE LIVED JUST SOUTH OF ROCHESTER in Brighton, a farming town that was becoming a fast-growing suburb. Among my pals were the Updaws, who lived on a farm next door. I became the twelfth child in that family of eleven kids. I was in charge of the chicken coop, and collecting eggs was fun. Remember, I loved to collect. I practically lived on the Updaw farm in my early years.

Sports were important in school, much as they are now. As a youth, I wasn't a super athlete, but I played decent baseball. In the eighth grade, I played second base on the school team; it's my claim to fame as a baseball star. I was a great fielder but didn't have a great throwing arm; if I had, I would have played third base or shortstop. No ball could get through me.

I was a terrible hitter. I remember one game to this day. It was the ninth inning, the score was tied, the bases were loaded, with two outs, and it was my turn to bat. Guess what the coach told me to do: Get hit by the ball! Being a team player, I took it in the shin. We won the game, too, and time healed the pain.

Was I popular? Yes. In the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades, you play with the kids in the neighborhood — mostly sports. I was also pretty active socially with girls. Despite my feelings about my mother, I've always liked girls. I remember kissing one in a doghouse when I was in the second grade.

My mother, like most other Jewish mothers, wanted her son to be

BULLISH ON LIFE

bar mitzvahed, which is the ritual that declares that at thirteen a boy becomes a man. There is usually a great deal of preparation for that rite of passage, but I was somehow fortunate enough not to have to go through all of it. I entered Hebrew school when I was almost twelve, whereas the majority of students entered at eight or nine or ten. It wasn't too pleasant to go to Hebrew school after regular school. I'd much rather have been outside playing ball.

That was the detrimental aspect of a particular religious activity. Going to religious school interferes with a person's ability to acclimate to society. I used to feel awkward waiting for the bus to pick me up after regular school two or three days a week to take me off to the synagogue's basement for instructions in Hebrew, but I had to do it.

I've never been good at languages, and Hebrew is particularly difficult. For weeks and months, I sat in Hebrew school listening to old religious scholars with their long, gray beards, their black outfits, and their pointers. They'd point to Hebrew words, and we had to repeat them. When a student screwed up, the teacher would use the old-fashioned teaching method and swat him with the pointer. Once after swatting me, the teacher looked at me and said, "This is what we used to do to the asses in Palestine." I replied, "How would you like to be an ass and be hit like this?" Well, you can imagine what happened next.

The bar mitzvah itself was my first opportunity to be a public speaker, and I felt the energy of the congregation as I talked. It felt good, yet it was twenty years before I returned to a synagogue.

I never really observed anti-Semitism until I went to Brighton High School. In grammar school everybody had mixed together, but things were different at Brighton High. The attractive, smart gentile kids formed a clique. We Jewish kids were a minority at Brighton High and commuted to neighboring Monroe High so we could part of the Jewish social scene there.

I never liked that, having to go to Monroe because there were so few Jews at Brighton. I was kind of forced to belong to a Jewish fraternity. The truth is, I felt isolated and ostracized. Nobody called me a "dirty Jew" or things like that, but I felt I was a second-class citizen socially.

All the gentiles went to dance school. Occasionally, they would

invite me as a guest, but I was a lousy dancer. I remember once visiting Franklin High School on the other side of Rochester where a dance was going on. Suddenly, I saw this very pretty girl. To this day, I remember her: Gloria Shapiro. I was probably fifteen and there she was — blonde, blue eyes, perfect body — and she was dancing. I really liked the way she danced, her rhythm, her body flowing with the music. I cut in on her partner, and I danced up a storm. Everybody started applauding. People watched me, admiringly jealous. No longer a klutz, I was dancing with the golden Aphrodite, Gloria Shapiro. It changed my life.

I had some good friends in high school. One was Mel Roboff, who was physically unattractive but brilliant. The poor guy looked like Dumbo. He had big ears, the biggest nose, and a kind of flushed face, and he walked with a limp because he had had polio as a child. Mel became a good friend, I admired his wit and his smarts (he was valedictorian of our class). He influenced me intellectually, getting me to use my brain. I kept in touch with him over the years, too.

My parents, uneducated immigrants, couldn't help me much intellectually, and my brother and sister, so much older than I, weren't around to help either. So I did the best I could on my own. Later on, in college, I did become interested in intellectual pursuits.

Grammar school had been easy, but high school was much more competitive. I was good with numbers and would score high in math on college entrance exams. But I wasn't good in languages. I think the only way I got through high school Spanish was playing the rear end of a bull in a Spanish Club play. I made an ass of myself, literally.

All in all, I was an average high school student academically, great in math and below average in the languages. Physically, I was the runt in the class. I was the second shortest in gym class and didn't grow tall until my senior year. I finally hit six feet in my late teens.

It was in high school that I found my sport: tennis. Why that one? Because the great athletes at Brighton High didn't play it. I couldn't make the football team, so I played on the tennis team. The No.1 tennis player in high school was excellent, but there wasn't much competition to be No. 2, which I was.

I go by the principle of "hit 'em where they ain't." The Hall of Fame baseball player Wee Willie Keeler said that. Do things that very

BULLISH ON LIFE

few people do, and you can be a star. Walk the “path least traveled.” That’s an important life message, and my children shared it; two of them became fencing stars at their universities.

Of course, there was more to life than school and sports. There were girls. All the guys were horny back then, the same as they are now. Nobody officially, least of all my parents, told me the facts of life.

Like most other boys then, I learned about sex from classmates like Don Shaprow, who was more mature than most of us early teenagers. Don was perhaps six months older than I was. He had access to his father’s car, a classic black Buick sedan, and, just as important, he had access to the local nymphomaniac, Helen Thomas.

One night Don telephoned to tell me that it was my night with Helen. So I rode my brother’s bicycle — I didn’t have one of my own — to Don’s house while he went to pick up Helen in that big, black boxy Buick, the back seat of which was supposed to be the site of the deflowering of Gerry Cramer. But he came back without her. Apparently, she couldn’t stay out late that night. Boy, was I irritated. He’d made promises of wonderful things to come and then left me in charge of his little sister. Evidently, that was part of the plan: while Don had Helen, I babysat. Eventually, though, I got Helen Thomas, my not-so-great introduction to sex.

It was difficult to have sexual relationships back then. For one thing, women’s clothing wasn’t conducive. Women wore girdles — even teenagers — which made it difficult to get to their bodies. By the time you did, it was often too late. We fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds engaged in very little sexual foreplay, mostly just a lot of kissing. If by luck you managed to touch a breast, you talked about it for weeks.

I was popular among the nice little sixteen-year-old Jewish girls. I went to all their Sweet Sixteen parties, but I didn’t have any extra-special girl. I was a big shot in my high school fraternity, but I didn’t hit my stride until I left home at the age of eighteen. That’s when things really started to click.

I started working at age six or seven, selling magazines like *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and peddling newspapers. I also mowed lawns and shoveled snow off driveways. At ten I had, in retrospect, my favorite job: working in an ice cream factory, for thirty cents an hour and all the ice cream I could eat. Rum maple and brandied

peach were my favorite flavors. I got drunk on ice cream. Besides the thirty cents an hour, I gained about thirty pounds that summer, growing more horizontally than vertically.

In my high school years, I worked summers and after school at either Relins Drug Store (next to the high school) or downtown at Cramer Drugs (no relation). At both, I swept floors, loaded the gum and candy counter (and helped myself on occasion), and did other chores. Cramer Drugs was an ethical apothecary in a medical arts building in Rochester, and its owners, because our names were the same, kind of adopted me. I became an apprentice pharmacist at a time when pharmacists still used a mortar and pestle to make medications. I did more than mix drugs, of course. I occasionally sneaked out Trojan condoms for my friends, a step up from sneaking candy. This was before you could easily buy condoms over the counter. Store employees got bonuses for selling high-profit items like perfumes, electrical items — and condoms. I knew exactly how to sell the higher-profit-margin items. I was a good employee.

My early teens were the years of World War II. Most of the eighteen- to nineteen-year-olds were off at war, so a fourteen-year-old, even a short one like me, was a big man. We were allowed in bars and nightclubs because they needed customers. We were young, but old at the same time. We dressed as if we were five years older than we were. I asked a fellow fourteen-year-old out on a date and we went to the local night club, The Chateau. The bartender asked what I would like. I hesitated. But he needed an answer, so I said I'd like some chicken (now that's sophistication). It was not much later that after seeing a re-run the movie *The Philadelphia Story* with Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn I met the dry martini, and we have been good friends ever since.

As high school graduation neared, I began to think about what I should do next. The only thing I knew was working in drugstores. I wanted more, so I persuaded my parents to send me to college. My brother and sister hadn't gone to college. Instead, they went to a business school, taking one-year programs where they learned typing and bookkeeping.

I won my parents over, mainly because now it was more common for people of my age to go to college, more so than was true of my

BULLISH ON LIFE

brother and sister's era. My parents thought I should learn a trade. Since I was working in drugstores, they reasoned, it was obvious that I should go to pharmacy school. I applied to the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, the oldest pharmacy school in the United States and a prestigious one. I was accepted. Then an unexpected thing happened. While on a tour of the campus, I could not help but notice the overwhelming smell of formaldehyde in the buildings. I can still smell it. And it slowly dawned on me in late spring that I didn't really want to be a pharmacist.

I wondered why I couldn't go to a real college, like the ones my friends were attending with football, cheerleaders, girls, and all the normal "rah-rah" things. My parents were not enthusiastic, however, because they still wanted me to learn a trade. At the last minute, I applied to Syracuse University because it was fairly close to Rochester and a lot of my older acquaintances had gone there. Syracuse accepted me, and I was very pleased, especially because my application went in after most of the acceptances had gone out. It was rare for Syracuse to accept a new student in the summer, and I appreciated that it did that for me.

Rather than being happy about my acceptance to a private university, my parents were mostly concerned about the cost. They were rather penurious — that's a fancy word for "cheap" — but they allowed me to go.