Hope for the Future Rooted in the Past

grew up in a store on Upper Albany Avenue. OK. It wasn’t on Albany Avenue. It wasn’t even in Hartford. The store I grew up in was Harrison’s Men’s and Boy's Wear on Fifth Avenue in Tarentum, Pa. It was owned by my father and uncle, and by their father before them.

I worked in Harrison’s from age 8—when I made boxes in the attic—until I was 18 and left to become a student at Trinity College in 1964.

So when I returned to Hartford 34 years later to become president of the University of Hartford, Upper Albany looked very familiar to me. It looked like Tarentum’s Fifth Avenue, a street lined with small businesses working hard to become successful.

I knew from my own experience how hard small-business owners work to succeed. I quite clearly remember my father working six days a week in the store and then spending Sunday afternoons at the dining room table in our home, working on the books. I remember my mother working in the small office in the rear of the store, my sister stocking the shoe section, and me selling shorts, shirts, and underwear up front. I remember how tired I felt after working for 11 and half hours on a Saturday before Christmas, and I especially remember how much my feet hurt after standing all day.

And I remember the incredible thrill my father felt in putting his stamp on his own business, and the satisfaction he felt in serving his customers.

So, when I looked at Upper Albany Avenue for the first time on that June day in 1998, I saw my own past and a wonderful potential for Hartford’s future. I saw a street in north Hartford that, with some prudent investment, could become a wonderful counterpart to thriving Hartford business sections on Franklin Avenue, Park Street, and Farmington Avenue.

A few weeks later, I visited The Artists Collective at its former location on Clark Street. I was amazed by the creative energy and talent I found there, and was astonished when Dollie McLean told me they were soon to move to a new building on Upper Albany designed by Tai Soo Kim.

University President Walter Harrison (right) was among the community leaders who spoke at a May 20 forum on “The Future of Albany Avenue” at The Artists Collective in Hartford, sponsored by The Hartford Courant editorial board. Other members of the panel included Dollie McLean (left), executive director of The Artists Collective, and Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez (center). The panelists agreed that there is a sense of positive momentum but felt that officials must develop a cohesive vision for the neighborhood and address such issues as crime, education, and parking in order for the avenue to thrive.

On the way back to the university, I stopped by to see the building, then under construction. I immediately realized that if the university could somehow become involved in this neighborhood of ours, The Artists Collective and the university could become gateways to a new vibrant Hartford location.

Several months later, Judge Robert Killian, my neighbor and a university regent, suggested that I look at the former Thomas Cadillac dealership at the corner of Albany Avenue and Westbourne Parkway as a site for an expansion of the university’s Hartt School. Within a few months, we began the discussions that concluded with our purchasing the site.
Since that summer day six years ago when I first saw Albany Avenue, I have learned a lot about it, about its merchants and their dreams, about the creative energy and talent of The Artists Collective, about the neighborhood’s schools and churches, about the boundless human potential that resides there. All this has been the underpinning of the university’s strategy of engagement with its neighbors.

Our strategy has three prongs. First, we have purchased the Thomas Cadillac site and are now raising the money and finishing the designs for a performing arts center that will house the theatre, dance, and voice divisions of The Hartt School. Under the leadership of architects Tyler Smith and Michael Howard and the construction expertise of Downes Construction and Capital Restoration (the latter firm located on Albany), we are very close to beginning the project.

Second, under the leadership of Professor Margery Steinberg of the Barney School of Business and many of her colleagues and students, we have partnered with the Upper Albany merchants to provide them with services and expertise in areas ranging from marketing to finance to accounting—support and expertise my father would have loved to have had—to help make them more successful.

Third, we have partnered with the Hartford public schools to improve our support of the schools in the neighborhood—from Annie Fisher School to Fox Middle School. Our students and faculty work every day through our national award-winning program, Educational Main Street, to provide tutoring and mentoring to students in these schools. And on May 5, the Connecticut legislature provided bonding authority for $34 million to support construction of a new University High School of Science and Engineering, to be built just west of Annie Fisher School on the east edge of our campus in the Blue Hills Neighborhood, just on the edge of Upper Albany. This school will provide a wonderful counterpoint to our already spectacularly successful elementary magnet school, which also serves the students and families of our neighborhoods.

All of this is a major investment by the university in the future of our neighborhood, in the future of our community. Hundreds of people and millions of dollars are involved. The energy is palpable. The future is bright.

The university is deeply committed to Albany Avenue. We hope to be a major force in its future. But my hopes for that future are deeply rooted in my past.

Sincerely,

Michael Gargano ’78
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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**Letters to the Editor**

truly enjoyed reading the article on the golf accomplishments of Jerry Kelly, Tim Petrovic, and Pat Sheehan [Winter 2004, *The Observer*]. It is amazing that a university that decided in the mid-1980s to move its athletics program from the lesser profile of NCAA Division II to the higher visibility of NCAA Division I has witnessed the increased exposure of the good name of the University of Hartford on major television networks, cable and satellite television, national newspapers, and major trade publications due to the success of its golf program.

Though the article did not mention the reclassification to NCAA Division I, one of the driving forces behind this initiative was former director of athletics, Mr. Gordon McCullough. Often referred to as the father of Hartford Hawk athletics, Gordon and then Vice President Robert A. Chernak spearheaded the move to place the then-young University of Hartford as a strong local, regional, and national institution. Today the University of Hartford reaps the benefit of their shared vision.

I served as Coach McCullough’s assistant for many years and can share that Gordon would have taken great pride in the accomplishments of the university today and those of Jerry, Tim, and Pat. He was instrumental in their recruitment to the university and their development as student-athletes. Gordon’s Irish eyes are smiling knowing that his boys are doing well and contributing back to their alma mater and the institution that he loved.

Sincerely,

Michael Gargano ’78
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life
University of Massachusetts Amherst

I just read the latest issue of *The Observer* [Winter 2004] and found the article on file sharing [“With A Little Help From Our Friends”] by Marcy Gotterbarn ’03 very interesting. One thing that surprised me is that the article didn’t quote Bill Stafford [Hartt ’90]. Bill is the VP of copyrights at BMG and is one of the people at the forefront of this issue in the music industry. It seems to me that Bill is a great asset to the university and would have been a perfect person to be interviewed for this piece.

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