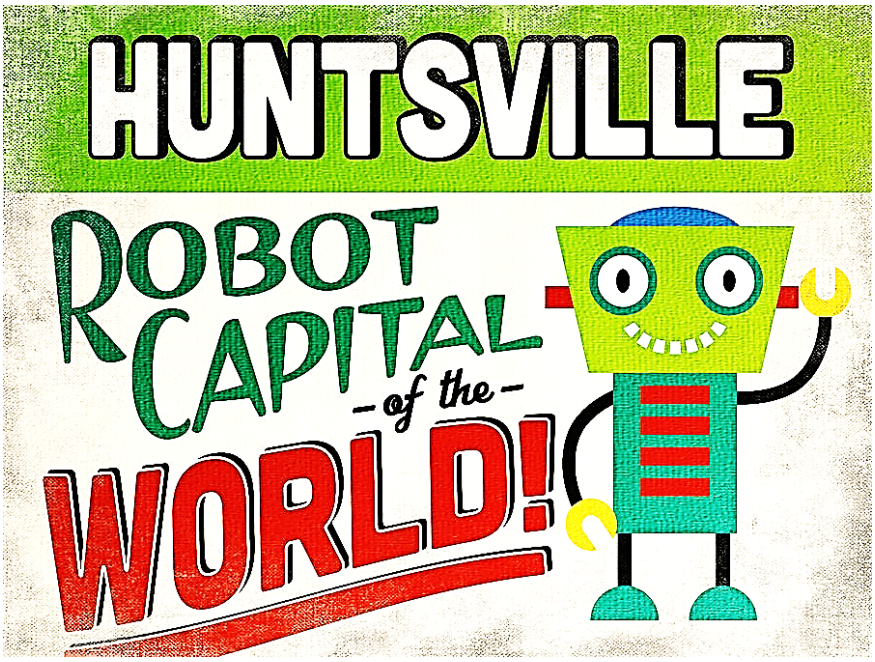
July 2024 "It's *your* New York!"

The Rondout Reader

FINDING MY FATHER

By Kevin Ahearn


QUEENIE


HUNTSVILLE
ROBOT CAPITAL
-of the-
WORLD!


HUNTSVILLE,
ALABAMA
ROCKET CITY

Fifty plus years ago, I was alone on a hot autumn morning, pumping my overloaded bicycle at the start of my first road trip that would lead to me pedaling more than 15,000 miles around the United States, Canada, Costa Rica and Brazil.

I was in great shape, but a couple of miles out of Huntsville, Alabama, something was wrong. I thought I was just sweating heavily and then I realized…I was breaking down.

I pulled off to the side.

“My god, I‘m…*crying*!”

Like never before in my life.

I should have cried when my father died. I rode with him in the ambulance to the veterans‘ hospital. The doctor asked him who the president was, the year, and who I was. Dad still knew me, but not much else.

Tall, lanky, *sharp*, ‘The Big Mow,‘ his crewmates had called him.

“Bad pilot, bad bombardier, *good* navigator,” he‘d told me often enough.

Fifty-seven missions in four-engine bombers in World War II, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with clusters. Had he been any of 10,000 other young, brave, white American airmen, I'd have never been born.

After the war had been won, the hero was lost, fathering five children and drinking himself into oblivion. I remember his empty eyes, his inner fire out.

"That"s not gonna happen to me!"

When the hospital called very early the next morning, I was still wide awake. Dad was 46.

Two years later…

I believe in Santa Claus. Not the bearded guy with the flying reindeer pulling a sled, the *spirit* of the season: the most precious gift can come from the most unlikely of givers.

On Christmas Day, 1969, in Jackson Heights, there came a knock at the door. A stranger handed me a telegram; I had been accepted as a **Volunteer In Service To America** (VISTA).

The next morning I called the VISTA number again and again and kept getting the same woman in Brooklyn. The US Government had typoed the area code; a harbinger of snafus to come?

I flew out early to visit my aunt and uncle in Atlanta where I got so sick I couldn't smoke for two days. After seven years, might as well quit.

Reporting to the US Government office, I filled out a bunch of forms, then joined nearly two dozen other new VISTAs in a big room. All were close to my age except 'Gypsy' at 83, the oldest Federal Employee.

'Gypsy' looked like 'Gabby' Hayes and sounded like John Wayne. He and his wife had visited every National Park in the country. After she died, he wanted to motivate other seniors less enthusiastic about living.

I was the other exception. Many young men became Vista Volunteers to get out of the draft and Vietnam. I was an Air Force veteran.

The training staff introduced themselves, telling us we'd soon be 'professional activists' and 'community organizers,' 'frontline patriots' in America's War on Poverty.

"The first VISTA members started in January 1965," read the official history. *And by the end of the year more than 2,000 members were working in the Appalachian region, California migrant worker camps, and Hartford, Connecticut poor neighborhoods.*

By 1966, more than 3,600 VISTA members were serving the country. By the end of its first decade, VISTA had helped develop a range of projects around the United States, including block watch clubs, credit unions, agricultural cooperatives, community groups, and small businesses.

Many of these entities still thrive today— including some of the first Head Start programs and Job Corps sites. As experience with poverty issues grew, VISTA also recruited lawyers, doctors, and architects to work in underserved areas."

A small, young, light-skinned Negro woman took the stage. Edith's resume was headlined by multiple arrests during demonstrations and sit-ins all over the South.

"Who's here to help poor black people?" she asked us all.

Twenty-two white hands shot straight up.

"Hands down, every one of you!" said Edith. "You are here to help yourselves, because if you can't help yourself, you can't help *anybody*!"

I would have killed for a cigarette.

On Sunday we attended services at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where the Reverend Martin Luther King had been the co-pastor and where many of the Civil Rights Movement's mass meetings, rallies and strategy sessions had been held. The room had a holy electricity ignited by the congregation singing with the choir, especially the song "Higher Ground'.

Ralph Abernathy took the pulpit and talked about the 'Young Lords,' Hispanic activists who had taken over a church in NYC and began an 11-day occupation providing free breakfast and clothing programs, health services, a day care center, and a liberation school.

The reverend's words psyched up us VISTAs, but we could feel the energy draining out of the church. Abernathy felt it too. Then he said…

“And we thank Jesus…”

“Amen,” said someone. “Make it plain.”

It all became about Jesus.

During training in Atlanta, I lived with a cab driver‘s family in a housing development. He had a young daughter having trouble adjusting to being called ‘black‘ rather than ‘Negro.‘ Either way, she was beautiful.

A couple of guys quit VISTA during the first week. Maybe they went to Canada. The rest of us headed for ‘Rocket City.‘

I went with ‘Gypsy‘ in his van, the most beautiful, dangerous, crazy drive in my young life. Growing up in NYC, I never drove anything, but I had to be able to drive better than ‘Gypsy‘ who was off the road half the time.

Finally, the Alabama State Police pulled us over.

“You keep weavin‘ like that, boy,” the angry officer told the old man. “I‘ll put your ass in jail.”

Years later I‘d find out that ‘Gypsy‘, a spry 90, had been killed by a hit-and-run driver in Jerusalem, on Christmas.

“Welcome to Hunts*vul*!” said the state official who‘d coordinate with the federal VISTA program.

The northern Alabama city of 50,000, was founded in the days of ‗King Cotton‘. After the upheaval of the Civil War, Huntsville promoted itself as ―The Watercress Capital of the World.‖

In 1950, Huntsville got a team that would remake the city; 118 German scientists
(―Nazi war criminals!‖ some insisted.) arrived in the ‗watercress town‘ to launch the Army‘s new rocket program. Prime players in America‘s ‗Space Race‘ against the Communist Soviet Union, the West German group was warmly welcomed and quickly integrated into Old South society.

Twenty years later, the billion-dollar Marshall Space Flight Center aimed Huntsville at the stars. Opening in 1970, with celebrated NASA fanfare, the ‘U.S. Space and Rocket Center‘, a spectacular museum displaying hundreds of rockets and missiles, including a mammoth SATURN V moon rocket, would be the hottest tourist destination in the state. Located on a prime site donated by the U.S. Army‘s Redstone Arsenal, the headliner was NASA‘s ‘Space Camp‘ geared to educate and excite young people - “Y*ou can be the astronaut!*“

VISTA had alerted the media; we did interviews for TV. “In Europe with the Air Force, I didn‘t feel I was helping America,” I said. “As a VISTA in Huntsville, I hope to be able to.”

At six foot, four, I was the tallest trainee. My VISTA supervisor, Stewart was taller, and a flaming radical burning white hot. With long stringy hair and a flowing beard to match, he looked like Jimmy Stewart meets ZZTop. We rarely saw eye to eye. Stewart had a prestigious degree as an optical scientist‘, but didn‘t know a damn thing about optics‘.

Training had a single task: to instill in each and every one of us…the VISTA *spirit* – the rage to kick The Establishment in the ass from coastal ghetto to coastal ghetto, from the Everglades to the Arctic Circle...on the front lines, in the trenches around the clock, fighting illiteracy and racism, improving health services, and rallying local groups.

VISTA volunteers were saving America!

From what? I didn‘t get it. Within a month, my fellow trainees were fully ablaze; I remained an all-wet vet, yet to get with the program.

Halfway through, I got called in.

“You‘ve got an inferiority complex,” Stewart told me face to face.

Why shouldn‘t I? The other VISTAs had college degrees. They were —qualified.‖ I was an art school drop-out with only limited experience and success organizing a 'tribe' of boys in Jackson Heights.

My mission as a “community organizer‘ would be to help poor, young black boys through recreation. Or was I just a PR pushpin? VISTA was a liberal-backed haven for

draft dodgers. I was an Air Force vet who had defended America against Communist aggression!

"Find something to *do*!" said Stewart. "Set a goal, get it done, make it *last*!"

A story I never found out who wrote: An idealistic young man points to an undeveloped tropical island off the bow of a huge yacht.

"Put me ashore with just my toothbrush," he says to the tycoon. "Give me a year, and I'll revolutionize the place."

The tycoon agrees and returns twelve months later to discover that the young man had unified the many tribes to create an industrial paradise centered on the headquarters hut which branched out to support a chain of thriving workshops.

Just before the young man is welcomed back on the yacht, he says. "Wait, let me get my toothbrush."

Reaching under the headquarters hut, he pulls out his toothbrush…and in a chain reaction, everything he had built falls down.

"Doing something' as a VISTA is not enough. Leave your 'toothbrush'!"

My 'underdeveloped isle' was the West End, a collection of small houses, mostly shacks, a Negro 'Dogpatch' in the heart of 'Rocket City'. West Germany had been foreign; the West End of Huntsville was the dark side of the moon.

I bought a used 3-speed bicycle. On a 'white street,' just outside the West End, there was a dilapidated string of apartments. I rented one for $30 a month. Catholic Charities furnished it.

A couple of white guys had access to a city gym where the West End boys played basketball. I met with the boys after their choose-up game. My bike was locked up; I was afraid one of the kids would steal it.

"We're the West End Bluehawks," said Dolphus Atchison, who at age 13, had the physique of Marvel Comic's African superhero, the *Black Panther*.

"Why the 'Bluehawks'?" I asked.

"'Cause nobody else's got that name," replied Dolphus.

“What kind of team are you?”

“Get us a game, you got yourself a team,” said one of them.

“You play in a league or in school?” I asked.

“Well, we‘ve never been an ‘official‘ team, you know.”
I knew. And basketball season was done. “You guys play baseball?”

“You mean the West End Bluehawks could be a *real* baseball team?” said the *Black Panther*.

“Sure,” I said.

If Jesus is a sports fan.

I was the only volunteer living alone. Sally, Pat, and Claudia, the three women I was working with, rented a house in West End. We never got along, mostly my fault. They were ‘qualified college grads ‘ community organizing to promote positive change‘ while I was this arrogant, afraid Air Force ass with no idea how to help them or himself.

Joyce, Jude, and Nancy got a place in town. I painted ‘mall monsters‘ on their windows for beer. We‘d play bridge there. Across the street from ‘The Parkway Church of God‘, Betty, Mary and Kathy‘s house on Oakwood Drive became the unofficial VISTA headquarters where we would gather -- young, idealistic commandos parachuted into
‘Rocket City‘ to save America.

The VISTAs burned. I drank.

We had an anthem we played incessantly.

“*No, you* cant *always get what you want*,” the choir opened for the Rolling Stones. “*You* cant *always get what you want.”*

I drank some more.

I got a couple of bats and balls from Catholic Charities. The West End had a beat-up field. The boys and I would ‘practice‘ after school and on weekends. I‘d never played on a baseball team and never coached anyone; the ‘Bluehawks‘ were as far from being a ‘real‘ team as I was from being a ‘real‘ coach.

Cue the choir: *“But if you try sometimes, you‟ll find, you get what you need.”*

President Lyndon Johnson had to be the most hated man in America. Less than two years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.‘s assassination, the fires from the riots were still smoldering. The Vietnam war was out of hand and in the streets and Nixon would begin bombing Cambodia. We VISTAs saw LBJ as Santa Claus; he gave us ‘Model Cities‘ – *money* for anti-poverty programs.

In late February, I made an appointment and pedaled downtown to see the ‘Model Cities‘ guy.

“Twelve baseball gloves, including a first baseman‘s and catcher‘s mitt, a dozen baseball hats with ‘BH‘ on them, and twenty-four white T-shirts of all sizes…,” said the middle-aged white man from behind a big desk. “For a neighborhood baseball team?”

“**The West End Bluehawks!”** I said.

“Understand that you have to be practical here,” advised ‘Model Cities‘. “This is nineteen seventy. Nobody wants an all-black team. The city won‘t let you play in any of their leagues, and forget about Little League. If you‘ve got kids that can play, have them try out for already established teams. Move them out and up, that‘s VISTA, right?”

“This is about the West End,” I said. “Creating something the community can be proud of. Who and how the team‘s going to play I‘ll work on when there *is* a team. I need to show these kids they can be one.”

“How? The West End‘s been a dead end since the Civil War,” he said. “You think *you* can change that? I get you these gloves and hats, they could be gone in a week and the t-shirts used for toilet rags. I won‘t be part of another VISTA scam shaming the federal government.”

“One, two, six, nine, two, six, eight, seven,” I said. “My serial number. Four years as an intelligence analyst in Air Force Security Service.”

(Had I told him I was *Super Analyst* on a Top Secret mission--that would have been a *felony*.)

“As a VISTA, I‘m still serving my country,” I said. “You?”

“I‘ll see what I can do,” said ‘Model Cities.‘

“When?”

“Give me two weeks.”

“Thanks, and congratulations,” I said with a crisp salute. “‘Model Cities‘ just bought its first baseball team.”

The West End ‘Citizens‘ Committee‘ was composed of a half dozen old women. Not a man in sight. The three other VISTAs and I met with them once a week. I had news, but nothing they hadn‘t heard before. Ever since they could remember, well-meaning white people had all kinds of ideas and made promises and nothing had changed.

One man alone among so many women, I got a nickname: ‘Mista‘ VISTA.‘

After I rode all over town and sold $50 worth of tickets to the ‘Citizens‘ Committee‘s’ chicken dinner, Thelma Lou, the oldest member, invited me over for morning coffee. I felt honored.

Every dusty road in the West End was a side street. Thelma Lou‘s small, wooden home had a worn neatness about it. She‘d lived here all her life. At the front door, I felt like an American foreigner.

“Yeah, we ‘Negroes‘ are *different*,” she said as we sat in frayed, stuffed chairs in her living room and I wondered when was the last time she had bought something new. “We have to be, been on different roads ever since we got here.”

“We whites got the high road, didn‘t we?”

“You all *took* it and ain‘t no way you‘re givin‘ it back,” said Thelma Lou harshly.

She was at least twice my age, maybe three times. I could feel the added years she‘d lived. If I were watching her in a movie, she‘d be somebody‘s maid. Who was I in hers?

“You‘re down with our boys,” she said. Overweight, every sip had a slim sense of purpose. A fire burned in her eyes… “This game you all‘re playin‘ gonna get them up somewhere?”

“The West End Bluehawks have nowhere else to go.”

“You don‘t know nuthin‘ yet, ‘Mista Vista‘,” she said and I winced at the sound of my neighborhood title. “You‘re new to the low road. You don‘t know where it‘s goin‘, where it‘s always gone.”

No, I don‘t,” I admitted. “But one day, Thelma Lou, our roads have to converge, combine. What a highway this country‘ll be.”

“Ha!” she laughed, her eyes twinkling. “That‘s a bridge we can both jump off if we ever get to it!”

The coffee stayed hot. Later I‘d find out Thelma Lou always had a pot brewing. If she ever had a husband, he was long gone. Her sister lived nearby and would drop in once in a while. No way could I imagine living her life.

But we had one thing in common.

“When I was born, I came out sickly and discolored,” she said. “They used to call me ‘Li‘l Red‘.”

‘Thelma Lou‘ no more. Now we both had nicknames.

‘I‘d rather be lucky than good,’ said Paul Brown, the hall of fame coach. Down to my last out, I‘d go down swinging.

I called up the Huntsville Boys‘ Club, told the director who I was and what I had and asked for a meeting. The next morning I‘d go in.

Had I been a ‘qualified community organizer‘ instilled with the VISTA spirit, I‘d‘ve found out the Boys‘ Club needed me as much as I needed them. Located in the white section of town, the Club was supposed to be fully integrated, but only two Afro-American boys had signed up for their summer baseball league. To make matters worse, the Club only had enough players for five teams. This VISTA calls with a sixth team and they‘re all black – the West End Bluehawks could be the answer to their prayers.

Not so fast. A big, thick man with a bulldog face and temperament, the Director was taking no chances.

“We want every boy, regardless of race, color or creed to become a member of *their* club,” he said. “But we will not tolerate a gang of hooligans comin‘ here to bully our boys!”

The West End‘s reputation had preceded me. So had VISTA‘s.

“I‘m still getting the team together,” I said. Only five or six boys were showing up for ’practice‘ while an older group turned out only to laugh at us. “The West End Bluehawks need a lot work.”

“Why don‘t you bring‘em all in and sign‘em up,” suggested the ‘Bulldog‘. “If enough come in, we‘ll have six *integrated* teams.”

He made good sense, but…

“This is about *community*,” I said. “The West End has to have something homegrown they can be proud of. Give the Bluehawks a league to play in and they‘ll do just that.”

‘Li‘l Red‘ was praying, I was sure.

Berne Hogarth (1911-1996) was the greatest American anatomist of the 20th Century, the definitive *Tarzan* artist, one of the founders of the School of Visual Arts, and the best teacher I ever had.

“The reason you‘re not doing anything in my class,” he singled me out in a room full of students. “Is that you‘re afraid to find out that you‘re not as good as you think you are.”

Time to show some guts; the ‘Model Cities‘ stuff arrived in the middle of March. I bought some brushes, five tubes of acrylic paint and an Xacto knife. Then I got a bunch of open-ended boxes used to ship cases of soda and beer.

On a piece of unbroken cardboard I drew two concentric circles. On the top half, in simple lettering - *West End*; the bottom half – *Bluehawks.* The team logo…a hawk‘s head profile, beak closed, with a feathery border. Then I cut out the letters and the logo silhouette and *viola!* I had my stencil.

“What you all fixin‘ to do?” asked Mike, walking into my always open apartment.

Mike Jacobs was 11 years old with honest black eyes and a face that mirrored truth. Born with a club foot, he walked like a corkscrew. The kids called him ‘Twister.‘

I stretched the first t-shirt over one of the boxes. Pen in hand, I stenciled in the lettering and the hawk‘s head. ‘West End Bluehawks‘ in red, the logo in blue with a yellow beak, trimmed in black.

“Oh, man!” said Mike.

The acrylic paint dried quickly. Then I restretched the shirt to do the back, a team number in blue.

The Bluehawks t-shirt was the first *art* I ever made. Better than ‘beautiful‘ and ‘professionally done‘, it had spirit. Would this be my ‘toothbrush‘?

Deservedly so, Mike got the first one right off the box and tore out on his bike to show the West End.

‘Ya‘ shudda seen‘im,” ‘Li‘l Red‘ told me later. “Wearin‘ that shirt, he came up to my house with eyes big as saucers, shoutin‘ ‘We‘re gonna be a *real* team!‘”

One down, 23 to go.

A productive St. Patrick‘s Day weekend - Setting up my table outside, I stretched and stenciled and painted over and over and over and got a sunburn to boot.

Two boys biked over Saturday morning.

Jerry Haley was tall and lean and longing to be on a team. The most dependable glove in the West End, he‘d play only two games before leaving for the sidelines.

“I tell you a boy can play,” said Jerry. “That boy can *play*!”

Boys throughout the league would prove me wrong all season, but none ever fooled Jerry.

‘Tee‘ (I never knew his full name.) started at third and left the field with Jerry. He came with an attitude; he never bought into me, but stuck with the team. Guess he had nothing else better to do, but he‘d never admit it.

By noon, I was handing out shirts as fast as I could paint them. Jerry would bring in boys I‘d never seen before.

“Give‘em a shirt,” said Jerry with a knowing smile. More the coach than I was, Jerry handed out the gloves and the caps.

I brought a sample shirt to the next meeting of the West End Citizens Committee. They liked it so much that they reimbursed me for the paint and art supplies.

But before I got to feelin‘ too proud.

“Lookie here, Mista Vista,” said the chairwoman. “We all been working real hard long before you ever got here.”

“I second that motion,” said ‘Li‘l Red‘ with a smile. “But we‘ve been playin‘ ever since.”

On April 11th, APOLLO XIII blasted off for the moon. A couple of days later came the misquoted message: “Houston, we have a problem.”

Tell me about it. West End‘s first shot at anything had yet to take off. Come game time, would they be ready?

Wearing new shirts, more and more boys came to practice, but my efforts were going south; I couldn‘t feel *team*. It wasn‘t the players, but the coach who was lacking.

I was afraid, scared to death of failure and humiliation. I didn‘t see ‘team‘ because I could only see ‘race.‘ Not as individuals, but as ‘poor black people‘ I was ‘here to help.‘

In a panic, impatient and angry, I yelled and screamed at them until I lost it, kicking a boy in the ass to get him off the field.

The Bluehawks should have taken off their T-shirts and pelted me with them, but they didn‘t. Had they become used to similar treatment from white people?

Stewart was pissed and told me so.

‘Twister‘ made it plain. “You shud‘na done that!”

The West End Citizens‘ Committee met without me. Word was they were looking for a black man to coach *their* team. Like the APOLLO XIII astronauts, I was running out of time. They had a ’lifeboat.‘ I didn‘t.

Nothing interfered with my drinking. Riding a bicycle drunk comes with a blind and stupid invincibility that can end in an instant. One night riding back to the West End, I crashed through a row of mailboxes, flew over the handlebars and landed in a ditch.

On the first evening of my father‘s wake, an older man I‘d never met came up to me.

“You know, you look just like that body lying in there,” he said. “Where‘s the bathroom?‖

Seems Jesus had other plans; I got up and rode home without a scratch.

NASA resourcefulness and heroism rescued the astronauts of APOLLO XIII.

Another night, another two six-packs. Pedaling home half-gassed, I spotted a fire in the West End. Half the neighborhood had turned out. I pulled up in front of an abandoned shack fully involved, flames ripping into the dark with a startling beauty.

“The most beautiful thing in the world is a B-Seventeen blowing up,” the ‘Big Mow‘ once told me. My father had seen it happen at least once. The Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was the bomber he and buddies were flying and the Nazis were blowing them up by the score. Ten men gone in a flash so beautiful it blotted out reality.

A quick look and I knew the wooden house across the narrow, dusty road would quickly catch. The way most white fire departments responded to calls in poor, black sections, half the West End could go up.

I turned around. Instantly I was stone sober. To this day I can still feel those poor, black eyes looking at me as if I were an astronaut.

That was the moment the *spirit* came into me.

“Who‘s got a garden hose?” I asked.

The homeowner raised his hand.

“Hook it up, give it to me, and turn it on *full*!”

In half a minute, I was hosing down the wooden wall facing the fire.

Then I had to soak myself. I was never in any danger, but the intense heat enveloped my clothes and body, producing a misty aura.

There I stood, ‘Part of the solution‘! I kept spraying, backing away, and soaking myself over and over—a young, white, steamin‘ VISTA trying to save America!

The fire truck pulled up just as the corner of the roof of the wetted house burst into flame. One quick shot from the big hose and it was over.

From a back porch in the dark, an old woman cried out. “Calvin, you done good tonight!”

There were no cheers. The home owner shook my hand, but nobody invited me to dinner. An understanding had been reached: one fire had been put out--another had ignited…‘Mista VISTA‘ was the *coach* of the West End Bluehawks!

All I had to do now was win.

Over morning coffee, I laid out my problem.

“What are you doing about it?” ‘Li‘l Red‘ made it plain.

“I have to let Dolphus, Jerry and ‘Tee‘ play,” I said. “The Bluehawks wouldn‘t have become a team without them.”

“But they‘re too old. You‘re playin‘ ringers. That‘s cheatin‘.”

“The Bluehawks have to win!” I insisted.

‘Failure is not an option,‘ was NASA‘s adage during the APOLLO XIII rescue mission. ‘A successful failure,‘ they called it when the astronauts returned safely to earth.

How would VISTA spin the Bluehawks if the team got beat bad and then quit on the Boys‘ Club League? I‘d be gone and my T-shirts would be cleaning toilets.

“You got ‘West End Disease‘,” said ‘L’l Red’, refilling my cup. “Been on the ‘low road‘ so long, you got no confidence. Some coach you are, you don‘t even trust your own team fair and square.”

How right she was. I was weak and all the other stuff that comes with it. Most of all I was afraid.

“The Boys‘ Club‘s gonna find out,” she said. “They‘re folks over there who ain‘t gonna want an all-black team winnin‘.”

“Let them win first and we‘ll worry about all else later!”

‘Li‘l Red‘ gave me her hardest eye.

“*You* are taking a short cut to get to the ‘high road‘,” she said. “When you get to that bridge, don‘t involve the boys. You jump off alone.”

Joyce left the house she shared with two other women and moved in with Dennis. David and Betty hooked up, then Bob and Faye, Stewart and Kathy, Dan and Nancy. I batted zero. One hot afternoon, I rode over, not wearing a shirt, to ‘VISTA HQ‘ on Oakwood. Alone with Mary, she told me I looked ‘like a Greek god.‘

Sweet, lovely, slim, athletic Mary--not quite VISTA material, she‘d leave in a couple of weeks for a religious cult that allowed no booze, drugs or sex.

Then came that day when one of my fellow volunteers touched my shoulder, gazed into my eyes, and said softly, “I love you.”

Including parents and family, that was the first time anybody ever said that to me; had I been gay or bisexual, he and I might have had something special.

On game day, gloves at bats on their handlebars, the Bluehawks assembled in front of my apartment for the bike ride to the Boys‘ Clubs. All wore their shirts. They looked like a *real* team.

The B-17 bomber was more than a flying machine to its crew. Each got named and personalized. One of my Dad‘s ships was called *The Ruptured Duck* after the cloth insignia depicting an eagle inside a wreath. Worn on uniforms above the right breast pocket by WWII servicemen and women, it was issued to service personnel who were about to leave the military with an Honorable Discharge, allowing them to continue to wear their uniform for up to thirty days after they were discharged since there was a clothing shortage at that time.

“There we were at twenty thousand,” the ‘Big Mow‘ would tell me, ‘flying‘ with his hands. When he was my age, he and his all-white crew flew with hundreds of other bombers, battling through Nazi fighter planes and anti-aircraft bursts.

“Boom! Boom! The *Duck* got hit again and again,” said Dad, balling his fists. —Ratatatatat! We fired at the fighters as they zoomed by. Ratatatatat!”

The B-17 bristled with .50 caliber machineguns, big, loud weapons that shook with every shot. Firing the ‘fifty,‘ Dad drew blood only once: the bouncing gun broke his nose.

“‘We live in fame or go down in flame,‘” he‘d sing hoarsely. “’Hey, nothing can stop the Army Air Corps!‘”

Growing up, I‘d built dozens of WW II model planes and read scores of war books trying to understand how, to know how the ‘Big Mow‘ must have *felt*, rolling down a runway, off on a mission to save the world. I never came close.

If only Dad could see me now. The Boys‘ Club did and I can only wonder how the other teams and coaches felt as we rode up to the field and parked our bikes behind the dug-out.

The opposing team wore standard baseball uniforms supplied by the Boys‘ Club.

"Niggers without uniforms," said one boy.

"Ain't nuttin but a t-shirt team," said another.

'T-shirt team'? The Bluehawks were a squad from the ‘hood, hungry for ‘Higher Ground.‘

“Play ball!” shouted the umpire and the West End team took the field.

Jerry was at first base. If I had appointed a team captain or if the team had elected one, it would have been him.

John Holden played second base from first game to last. His patience outdid his glove and his bat. A born lead-off hitter if there ever was one, his onbase percentage had to be over .500

“Pretty smart,” he told me, just before taking his position in the first inning of the opening game. “Practicing us a full-size field when you knew we‘d be playing on a small one. This‘ll be kid‘s stuff for us.”

As if I had any idea.

Robert Earl Green started at shortstop and would play other positions from game to game. Big and strong, he rarely hit with power, but he talked and looked like a slugger.

“You‘ll lose your spot if you don‘t come to practice,” I had to warn him once.

“Who‘s gonna take my place?” he asked.

“Your mother-in-law,” I said.

“She can‘t play,” he insisted. “She‘s too old!”

‘Tee‘ was at third base. With every pitch, he‘d crouch low and glare at the batter, daring the opposition to test him in ‘the hot corner.‘ Two games later, he‘d be tested in a way he never saw coming.

Reggie Haley, Jerry‘s younger brother, was in left field. Small, lean, and fast, he‘d never forgive me for starting him in the outfield ‘where players who can‘t play play.‘

Dolphus, the *Black Panther*, got center field and would bang out a line-drive that‘d roll for a homer in the only game he played.

Angry for not being in the infield, Greg Jacobs, ‘Twister‘s‘ older brother, started in right field. He would have won the MVP Trophy if the Boys‘ Club had one. But not mine. Nothing was ever good enough for Greg, especially me.

The first boy whose family I met was Anthony Garner. He made a pitch for me to other kids, and now he was pitching for the Bluehawks. With every wind-up, I could see the joy and determination.

Behind the plate squatted the field general, Draper. “They‘re just ball players. I‘m a *catcher*!” he told me right off. Big, strong, hard, impatient, should one of the Bluehawks make an error…”Let me play shortstop!” or give up a few runs…Let me pitch!” and so many times I lost count…”Let me *coach*!”

When the Bluehawks took the field in a 'real' game for the very first time I understood that my *art* had found a team. The red letters and the blue bird on white cawed 'America!'; matted on black made them beautiful.

The game highlight would have made ‘SportsCenter‘.

Diehard baseball fans have a special homerun, a shot that becomes part of their lives. In May of 1963, weeks before I enlisted in the Air Force, friends and I went to
Yankee Stadium. (The cost of roundtrip subway fare plus a grandstand ticket - $1.65.)

I got my favorite seat, the top corner of the upper deck in right field. When Mickey Mantle came to the plate, he seemed a mile away. Then he swung and hit the ball so high and so far, the roof of the grandstand blocked it out; I had to get down to look up. I can still hear the ball hit the Yankee Stadium façade and swore I saw a mark on it as it bounced down to the field.

Nothing could beat that homer. Until Greg Jacobs swung at the first pitch in the second inning. ***CRACK!*** I watched the ball rocket off his bat and for a moment, it was as if the earth had stopped spinning—the only movement was a baseball ripping through the air.

“Watta squad!” I cheered as Greg rounded the bases. “Watta squad!”

We won going away and rode home in triumph. Dolphus left the team to try out for an older boys‘ city team. He wouldn‘t make it. A boy without a team, I always felt bad about that.

Thanks to Jerry and ‘Tee‘ scouting the city, other boys looking for a team came to the West End.

“This is Larry,” Jerry introduced a boy already wearing a baseball uniform. A left-handed, sidearm, sinker ball pitcher, Larry was a big star on a white team, but wanted to be a Bluehawk.
“Give‘em a shirt,” said Jerry. And I did.

‘Straight ball‘ Ricky could pitch, but couldn‘t get people out. He could field and once in a while, hit, and he always showed up.

Then there was ‘Punjab,‘ the blackest black boy the Bluehawks had ever seen. Legend had it that ‘Punjab was born in a coal mine. He couldn‘t hit or throw or catch, but if had to pick a boy to *model* my T-shirt, it‘d be ‘Punjab.‘

“Watta squad!”

The second game came and the West End Bluehawks won again, undefeated and alone in first place.

Suddenly the proud coach, I was riding more around the community talking to folks on their porches. One Sunday morning, I was surprised to see three older *men* sitting back in rocking chairs, letting words fly.

I pulled up and they nodded politely.

“You know there was a time,” the oldest said. “When a black man couldn‘t walk in downtown Huntsville with a white shirt on.”

“Oh, yeah,” said the man, rocking next to him. “We all remember those days, but things are gettin‘ diff‘rent now.”

Music to my ears! I strictly listened.

“And you know, boy,” said the third man. “How this‘s all comin‘ to pass?”

Mouth shut, I prayed for a Civil Rights answer.

“It‘s all Jesus,” he said.

“Thanks to Jesus,” said the second man while the third bowed his head.

Amen.

Changes had to be made on the team. God willing, the Bluehawks would keep flying.

For the third game, the Director of the Boys‘ Club was lying in wait for the boys to take the field. With school and city records he went from boy to boy, confirming their birth dates.

“Where‘s Dolphus Atchison?” asked the Director.

I told him. One down, two to go.

“Jerry Haley and ‘Tee‘?” he asked.

“When I found out they were too old, I made them my first and third base coaches.”

Greg Jacobs and Jerry Haley got their infield spots.

The ‘Bulldog‘ knew full well what I had done. In my position, he might have done the same.

“Your first two game are forfeits,” he said, dropping us from first place to last. “**Play ball**!”

The Bluehawks played like *Ruptured Ducks*. Nobody could hit or field and no one could pitch. We cycled home a beaten team.

The next game could be our last. Out of kindness and maybe a little pity, I started Mike Jacobs in right field. His first time at bat, the ‘Twister‘ flailed at the ball and struck out on three pitches.

The next time he came to the plate, we were down 4-0. 0-3 and losing our fourth game, the Bluehawks were at the bottom of the ‘low road.‘

Mike got hit by the second pitch and some kids laughed as he did his wobbly walk to first base. The first pitch to the next batter skipped under the catcher‘s glove. Off went ‘Twister,‘ corkscrewing into second.

“Watta squad!” I cheered.

The Bluehawks exploded. We‘d never lose another game during the regular season.

Halfway through the summer, I sold my used 3-speed bicycle and bought a brand new blue Schwinn Varsity ten-speed. Then I got some enamel and painted a thick red and white stripe over the brand name. *The Spirit of Mighty America,* I christened the result. Every payday, I‘d hit the bike shop before the beer store, adding big mirrors, a heavy backrack and rear highbar plus a light and a bell. More ‘bomber‘ than bicycle, the ‘Big Mow‘ never had it so cool.

The Bluehawks were welcome in my apartment any time. One came in through the kitchen window while I was out and ripped me off. The police arrested him for a couple of other thefts and he was sent away.

One morning, Jerry, Reggie, Anthony and John came over to find me taking a bath. We had a good laugh and they adjourned to the small living room. Then two brothers showed up. Neither played on the team. Anthony was big and slow; younger David small and wiry, as bitter as black tea and as sharp as a cat o‘ nine tails.

“The most dangerous thing in the world is an intelligent nigger,” I‘d be told twenty years later in a New York prison.

“I don‘t care what that ’Mista VISTA‘ *thinks*,” said David, his words zinging through the bathroom wall like fifty caliber bullets. “We‘re just a bunch of niggers and always will be.”

I should have stormed out of the tub and soaking wet, made a speech every boy would quote to his grave, but I just lay there in the water, able only to utter a single word: “Jesus!”

I was down to my last painted T-shirt, a ‘small.‘ Other boys and adults who wanted to join the team or show its colors had to give me a shirt of their own. After a game late in the season, a little kid came into our dug-out and asked me if he could be a Bluehawk. He couldn‘t hit or field or pitch or run; he got the last shirt and played some innings in centerfield because he was *white*.

The one kid we couldn't get that every Bluehawk wanted on the team: Michael Jackson - *'A-B-C, as easy as one, two, three.'*

There was a burly, fiery catcher on another team who was better than Draper and Draper knew it. Once he pulled off the coolest play at the plate: blocking out the umpire and selling a missed tag.

“Out!” cried Jim, the Boys‘ Club guy who umped the games and ran the baseball program.

Then that damn catcher winked at me.

Later Jim took me aside.

“Sorry for missing that call,” he said.

Like me in his mid-twenties, Jim was Boys‘ Club all the way. In the years to come, the organization would become ‘The Boys and Girls Club‘ and further expand across the nation. It was men, and later women, like Jim who made it great.

The regular season done, with two playoff wins, the Bluehawks would be champions. The team only got one.

It rained heavily the night before. As we rode out I was hoping that the wet field wouldn‘t be factor.

Not to worry. Not one kid from the other team showed up.

“They‘re afraid to play us,” said Reggie, shaking his fist.

Not that I blamed them. What 12-year old white boy wanted to take on the West End Bluehawks, a team that had blown out the rest of the league 15 games in a row?

“They should‘na let you play,” a Boys‘ Club kid told me later. “You‘re too good.”

“I can get us a game,” said Jerry.

“Let us ride around a bit,” said ‘Tee‘. “We‘ll find boys with guts enough to give us some practice.”

The pair cycled away. By the time the rest of team got to the practice field, there was a group of black kids waiting.

As this would not be an ‘official‘ game, some of the Bluehawks didn‘t want to play, which meant I could put in kids who‘d been waiting for a shot all season, even ‘Punjab‘.

As I was the only adult, I‘d ump behind the plate.

The opposing pitcher was a slight 12-year old. His first pitch blazed by the batter. His next was a curve that ‘fell off the table‘. With uncanny control and overpowering stuff, this *phenom* mowed down the Bluehawks.

Jerry smiled through the whole game.

“Who *is* he?” I had to know.

“That‘s ‘Tee-Tee'. He stays up on Nasty Pulaski.” (The pike named after the Pole.)

Then Jerry handed me a new white ’large‘ T-shirt.

“Number forty-five,” he said. “Bob Gibson.”

No way was ‘Tee-Tee‘ as *severe* as Gibson. Nobody was. Koufax was *eloquent*. The next year a young black pitcher would dominate the major leagues and every time I saw Vida Blue, I thought of ‘Tee-Tee.‘

“You, you set this kid up to pitch against your own team?”

“Watta squad!” beamed Jerry.

“No, you cant *always get what you want,”* sang the choir.

On the morning of the Boys‘ Club Championship Game, a beautiful day for baseball, it would have been nice if the West End Citizens‘ Committee had rounded up the players‘ parents and a couple of stationwagons…or if the local media had thought it news and sent a reporter and a cameraman…or if the mayor of Huntsville or anybody who was somebody showed up just to say he or she had been there…

“I don‘t need to see it,” said ‘Li‘l Red. “The boys have to feel it---to see themselves as winners. They don‘t need nobody watching.”

Work with young boys and you can‘t help remembering how you felt when you were their age.

Dad only beat me once. It didn‘t fly. If there‘s a greater pain than a boy seeing his father passed out drunk, I never felt it. In his living room chair, on the sofa, at the dining room table, on the stone steps of the back porch…not sleeping or resting, his face twisted, his body all akimbo, as if he‘d fallen out of an airplane.

A *good* navigator, a bad drunk and a worse father.

Before they abandoned him and NYC, the Giants had been my Dad‘s baseball team. He loved Willy Mays and Sal Maglie.

If only he hadn‘t drunk so much so often. If he could have stretched out his power dive, if he could‘ve leveled himself off to last three more years.

Imagine the ‘Big Mow‘ being here *sober*.

I should have called that guy from ‘Model Cities.‘

For the first time all season, the Bluehawks were shut out in the first inning. Then ‘Tee-Tee‘ took the mound and struck out the side on thirteen pitches. After his last strike, Jim, the Boys‘ Club ump, took off his mask and gave *that* look yet again: “*Where do you* get *these kids*?”

'A-B-C, as easy as one, two, three.'

By the bottom of the third we were up by four runs. I left the dug-out, walked away and went into the Boys‘ Club building and played a couple of games of pool with a couple of kids who weren‘t baseball players.

“But if you try sometimes,‟ sang the choir. *“You‟ll find, you get what you need.*‟

I finally understood…it wasn‘t about me, but about them and they‘d do just fine without me. Winning ‗wasn‘t the only thing‘; this was about *joining* and only the beginning. I trusted the Bluehawks.

By the time I returned, the team had the game in hand. With one last out to go, I called time, then motioned to the infield for a conference on the mound. Draper hustled out from behind the plate.

“Watta squad!” I said and every boy looked up at me. No longer an astronaut, I was one of them.

“You played like champions, now *be* champions,” I said. “Show respect to the other boys who worked just as hard as you did to win this game.”

A soft liner to John Holden at second base and it was over. The boys shook hands all around. The team signed the game ball which I have to this day. Never again would the Bluehawks play as a team.

The West End had won. The Boys‘ Club had won and so did Huntsville, Alabama.

If I didn‘t get lost soon, I soon would be.

“That‟s not gonna happen to me!”

It took me more than a month to work up the courage to leave. Not by plane or bus, I‘d be riding my bike back to New York City.

On *The Spirit of Mighty America*, I took a last lap around and through the West End, saying good-bye to the boys and their families. Early the next morning I made a stop for coffee.

“Not the low or the high road, ‘Mista Vista‘,” said ‘Li‘l Red, giving me a long, warm embrace. “You‘re gonna make your own way.”

I made my way to Oakwood where the VISTAs held a breakfast for me. We talked and laughed over eggs, bacon and pancakes. How special we all were, united in purpose, our spirits raging.

Stewart gave me a plastic bag full of ‘gorp‘, an energy concoction made of oatmeal, maple syrup, raisins, and added ‘secret ingredients‘ which served only to rot my teeth.

Last hugs and kisses. I got on my bike and pushed out. Across from the ‘Parkway Church of God,‘ one look back, a final wave, and I was away.

The ‘Big Mow’ *was* a good navigator. I saw the road ahead as a runway. Aboard *Mighty America*, I felt like my father when he was a hero. Off on a mission, I was going to save the world!

Cue the choir: