

OSSE
D.C. QUARTERLY



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Doing Well at Doing Good

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. A few weeks ago, I traveled to Pennsylvania to spend a few days with friends. They live in the Washington, D.C. area. For this occasion, we assembled at one friend's mountain home in Pennsylvania to renew old ties.

Old Friends

We retold tales about our times together, times that grow grander with each re-telling. After years of recitation and repetition, some of these reminiscences have taken on heroic proportions, with the storyteller as the hero. I claim first place in these narrations. My 10ⁿ re-telling of my Navy "exploits" had my friends wondering why I had not received the Medal of Honor in Vietnam---for mostly just showing up.

Such is the process of growing old. Charles Barkley, an NBA star, put it well, "The older I get, the faster I was." It's a good way to reminisce, not only for Mr. Barkley, but for all of us.

I have known my friends for over forty years. I met them while living in Northern Virginia and working in Washington, D.C. When we first met in the mid 1960s, we were single, in our twenties, and living in a high-rise apartment populated mostly by single men and women. Stories for another time.

Many males and females can hearken back to their past and make a list of friends' names for whom they have had affection and admiration. We have stood-up at their weddings, had our names mentioned at their baby showers as godfathers, celebrated many birthdays, consoled in deaths, and offered counsel for a divorce here and there. This story focuses on one my friends, Harvey Borkin.

Harvey recently built a place in Pennsylvania---the mountain home we visited. He conceived it to be a family retreat, a retreat for his friends, and a retreat for the Posse youngsters, the reason this large mountain retreat is large.

New Friends

And what a house it is. Even if it were a shack, and it is not, here are three views from the balcony, shown below. Harvey takes his "posse," who are high school students, to this retreat. The retreat gives them a place to get away from urban life and the pressures of school. Just as we retreat to these sanctuaries to get way from various problems.

Harvey joined with the Posse Foundation to help deserving high school students climb the ladder of life. This ladder often favors those who have a step-up on life to begin with. The favored ones ascend the ladder more easily because of their good fortune to have been born into families who occupy upper positions on this ladder.

Posse and Harvey provide a means for these young men and women to move up this ladder a step or two, or three, maybe more. He is giving them opportunities to ascend, not based on a minority status, but on their merits.

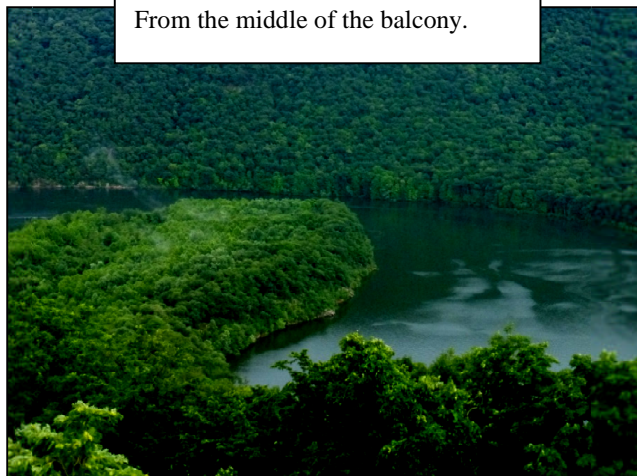
From the right side of the balcony.



From the left side of the balcony.



From the middle of the balcony.



Many of my readers of this blog (those whom I know) have a step up on that ladder of life by virtue of their birth (including me). As I wrote in an earlier piece:

If you [taking license with using the personal, *you*] are born (by chance) into a family that has financial leverage, the chances are good that you, too, will have financial leverage. Why? Because it will have been passed down to you from your parents and other members of your family. You can leverage your way into prep schools, elite colleges, and networked employments to gain yet more leverage. Your networks in life to obtain financial leverage have largely been set up for you before you were born.

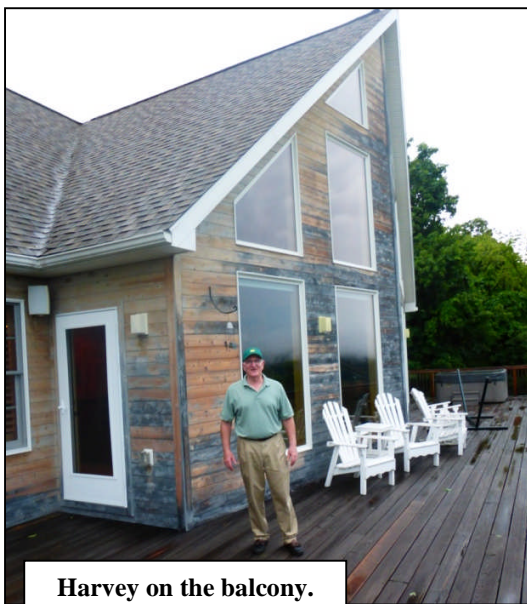
Does any of this deal with merit, with talent? Of course it does. Merit and talent rest a lot on intelligence and education. You likely possess education and intelligence in spades because of the selective breeding of your parents and their parents. Intelligent people tend to marry other intelligent people. The “landed gentry” tend to marry other members of the “landed gentry.”

Many deserving people never make it. They are born with no leverage on life. They have great merit. They just need some help getting out of the starting blocks. Harvey and Posse furnish the starting blocks. Harvey also furnishes the track shoes, as explained shortly. My friend does more for his posse children than the extraordinary Posse program itself does. But first, here is some background information on the Posse program.¹

Founded in 1989, Posse identifies public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes. Posse extends to these students the opportunity to pursue personal and academic excellence by placing them in supportive, multicultural teams—Posses—of 10 students. Posse-partner colleges and universities award Posse Scholars four-year, full-tuition leadership scholarships.

The Posse has succeeded in obtaining almost 5,000 merit-based scholarships (worth almost \$600 million) from some of America's top colleges and universities. Harvey has worked with his college alma mater, the University of Wisconsin, to foster this program.

Wisconsin joined Posse before Harvey had heard of the program. So, Harvey was not the catalyst for this specific program. Harvey told me he became involved with Posse program when the University Chancellor called and asked if he wanted to become involved. He had given some money to his school and had frequented local alumni events, but he said this call was a real surprise. I know my friend: In for a dime, in for a dollar.



Harvey also told me that Wisconsin, in joining the Posse Foundation's program in Washington, D.C., wanted an alum to be the lead person. The foundation, part of a program in Chicago, wanted to expand to DC and LA because of the great success it was having. Harvey gladly said yes, and related to me, "The rest, as they say, is history."

Not quite. Harvey has taken the Wisconsin program to a new level by buying clothes and raising private money to sponsor more kids than just the ones that the university pays for. But before going into more details about his personal program, let's meet Harvey, or at least let's see a picture of Harvey, standing on the balcony of his retreat.

¹ Google Posse Foundation for more information.



Recreation.

Harvey has his posse come to this mountain place to enjoy time in the country, to get to know one another. They play games, masquerading themselves in various costumes, as seen in the photo above. Harvey has leveled-out a meadow for them to exercise, also seen above.



They work together to prepare meals and share them at a large table, built by Harvey just for his posse pals, as seen in the photo to the left. The bedrooms are

spacious and can accommodate four sleepers. Harvey lent me the master suite, shown above, which is more spacious than the other five bedrooms, but not by much.

I cannot convey adequately the extent of this man's dedication to the cause of bootstrapping children onto those often slippery rungs on the ladder of life. I cannot convey the extent of his kindness. I'll let Harvey do the talking to convey these ideas to you:

I am rather unique in what I do with the Posse scholars as most of the other lead alums merely meet the scholars for an evening of "role playing," read their transcripts and files beforehand just as an admissions counselor would, and then help choose which kids will get the scholarships. Other members of the selection committee (usually about five people) consist of the Wisconsin director of admissions, a senior faculty member, the vice president for diversity, a senior staff person from the Posse Foundation, and an alum (me). Reading the students' personal statements and recommendation letters, checking the transcripts for things such as course rigor and extra-curricular activities takes me almost ten hours to complete. It is important to not merely peruse the material because (after all) you are changing someone's life. After having studied the 24 finalists' files and having

met them during the role-playing process, we deliberate for about three hours and winnow it down to 10 lucky winners. Last year in DC there were almost 1,600 nominees, and most were excellent students from inner-city schools who, because of circumstances, never had a chance or a fair chance at a normal life.

I never lose sight of the fact that if they don't get the scholarship, many of these kids won't attend college at all.

In my particular case, as I have become more emotionally involved, I have taken the process to a higher level. I travel to Madison, Wisconsin, in the fall and "treat" the freshmen Posse scholars to some hometown love. Many of these kids are from single-parent homes or difficult financial situations so that over their entire four-year careers, they may never have a visitor or only once, which is usually for graduation. Staying in the dorms for Thanksgiving is not uncommon, and I now have begun to surprise them with plane tickets home. Fortunately, after their freshmen year, most make friends with other students who live nearby and go to their homes for Thanksgiving. It is only during the transitional freshmen year that this presents a problem.

When I come in the fall, it is a lot of fun as I play like Santa Claus and take the neediest scholars shopping for things such as winter coats, snow boots, hats, sweaters, gloves, and the like. Some of these kids have no idea just how cold it can get in Wisconsin, and at the very least, they now will not freeze to death. After having gone on my shopping spree for a few years now to the local department stores in Madison, some have started (with no prodding from me) to give me a generous discount. One year, a crowd of shoppers even gathered as the kids were trying on their clothes and seeking approval from the old bald guy (me) who was checking things out for fit and practicality. Some curious patrons even started to applaud as I marched the kids with their largesse to the register for payment. Talk about your feel-good moments.

I sometimes wonder why am I so generous with these kids? I guess it is because 40 to 50 years ago, I, too, was once a kid from far away DC attending Wisconsin. Our house was filled with love, and while we weren't poor, I realize just how much my parents sacrificed to make sure that my sister and I could go to college. The personal stories of these Posse-scholar kids are far different than mine, but I, nevertheless, can relate to being alone and far away. Having the other Posse scholars attend Wisconsin with them helps to somewhat solve the "alone" part and make the transition easier. Being part of a small minority (a black face in a white sea) in a faraway college is another dynamic in and of itself, which the Posse program helps mitigate.

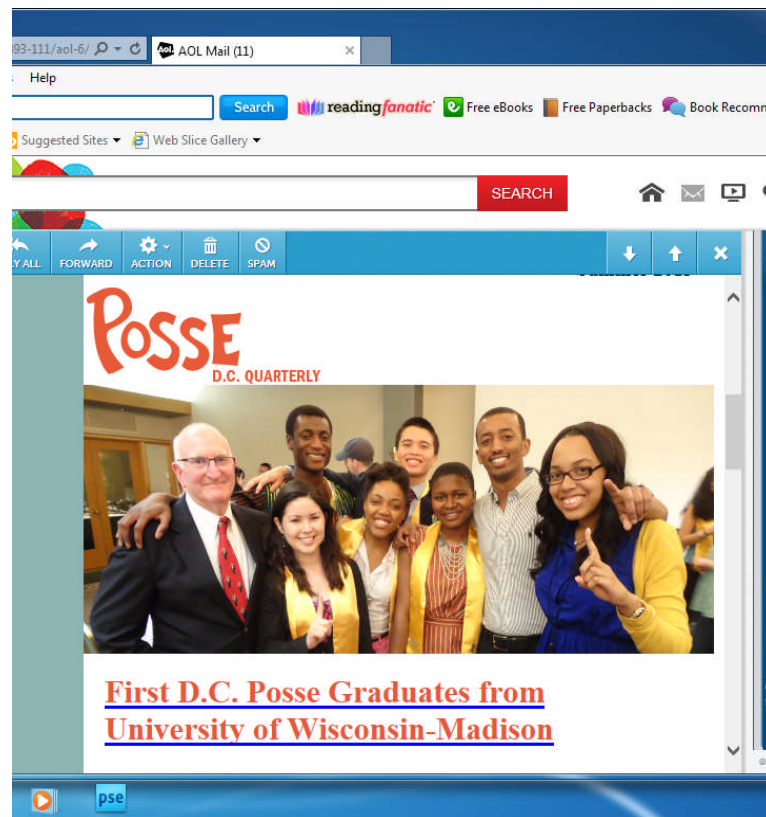
It takes almost a year for these Posse kids to make new friends and integrate into the university as a whole, and having their "posse" during this transition is a life saver.

Also during the summer when the kids are back in DC, I take separate groups up to my mountain retreat, and we enjoy simple pleasures like getting away from the hot summers in DC. Everyone pitches in with the cooking (other than a breakfast trip to town for the pancakes and omelets at Mammies'). At dinner, we discuss everything from the dorm food in Wisconsin to the important social issues of our time. Talk about stimulating conversation.

U, as I tell the kids at almost every turn, while the Posse-scholarship program has changed their lives, they have changed mine.

I firmly believe that if you have been fortunate in your life, you have a certain responsibility to give back. I have benefitted greatly from this credo---more than you could ever imagine.

Harvey sent me the screen shot seen in the figure below. His rookie posse made the grade. The picture tells the story.



Good for you, Harvey. You are doing well at doing good. All of us wish there were more folks out there of your caliber. I am privileged that you call me your friend.

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