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April 29, 2007

## **PARENTING; Young, Gifted, and Not Getting Into Harvard**

By MICHAEL WINERIP

ON a Sunday morning a few months back, I interviewed my final Harvard applicant of the year. After saying goodbye to the girl and watching her and her mother drive off, I headed to the beach at the end of our street for a run.

It was a spectacular winter day, bright, sunny and cold; the tide was out, the waves were high, and I had the beach to myself. As I ran, I thought the same thing I do after all these interviews: Another amazing kid who won't get into Harvard.

That used to upset me. But I've changed.

Over the last decade, I've done perhaps 40 of these interviews, which are conducted by alumni across the country. They're my only remaining link to my alma mater; I've never been back to a reunion or a football game, and my total donations since graduating in the 1970s do not add up to four figures.

No matter how glowing my recommendations, in all this time only one kid, a girl, got in, many years back. I do not tell this to the eager, well-groomed seniors who settle onto the couch in our den. They're under too much pressure already. Better than anyone, they know the odds, particularly for a kid from a New York suburb.

By the time I meet them, they're pros at working the system. Some have Googled me because they think knowing about me will improve their odds. After the interview, many send handwritten thank-you notes saying how much they enjoyed meeting me.

Maybe it's true.

I used to be upset by these attempts to ingratiate. Since I've watched my own children go through similar torture, I find these gestures touching. Everyone's trying so hard.

My reason for doing these interviews has shifted over time. When I started, my kids were young, and I thought it might give them a little advantage when they applied to Harvard. That has turned out not to be an issue. My oldest, now a college freshman, did not apply, nor will my twins, who are both high school juniors.

We are not snubbing Harvard. Even my oldest, who is my most academic son, did not quite have the class rank or the SATs. His SAT score was probably 100 points too low -- though it was identical to the SAT score that got me in 35 years ago.

Why do I continue to interview? It's very moving meeting all these bright young people who won't get into Harvard. Recent news articles make it sound unbearably tragic. Several Ivies, including Harvard, rejected a record number of applicants this year.

Actually, meeting the soon-to-be rejected makes me hopeful about young people. They are far more accomplished than I was at their age and without a doubt will do superbly wherever they go.

Knowing me and seeing them is like witnessing some major evolutionary change take place in just 35 years, from the Neanderthal Harvard applicant of 1970 to today's fully evolved Homo sapiens applicant.

There was the girl who, during summer vacation, left her house before 7 each morning to make a two-hour train ride to a major university, where she worked all day doing cutting-edge research for NASA on weightlessness in mice.

When I was in high school, my 10th-grade science project was on plant tropism -- a shoebox with soil and

bean sprouts bending toward the light.

These kids who don't get into Harvard spend summers on schooners in Chesapeake Bay studying marine biology, building homes for the poor in Central America, touring Europe with all-star orchestras.

Summers, I dug trenches for my local sewer department during the day, and sold hot dogs at Fenway Park at night.

As I listen to them, I can visualize their parents, striving to teach excellence. One girl I interviewed described how her father made her watch the 2004 convention speeches by both President Bush and Senator John Kerry and then tell him which she liked better and why.

What kind of kid doesn't get into Harvard? Well, there was the charming boy I interviewed with 1560 SATs. He did cancer research in the summer; played two instruments in three orchestras; and composed his own music. He redid the computer system for his student paper, loved to cook and was writing his own cookbook. One of his specialties was snapper poached in tea and served with noodle cake.

At his age, when I got hungry, I made myself peanut butter and jam on white bread and got into Harvard.

Some take 10 AP courses and get top scores of 5 on all of them.

I took one AP course and scored 3.

Of course, evolution is not the same as progress. These kids have an AP history textbook that has been specially created to match the content of the AP test, as well as review books and tutors for those tests. We had no AP textbook; many of our readings came from primary documents, and there was no Princeton Review then. I was never tutored in anything and walked into the SATs without having seen a sample SAT question.

As for my bean sprouts project, as bad it was, I did it alone. I interview kids who describe how their schools provide a statistician to analyze their science project data.

I see these kids -- and watch my own applying to college -- and as evolved as they are, I wouldn't change places with them for anything. They're under such pressure.

I used to say goodbye at my door, but since my own kids reached this age, I walk them out to their cars, where a parent waits. I always say the same thing to the mom or dad: "You've done a wonderful job -- you should be very proud." And I mean it.

But I've stopped feeling bad about the looming rejection. When my four were little, I used to hope a couple might go to Harvard. I pushed them, but by the end of middle school it was clear my twins, at least, were not made that way. They rebelled, and I had to learn to see who they were.

I came to understand that my own focus on Harvard was a matter of not sophistication but narrowness. I grew up in an unworldly blue-collar environment. Getting perfect grades and attending an elite college was one of the few ways up I could see.

My four have been raised in an upper-middle-class world. They look around and see lots of avenues to success. My wife's two brothers struggled as students at mainstream colleges and both have made wonderful full lives, one as a salesman, the other as a builder. Each found his own best path. Each knows excellence.

That day, running on the beach, I was lost in my thoughts when a voice startled me. "Pops, hey, Pops!" It was Sammy, one of my twins, who's probably heading for a good state school. He was in his wetsuit, surfing alone in the 30-degree weather, the only other person on the beach. "What a day!" he yelled, and his joy filled my heart.

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