

Against all odds

Wooden rises from Hartford's North End through Manchester schools and into state office

By Eric Bedner

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State Treasurer Shawn T. Wooden talks with Hartford School Superintendent Leslie Torres-Rodriguez on Aug. 26 during a tour of the new Weaver High School in Hartford, which he advocated for when serving as Hartford City Council president.

Eric Bedner / Journal Inquirer

From the North End of Hartford to Manchester public schools and later the state treasurer's office, Shawn T. Wooden's life has been filled with adversities and opportunities that he says have molded and prepared him for a life in public service.

His parents were among those "escaping the South" when they moved to Hartford from rural Georgia in the 1950s, Wooden says.

As the youngest of six children, Wooden, now 50, lived as a child throughout the North End of Hartford, attending Hartford public schools from kindergarten through second grade, after which his parents applied for him and one of his brothers to participate in a desegregation busing program that was essentially the precursor to the Open Choice program as it exists today.

After being selected to attend Manchester schools, Wooden made the trek to Waddell Elementary School on Broad Street for his third-grade studies.

He and his brother, who is two years older, took school buses from Hartford to Manchester for the next few years, but funding for the busing was cut, causing the youngsters to have to travel on Connecticut transit buses.

From seventh through 12th grades, Wooden's ability to obtain a quality education became far more complicated, requiring two buses each way to and from Hartford.

He would set his own alarm and wake up at 5 a.m. in order to catch the 6:15 a.m. bus in his neighborhood, after which he switched buses to finish his daily journey to Manchester. In the early years, Wooden rode the bus alone, going to Illing Junior High School on East Middle Turnpike, while his brother went to Elisabeth M. Bennet Junior High School on Main Street, before both attended Manchester High School.

"I had to work a lot harder to show up to school on that basic level," Wooden says.

Despite being on his own at an early age, Wooden says he had no trepidation.

"There are a lot of things growing up in North Hartford that might make you scared, but riding the bus wasn't one of them," he says, noting that poor communities often face similar challenges including gun violence and drug addiction.

While "private school was never going to be an option," going to school in Manchester was "an amazing opportunity," but "certainly not without its challenges," including facing racial discrimination in what was a predominately white school district at the time, he says.

Throughout the years, "this reminder" that Wooden is black would periodically rear its head, such as when an elementary school friend used a racially derogatory term in an otherwise innocuous note in his yearbook.

An incident that led to Wooden's only disciplinary blemish while in school stemmed from a classmate asserting that white suburban kids play baseball, while Hartford children play only stickball.

"That offended me," Wooden recalls. The jab led him to place a tack on the student's chair just before he sat down. Following a shriek from the bully, the teacher was alerted and Wooden received an in-school suspension.

In general, Wooden's teachers were accepting, but there was one in particular who told Wooden's mother that he was not capable of learning chemistry.

However, once Manchester High School chemistry teacher Peter Vincenzo saw his potential, Wooden thrived.

"He was so affirming, so supporting," Wooden says. "He saw the whole person."

Once in high school, Wooden was growing into a leader and an activist, becoming more involved in the school's multicultural club. At the time, he says, minority girls weren't being

selected to the cheerleading squad, an issue Wooden highlighted and helped bring to the attention of Manchester High School's administration.

Exacerbating the disconnect with some of his peers was the fact that Wooden had only two black teachers the entire time he was in the Manchester school system.

Still, "it was nice to have that as part of the mix," he says. "When you don't have diverse environments, it sends a message even before you can start the learning process that maybe you're not welcome."

He says he recently came across a much more diverse photograph of the school's current cheerleaders, which shows how far diversity has come since his time as a student.

"I still pay attention to Manchester; it's part of my story," Wooden says. "I felt like it was a reminder that change takes time. You can't always see it right away. ... What (things) we as a parent think are small are really, really powerful to kids when it comes to feeling included, feeling welcome, and part of something" both inside and outside the classroom.

Wooden looks back fondly on the importance of his education in Manchester, but "at the time, I wished that my good school was down the street from my house."

He remains a supporter of programs that help all children gain access to a high-quality education, "but I think that should include a high-quality school in your neighborhood as one of those options."

Watching out for teachers

Ultimately, Wooden graduated Manchester High School in 1987 and attended Trinity College in Hartford on an academic scholarship, later earning his law degree from the New York University School of Law.

Elected state treasurer in 2018, Wooden, a Democrat, plays a major role in the state's finances, particularly the state employee and teacher pension funds that represent substantial long-term liabilities.

He cites the refinancing of the teacher pension system as one of his early successes. With a clear understanding of his educational background, Wooden says that protecting teacher retirements was a "critical part" of his desire to stabilize the fund, as well as helping put the state in a more sound financial position.

Under his watch, the state also has seen record-breaking bond sales. He invited Gov. Ned Lamont to meet with investors to promote the state, and was seeking \$850 million. The state received offers for \$5.5 billion, Wooden says.

Connecticut ended up borrowing \$1 billion at the lowest interest rates in years, saving Connecticut taxpayers millions compared to the cost of borrowing at the same point last year, he says.

Additionally, the state also received the first rating outlook upgrade from Standard & Poor's in 18 years.

Aside from access to a quality education, Wooden credits lessons learned from his parents, including the value of dedication and public service, with providing him the tools to head the state's finances.

"I always see myself as really, really fortunate because in a community where a lot of my friends had one parent, I had both of my parents with me everyday," he says. "That was powerfully important to helping to keep me on track through those challenges. Even with that, I had a lot of family members whose stories ended up a lot different," including family members with drug addictions, prison sentences, and victims of gun violence.

"I don't have to look far," Wooden says. "Quite honestly, I didn't have to look outside my household to see some of that."

His parents, he says, were "amazing" through tumultuous times and "always helping people." His mother, formerly a paraprofessional in the Hartford public school system, eventually worked for a community action program, helping less wealthy people gain access to assistance programs to help pay fuel bills during winter months.

After working in manufacturing and then owning a television repair shop, Wooden's father worked for the same community organization, and in retirement ran a senior center.

"I grew up in a household and in a community constantly aware of struggle, challenge, pain, and suffering," Wooden says. "But I also grew up with parents who were always focused on helping a community."

This included people needing a place to stay, who Wooden's parents referred to as his "siblings."

One "sibling" was an older man who struggled with alcoholism until Wooden's father convinced him to quit drinking. With the help of Wooden's father, the man got work as a janitor for the city of Hartford, retiring 20 years later.

"The most powerful social program is a person having a job and a reason to get up every morning," Wooden says.

When first running for office, Wooden says people would routinely ask him why, particularly since he was a partner in a law firm by that time.

"The answer ultimately came back to my parents and what I saw," he says.