

Although he is dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, **Harold McAllister's** closely trimmed beard makes him look older than the other youth in the study. I meet him on a weekday morning in the apartment that he shares with his brother, his brother's girlfriend, and their three kids. Harold pays the cable bill and helps out with groceries, but he does not pay rent. He works the 4 P.M.-to-midnight shift at a suburban chain restaurant similar to Bennigan's. He takes four buses, and two hours, to get there. Harold knows how to drive, but he has not gotten around to getting his driver's license ("I got to get to that real soon"). He keeps thinking he will do it, but it hasn't happened. Usually, he gets a ride home from a coworker, who drops him off a few blocks from the apartment. He started at the restaurant five years ago, as a busboy. Now he is a waiter.

Harold began high school in a "school within a school" college prep program. He liked it and was very surprised when, on the first day of his sophomore year, he found out that he wasn't in the program anymore. He wasn't quite sure why. He thought it was because he was late a few times; also, he got a D in English. He was reassigned to his school's general education program. There, the academic expectations were lower, and Harold's grades were B's and C's. During high school, his mom had trouble with various landlords, and the family moved a lot. Also, both of his sisters had children at early ages. Ms. McAllister took care of their kids. Explaining that, "I couldn't deal with all those females," Harold said he started staying with his father in the west part of town. Playing basketball during middle school, Harold had been ranked seventh in the city, and he also played on a number of prestigious summer leagues. He was hoping to play basketball professionally. But high school brought disaster: he was not selected for the team. Harold insists this was because the basketball coach (who also coached football) wanted him to play football. (At 5 feet 11 inches and 240 pounds with very broad shoulders, Harold is built like a football player.) In his sophomore year, despite his apparent basketball skills, Harold was not put on the high school junior varsity team. He talked to the principal about it, but she said the decision was up to the coach. Harold talked to his dad about transferring to another high

school, but his father did not support the idea (“He was like, ‘Just stay there.’{hrs}”). It was especially upsetting that one of his buddies, who Harold insists was not as good a player as he was, ended up with a full scholarship to a local university.

Devastated by his inability to play on the high school team, Harold started working as a busboy during his sophomore year, in the same suburban restaurant where he is now a waiter. He wanted “to get [his] mind off basketball.” Because his job was a long way away, Harold got home late. By his junior year, he was working full-time. His mother always woke him up in time to get to school, and he always went. But things changed once Harold began spending more time at his father’s house. His father did not wake him up in the morning. In the spring of his senior year, he was getting to school less and less. That April he got into a conflict with a teacher (over talking and not following instructions), and he was suspended.<sup>1</sup> He ended up dropping out six weeks before graduation. His mother was livid; her voice rising in anger she said, “There was no reason why he couldn’t graduate.” Harold seemed sheepish about it and also recalled that he was disappointed that he did not go to the prom. He hopes one day to go back to school.

In the meantime, Harold is content sharing his brother’s apartment. Living with his nieces and nephews, he is aware of how much work children can be (“I love my nieces, and nephews, and cousins, but like they are irritating after a while.”) He has some girlfriends, but he is not in a serious relationship with anyone. He does not have any children. As his sister says, any time a girl gets serious, he drops her. Still, he says that by the age of twenty-five, he hopes to be married, and he expects to have children. He sees his mother and sisters regularly. He “loves [his] Mom” and says he “would do anything” for her. He regularly gives her money. There is no schedule, but it is often \$20 a couple of times per month, or whenever she asks.

Unlike many African American men who are high school dropouts, Harold has never been “locked up.” He has known people, including family members and neighborhood acquaintances, who have had run-ins with the police. Indeed, reflecting on his old

neighborhood, he says, “It is really bad down there; seventy percent of my friends are dead or in jail. It is crazy.” The father of his older sister’s kids is “locked up.” Harold had one close call himself with being locked up, when he was with a friend who had some “weed” (marijuana). Harold, the friend, and another buddy were in a fast food restaurant. The police came in. Despite his buddy’s assertions that Harold was not involved, the officers were convinced Harold was involved in drug possession and sales. Someone saw what was going on and called Harold’s mom. She came running to the restaurant, and Harold was released to her. Harold does smoke marijuana (daily), but he does not do harder drugs. He feels that Blacks are treated differently than whites, particularly by the police. He gives an example from his own life. One night, when he got off work, a white coworker gave Harold and another young African American man a ride home. The driver accidentally left her purse on the roof of her car in the suburban mall where the restaurant is located. Harold says that a police officer approached the car. As he recalls, “The first thing that the policeman said was, ‘Are you okay, Miss?’{hrs}” “He [the policeman] didn’t say, ‘Here is your purse.’ He said, ‘Are you okay, Miss?’{hrs}” Harold felt that the policeman was worried that he and the other African American young man were abducting the driver. Harold believes that the policeman would not have drawn that conclusion if they were white. While this and similar instances bother Harold, he does not “dwell on it.” With a notable sense of **resignation** he tells me, “It’s going to happen regardless.”

All of Harold’s friends work. They go to work and later they hang out. Still, Harold is not enthralled with being a waiter. He hopes to have his own business, possibly a corner grocery store. He wants to earn enough money to be able to retire at thirty-five.