

The background of the cover is a photograph of two young men standing in a library. The man on the left is white with short hair, wearing a white polo shirt with dark and yellow horizontal stripes. The man on the right is Black with short hair, wearing a dark blue polo shirt. They are both looking towards the camera with neutral expressions. The library shelves with books are visible in the background.

***TEARING
DOWN***

***THE
GATES***

***CONFRONTING
THE CLASS DIVIDE
IN AMERICAN
EDUCATION***

***PETER
DICKS***

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ASHLEA AND GILLIAN

Ashlea Jackson remembers the moment she decided to choose a different path than her troubled brothers had followed. She was in fourth grade, and one day, walking down the hallway, she looked up when she heard some girls call out her older brother Justin's nickname, "Jay Jay."

"They were saying, 'Bye, Jay Jay,' and I turned around and saw my brother being taken out of the school in handcuffs by two cops, and that is when I knew I didn't want to end up like my older brother," Ashlea told me. "He was in fifth grade. He was eleven or twelve. I mean, that is something I will never forget. Because that was the first time I'd ever seen anyone in handcuffs."¹

This happened at Whittier Elementary, a school in Boise, Idaho, which draws virtually all its students from Garden City, a geographically strange and often-forgotten enclave, out of sight of most Boiseans, where Ashlea lived for several years. Garden City includes some of the Boise area's poorest families. Surrounded by the city of Boise, Garden City itself has no public school, and so the largely Hispanic and poor children from its many trailer parks are bused to Whittier, which is part of the Boise school district. In any given year, more than 90 percent of Whittier's three hundred students are eligible for the school's free lunch program.

Debbie Bailey is Whittier's principal of two years. Before that, she served as principal of a far more affluent elementary school in Boise for seven years. Earlier in her career, she received special training at the Co-

operative Urban Teacher Education Program in Kansas City and taught in a number of urban schools before returning to her home state of Idaho.

Bailey took the job at Whittier because she missed the sorts of kids who go to schools like this one. But she was also painfully aware of the challenges of keeping Whittier afloat in the era of No Child Left Behind, with its mandate to meet annual test score targets or face closure by the government. Bailey knows where her students come from, and she knows all too well that she and her staff are limited in what they can do for these kids, who start the academic race so far behind their peers in other schools—peers who start out and grow up with all the opportunities that their well-to-do families and schools provide.

She described Garden City's trailer parks this way to me: "The majority of our kids are bused from Garden City. I live right up the hill from there, and the trailer parks down there were eye-opening to me. They're horrible. They're a ghetto. They are Boise's ghetto."²

In truth, I do not know many kids like Ashlea, living where I do and knowing the people I know. I first met Ashlea when she was twelve or thirteen through my wife, Kathleen, who is her Big Sister. When I spoke with her over a period of several months for this book, Ashlea was in her junior year of high school. Over the years, I've watched her struggle with school and with life, facing difficulties associated with growing up poor that are unimaginable to children in most middle-class families. The difficulties she faces come with being poor, but they also come from the lack of something far more intangible: the cultural, social, and economic "capital" that upper- and middle-class families routinely provide their children. The benefits of such capital manifest themselves in a multitude of both highly visible and often subtle ways that make going to college, and going to good colleges, a common destiny for the children of wealthier families.

After being escorted out of Whittier Elementary by the police at age eleven, Ashlea's older brother would spend several years in and out of juvenile detention at various facilities across the state. By the age of eighteen, he was married and living with his wife and the child of a former girlfriend, although he soon would be divorced.

Her younger brother wound up at an alternative school for troubled kids. "His biggest problem is that he does not want to go to school,"

Ashlea explained. “And, basically, they are saying if you do not go to school, then you go to Juvie, pretty much.”

When Ashlea realized that she didn’t want to end up like her brothers, staying out of trouble became a conscious choice that she made daily, because trouble was all around her in the Garden City trailer parks. “There were always a lot of problems,” she says. “There were always cops.”

When Ashlea was in elementary school, being from Garden City wasn’t a big deal, because all the students at Whittier were bused in from Garden City. But when she moved to junior high at Riverglen, surrounded by nice houses in middle-class neighborhoods, Garden City became a place of shame for her.

“I didn’t let on that I lived in Garden City, because I was ashamed of it,” Ashlea admitted. “Nobody knew that I lived in Garden City. When someone asked me where I lived, I would say I lived up the hill. There were like two hills, so nobody really knew.”

During these years, I heard how the family became homeless after they confronted a slumlord in their Garden City trailer park over holes in the walls of their rented trailer. I heard about the family getting kicked out of a homeless shelter because Ashlea’s mother and father refused the humiliation of being split up according to the shelter’s single-sex rules.

During her sophomore year, Ashlea tried to commit suicide in a bout of severe depression, and school officials tried to remove her from school—just two weeks before the end of the school year—claiming she had too many absences after her suicide attempt. I watched Kathleen, loath to interfere in Ashlea’s life in ways that might be inappropriate for a Big Sister, draw the line at this heavy-handed move by the school.

As a physician, Kathleen knew what Ashlea’s parents might not have realized: schools were organizations run by people who could be influenced. Kathleen got on the phone with Ashlea’s high school counselors, school officials, coordinators at Big Brothers Big Sisters, private counselors she knew from her medical practice, and others in order to keep Ashlea in school.

During all this, Kathleen said more than once to me that the school would have treated a middle-class child far differently than it treated Ashlea, and she wasn’t going to stand for it. In effect, Kathleen did what most highly educated and affluent parents would have done in a similar situation, deploying whatever knowledge, information, contacts, political clout, stature in the community, and financial resources she had to

ensure that Ashlea's interests were protected—drawing on her own cultural and social capital to help Ashlea in ways that the Jacksons didn't know how to do or perhaps weren't in a position to do.

Families matter when it comes to the academic success of children, and the social class background of children matters. That much is given. But these things matter far more than the recent approaches to education policy at the federal and state levels—which have an inveterate obsession with schools as the agent of social change—would lead most people to think. Indeed, the nation's preoccupation in recent years with standardized test scores and public school accountability belies more than forty years of social research, which underscores that schools themselves contribute insignificantly to student achievement relative to what children bring with them to school from the first day of kindergarten—derived largely from the social class background of their parents and grandparents and from other aspects of their life beyond school.

The 1966 Coleman Report first staked out this ground. Titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, this far-reaching study, headed by prominent sociologist James S. Coleman, grew out of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The report's fundamental finding was that families' social and economic status, the stuff that children bring to school, trumped just about all else in accounting for students' educational achievements and prospects.

Coleman summarized that report:

Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all. That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools.³

The unavoidable policy implications are that good schools can go only so far in raising the achievement levels of disadvantaged children and that attacking the problem with policies that improve the social and economic conditions of individuals and families will be more effective than creating policies aimed just at schools. (I should note, however,

that, in addition to the influence of family on individual student achievement, the socioeconomic characteristics of a student's peers also had a powerful effect on Coleman's data. Ironically, these peer effects were weakest for the very advantaged groups whose parents might be most conscious of choosing the "right" schools for their children. But for disadvantaged students, the socioeconomic background of other students at the school they attended was of considerable importance.)

In one way or another, the basic findings of the Coleman Report have been reiterated in the research literature ever since. About thirty years later, *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, documented that fully two-thirds of the gap in school achievement between white and black students could be explained when the researchers accounted for the full range of social and economic conditions of individual students, a range that went far beyond the conventional factors of education and income and included such intergenerational resources as those passed on by grandparents to their heirs.⁴

In trying to pinpoint the source of the class advantages that affluent parents provide children, researchers in recent years have paid considerable attention to the concept of "cultural capital," a term widely attributed to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁵ His notion of cultural capital, explains Patricia McDonough in her book *Choosing Colleges*, "is precisely the knowledge that elites value yet schools do not teach. . . . Cultural capital is of no intrinsic value. Its utility comes in using, manipulating, and investing it for socially valued and difficult-to-secure purposes and resources."⁶ In Bourdieu's analysis, various types of human capital can be converted into other forms. Family wealth, for example, produces cultural and social capital for children: the children of well-to-do families are able to attend museums, study art, or acquire useful social networks. Such parents provide their children with skills, resources, and—perhaps most important—a sense of social power in the world. What's more, schools and the larger society reward and reinforce that social power, all under the guise of supposedly merit-based selection methods that favor the most culturally privileged—a self-reinforcing system that reproduces social class advantage.

Indeed, this ineffable sense of social power and confidence that wealthy parents pass on to children showed up vividly in Coleman's data. Along with schools, families, peers, and other possible influences on student achievement, the Coleman Report examined the extent to which student attitudes explained differences in academic performance. Coleman discovered that students' motivation, interest in school, self-

concept, and sense of control over the environment—all intimately related to one's class background—produced surprisingly strong effects on academic achievement.

“For children from advantaged groups, achievement or lack of it appears closely related to their self concept: what they believe about themselves,” Coleman wrote. “For children from disadvantaged groups, achievement or lack of achievement appears closely related to what they believe about their environment: whether they believe the environment will respond to reasonable efforts, or whether they believe it is instead merely random or immovable.”

But schools seemed largely powerless to affect these attitudes, according to Coleman's findings: “This study provides little evidence concerning the effect of school factors on these attitudes,” he wrote. “If family background characteristics are controlled, almost none of the remaining variance in self concept and control of the environment is accounted for by the school factors measured in this survey. . . . It appears reasonable that these attitudes depend more on the home than the school.”⁷

Conservatives have taken Coleman's conclusion to suggest that student attitudes are simply a question of individual choice, as if parents can just choose success or failure for their children by providing them with the right values. But the research evidence paints a far more complicated picture. Attitudes are situated in economics and the social tastes acquired from one's class position. A family can, in effect, “buy” the right values for its children with sufficient wealth, income, time, and knowledge.

For example, in their ethnographic study of children from working-class and middle-class neighborhoods, Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips discovered stark differences among children in terms of summer activities and vacations—differences that stemmed not from parental values but from family resources. While working-class children's summer activities tended to be unorganized and nonacademic, affluent parents variously organized book clubs, involved children in university research projects, arranged piano lessons, and provided many similar sorts of enrichment.

“Even though children's summer experiences are stratified by social class, most parents from all social classes aspire to develop their children's skills and talents,” Chin and Phillips write in *Sociology of Education*. “Most parents from all social classes believed that they should actively nurture their children's development, and most tried to do so. Yet, relative to the working class and poor parents, the middle-class

parents tended to be more successful in constructing highly stimulating summers for their children because they tended to have greater financial resources, more flexible jobs, and more knowledge about how to match particular activities to their children's skills and interests." They continue, "These social-class differences probably produce both a 'talent development gap' and a 'cultural exposure gap,' which, if exacerbated each summer, contribute to disparities in children's future life chances."⁸

While there's little doubt that a child's family circumstances account for most of his or her chances of success in school, the exact sources of this family effect are uncertain. Does family income matter more or less than, say, providing children with lots of learning opportunities, such as puzzles, games, and a daily newspaper? Does cultural capital matter more or less than a family's financial capital?

One recent international study, for example, found that a child's cultural capital at home trumped family economics in predicting school success. Researchers Yang Yang and Jan-Eric Gustafsson examined some sixty-two thousand students in twenty-three countries in order to see how student resources and possessions at home, such as having books, newspapers, and computers, compared to family financial resources in predicting reading achievement. "The results show the cultural aspects of home background to be more important than the economic aspects in accounting for individual differences in reading achievement," the researchers conclude.⁹

Indeed, the powerful effects of cultural capital suggest that standard measures of socioeconomic status, such as parents' salary income and their education levels, probably underestimate the effect of family background on children's school chances. It turns out that wealth itself matters. Wealth, the economic assets that parents own, allows families to create the stores of cultural capital that seem to be essential to their children's success in school.

For example, in a study that examined differences in math achievement between white and black children, Amy J. Orr found that family wealth, particularly a family's income-producing financial assets, such as stocks and bonds, was a powerful predictor of math achievement, even after accounting for the parents' annual income and level of education.

But wealth lost explanatory power in Orr's model once several mediating variables associated with cultural capital, including books, newspapers, museum trips, and such, were accounted for. This model provides a fairly neat proof of Bourdieu's theory that the forms of human

capital are mutable. As Orr concludes, “The effect of wealth on achievement is explained mainly by the effect of wealth on the amount of cultural capital to which a child is exposed. This finding supports Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of capital: Economic capital (wealth) can be converted into other forms of capital (in this case, cultural capital) to reproduce status.”¹⁰

After Kathleen’s intervention with school officials, Ashlea was able to return to school. Although she had to make up some classes during the summer, she bounced back emotionally and academically.

As a sophomore, Ashlea discovered journalism after an English teacher read one of her essays and encouraged her to join the school’s newspaper staff. In journalism, Ashlea seemed to have found a calling, one that tapped into her ingrained sense of social justice. Once, for instance, she became angry when kids on the school bus were harassing a boy who suffered from Asperger’s syndrome, and she challenged the bus driver to do something about it.

“The boy was constantly picked on, and the bus driver really didn’t pay attention to it,” Ashlea told me. “He knew what was going on, but he wouldn’t say anything about it. I felt really bad for the boy because he didn’t deserve to be picked on. It upset me, and I told the kids to leave him alone. I got in trouble because the bus driver told me that I should not be butting into their business, and I said, ‘Well, you should be doing your job then.’”

“I got in trouble for it. I got Saturday school, and I got kicked off of the bus for three days. But I didn’t care about getting in trouble, because I thought that what I did was right.”

By the end of her junior year in high school, Ashlea had worked her way up on the newspaper staff and had contributed several articles about school life to the local daily newspaper. During the school year, she worked at a drive-in to earn extra money, and she saved enough to attend the annual high school journalism conference in Seattle. There, she pulled in a prize for feature writing. Her journalism teacher, who, Ashlea says, was sparing with praise for students, encouraged her to become the paper’s news editor for her senior year.

For the first time, Ashlea began to see college as a possibility. A representative from a private two-year college in Wyoming had talked to her journalism class about the college’s journalism program, and Ashlea became excited about the possibility of attending the school.

I asked her what she saw in her future. Without the slightest hesitation, she said, "I want to be a journalist."

I met Ashlea's father, Gary Jackson, one cold November afternoon at a Boise coffee shop, a few hours before his shift was to start at a downtown convention center where he worked setting up rooms for events. His cell phone rang while we were talking. "That was my Ashlea," he beamed.¹¹

Jackson grew up on a farm in eastern Idaho and left home at the age of sixteen to join the army because he didn't get along well with his stepfather, who was just five or six years older and had himself recently returned from Vietnam. Gary Jackson was a good student. His grade school, located in the farm country around Pocatello, consisted of a few rooms, with just a couple of kids in each grade.

"I loved school," Jackson told me. "I got to learn and I got to think. I went through physics and chemistry and everything when I was in high school. I had enough credits to graduate when I was in the eleventh grade."

But Jackson went to Vietnam instead, essentially trading places with the stepfather who had just returned from the war. He showed enough aptitude to move up to staff sergeant and was assigned to a Special Operations unit in Thailand and Cambodia. Jackson left the army in 1982. "For a while, I had a lot of post-traumatic stuff," he said, declining to describe in detail the years in Southeast Asia. "Pretty heavy stuff," he said. "I saw a lot."

After getting out, Jackson rode freight trains, living as a hobo on the streets. He found his way to the Pioneer Square district in Seattle, when it was still a pretty rough place, before urban gentrification. There, he met his wife, Patty, who had also served in the army.

"I was playing cards at a place called First Avenue Service Center. It's gone now, but I was playing cards, and I looked up and I see these beautiful legs, and then I see the rest of her, and I just fell in love with her. She fell in love with me, and here we are, twenty-one years later," Jackson said.

Gary and Patty found their way to Utah, rode a freight train to Reno, and then moved to Arkansas, where Gary found a job as a long-haul truck driver, delivering loads of wheat across the country. They ended up in Bremerton, Washington, a navy town, where Ashlea was born in 1988. Jackson drove trucks for seventeen years.

"I would leave, and nine days later I'd be back, and I might stay for

four or five hours. You know, wash my clothes and get something to eat, and I'd be gone again," Jackson said. "It was pretty constant, and I was—it was something else. One week I would be in New York, the next week I would be in Washington, and the next week I would be back in New York." Eventually, Patty gave him an ultimatum, insisting that he find another job that would allow him to be around more. "I missed Ashlea's birth by five minutes," he said.

When Patty developed breast cancer, during Ashlea's fifth grade year at Whittier, Ashlea took on more of the family's burdens than any child probably should have. Until Patty's illness, school had always been Ashlea's first priority. But then came her mom's surgeries and recovery time at home. Ashlea started missing school to help out. "My mom needed someone to be there with her when my dad had to work, because he was the only one bringing in money at the time. And she needed someone there when she was really, really sick, so I would be that person," Ashlea remembered.

Ashlea became a source of stability in the family, the one who might have a chance to go to college and break out of poverty. Over the years, she became the dependable one, not just for her immediate family but also for friends in Garden City whose lives were equally troubled. Eventually, the burdens became too much for a teenager to bear.

I asked her about her depression and her suicide attempt.

"I wasn't talking about my feelings or my problems. I took on a lot of other people's problems," Ashlea explained. "I've always been the strong one in my family because my mom had cancer, my brothers were troublemakers, so I had to be there, you know. I had to be the good one, I had to be the one to help out. Well, at least, I thought so. And so I felt that for a really long time. And then last year, I just kind of got overwhelmed with everybody else's problems, and it caused a big problem for me."

Things fall through the cracks when a sixteen-year-old must rely mostly on herself for planning her school life. Ashlea says that her parents want the best for her. But they could provide little besides emotional support in terms of helping Ashlea actually get to college. With limited help from guidance counselors at school, who in public high schools typically have caseloads of hundreds of students, Ashlea's knowledge of the details she needed to consider when preparing for college was hit or miss, at best.

What's more, her father, Gary, had left school at the age of sixteen

and her mother's highest degree was a high school diploma. There was little information they could pass on to Ashlea about college—the seemingly small things that middle-class children get from the very air they breathe.

In affluent families, at least one parent is often available to ride herd on the details of school: to ensure that the child signs up for the right classes, to advocate for the child's enrollment in accelerated classes that lead to college-track math and English, and generally to make sure that the child's interests are protected in rule-bound school systems. In working-class and low-income families, where both parents work full-time jobs with inflexible hours, that extra bit of parental support and advocacy is rarely available—not because the families don't want to help but because they don't know how to help or don't have the extra time to help.

The way students are steered into college-track mathematics is a good example. When most American students make the transition from sixth to seventh grade, schools effectively put colored tags on their backs, labeling them as remedial, regular, or accelerated, depending on standardized test performance and teacher recommendations. Only students in the accelerated category are deemed ready for algebra, which will track them into calculus by their senior year of high school. And it's calculus—Advanced Placement (AP) calculus, in particular—that selective colleges look for on high school transcripts. Well-educated parents know these things, and there's ample evidence to suggest that they advocate vigorously to get their children into accelerated math courses, exploiting whatever wiggle room there is in school policies about track placement.

Elizabeth Useem has extensively studied the relationships between students' social class status and their placement in mathematics courses in American schools. In one study of the math placement patterns in Boston public schools, Useem found that almost 60 percent of the students on the accelerated math track had fathers with doctoral degrees, and 33 percent had fathers with master's degrees. In contrast, almost 50 percent of students in remedial math classes had fathers with only a high school diploma or less. Just 5.6 percent of the students in accelerated math had fathers with a high school education only.

Useem discovered that educated mothers were typically the ones in families who knew the details of school tracking policies. Indeed, 69 percent of students in accelerated math had mothers with a high degree of knowledge about such policies. By comparison, 70 percent of students in remedial math had mothers who seemed to know little about track-

ing. What's more, Useem found that mothers' understanding of school tracking systems was powerfully related to their own level of education. Some 65 percent of the knowledgeable mothers had advanced degrees, and more than three-quarters were well integrated into school affairs. In contrast, Useem quotes one mother whose child was in remedial math: "I learned about my son's math placement at the Open House this fall. I was under the impression that he was in regular math. The sixth-grade teacher never told me he would be in remedial math. There was no conference, no letter. . . . I was shocked."

As Useem concludes:

Parents with baccalaureate and graduate degrees appear to pass on their educational advantages to their children in many direct and indirect ways. They do so by being much more aware of the implications of academic choices made in schools, by being more integrated into school affairs and parent-information networks, by having a greater propensity to intervene in educational decisions that are made for their children in school, and by the greater likelihood that they will exert influence on their children over the choice of courses.

She continues, "In a number of cases studied here, it appeared to be the parents' lack of involvement, social isolation, and reluctance to intervene and influence their children's program in a more demanding direction—factors that are all highly associated with their own educational background—rather than the children's academic ability, that accounted for the children's placement in a lower level mathematics course."¹²

As Ashlea continued to recover from her suicide attempt, she discovered a newfound sense of purpose in school. She was going to college. She quit her job at the drive-in to give herself more time for studying. She went to a college fair at the downtown convention center where her dad worked.

I asked Ashlea whether her emphasis on the importance of school came from within her or from her parents.

"No, it is coming from me," she said. "I want to go somewhere. I do not want to be like my brothers. And my parents know that, and they are really proud of that. They are basically telling me, you know, we just want you to be happy and go as far as you can."

But for all the hopes and dreams, details slipped from her grasp. When Ashlea first took pre-algebra, she didn't do well and was forced to repeat the class during the summer before her sophomore year. She aced the

summer course. Then fall came, and she was enrolled in what she thought was algebra. But halfway into the semester, Ashlea realized that she was repeating pre-algebra.

“I don’t know what happened there,” she told me. “I just know that, after I realized that I wasn’t supposed to be in that class, it was too late.”

And then there was the chemistry snafu. Ashlea took chemistry during her junior year and got a B in the course. But when her senior year started, she missed a pre-registration session at the school, and her counselor simply placed her into the same chemistry class. It didn’t seem right. But her learned passivity had gotten Ashlea by in such circumstances before, and she was ready to let this one slide, too—that is, until Kathleen found out what had happened and coached Ashlea on how to talk to her counselor and firmly tell him that being assigned to the same chemistry course for two years was simply not acceptable.



When Gillian Brunet was growing up near Santa Monica, California, she was virtually guaranteed that such details concerning her education would not slip by her mother and father, Ann and Jim Brunet. Gillian had but one main responsibility when she was growing up: to do well in school, period. She was assured that her parents would take care of everything else.

Gillian, who is white, was halfway through her freshman year at Smith College when I spoke to her and to Jim Brunet.¹³ It’s not likely that she would have made it to a college like Smith had Jim Brunet not been, as he put it to me, the “anal-retentive nudge” with Gillian’s school life, mapping out her school plan and tracking nearly every detail of her progress.

The notion that Gillian would go to college wasn’t simply part of the air she breathed in the Brunet family. It was explicitly planted in a conversation that her father had with Gillian when she was a first grader in a Santa Monica elementary school.

Gillian had clashed with her teacher, who, as first grade teachers are prone to do, spoke to her in a “touchy-feely,” condescending tone, which Gillian “absolutely loathed,” Jim Brunet told me. The child was bored with school and didn’t even like the stories the teacher read.

One day, after Gillian came home from school complaining about her teacher, Brunet told his daughter that some day she’d get to go to college and that it would be a lot more fun and interesting than first grade. “Gillian is, as am I and my wife, a very rationally thinking kind of person, and what Gillian had expressed very, very early was that she

wasn't into touchy-feely at all, and she was one of these kids that would rather read than be read to," Brunet explained.

"I told her—and I felt almost like a biblical prophet, so it came to pass—I said, 'Honey, you know, this is kind of tough right now, but you're going to like middle school a lot more than elementary school. You're going to like high school a lot more than middle school, and you're really going to blossom and love college.'"

So began Gillian Brunet's path to Smith College.

When she was young, the Brunets couldn't afford to buy a house in Santa Monica, but they wanted Gillian to attend the high-quality Santa Monica schools. Rather than do the financially prudent thing and buy an affordable home a long commute from where Ann worked at the University of California at Los Angeles, the Brunets rented apartments near Santa Monica, a lifestyle choice that allowed the family to socialize with university professors, writers, and other professionals. And Jim Brunet made every effort to ensure that Gillian got the best teachers and the best schools that the Santa Monica public school system had to offer.

"You had to jump through all the hoops, but I made sure we did it," Brunet said. "I told Gillian that as long as she didn't screw up, she could continue."

When I spoke to Gillian just before her winter break at Smith, she remembered her beginnings in Santa Monica schools essentially the same way her father did, particularly after she was old enough to figure out what her parents had sacrificed for her schooling. But she said her parents also taught her a certain orientation toward the future that has paid off throughout her school years.

"A lot of times I was a very quick student, and I would complain that it was boring, like 'Why do I want to learn this in elementary school?'" Gillian told me. "When I was in first grade, I wondered why I should learn to read, because I couldn't read anything that was interesting to me. My parents were very patient with me and said, 'You have to do the boring stuff before you can do fun stuff.' And also that even if something wasn't interesting in and of itself, it could have interesting applications. In doing the boring stuff, I would get to more interesting stuff later on. In other words, delayed gratification. I got that really early on."

Jim Brunet's career has been an eclectic concoction of stints as a public relations professional, an aeronautical engineer, a U.S. Senate staffer, a science fiction writer, and, for the past several years, a real estate agent

in Santa Monica. He grew up in Evanston, Illinois, and in Southern California, graduating with a degree in political science from the University of California at Santa Barbara. His father, who left the family when Jim was young, was an English professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and his stepfather was a mathematician who taught at a small college. His mother's father had committed suicide when she was young, during the Depression, forcing her to go to work and dashing her hopes of attending college.

"My mother was very bright and should have gone to college," Brunet told me. "I think she even got admitted somewhere, but there wasn't money for it. I've seen some of her artwork and some of her writing. She had great potential, and I think it's actually a crime that she didn't go to college. Her life might have been much happier if she had. Lots of unfulfilled potential, let's put it that way."

Jim met Ann at an evening writing class at UCLA. They bonded through words and books, and they passed on their love of books and reading to Gillian. Ann was a graduate of the University of Missouri's highly regarded journalism school, and she has worked in public relations at UCLA for some twenty-five years.

Ann's first gift of note to Jim was a copy of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in hardcover. They accumulated loads of books together; one of their requirements for an apartment was that there be enough space for their fourteen bookcases. Brunet knows this figure because he once counted them.

"Good Lord, we are some of these people that when we are looking for a place to live, looking for space to stick the bookcases is high up among the top five concerns," Brunet told me. "And as a real estate agent, which is my day job, it's a very interesting thing: the nation really does split, based on my anecdotal experience. Walk into homes, and there are homes that have books and homes that don't. It's actually fairly rare that it's in between. Either people have books or they have none."

Brunet went on, "So that's one of the things we always had, lots of books. Somebody did a watercolor for my wife. I forget what you call it, it's one of those illustrations based around the letter A—my wife's first name is Ann. Anyway, it is of a young woman sitting in a window seat reading, which in many ways captures my wife."

One evening after writing class, Ann and Jim were walking on the UCLA campus, and the love light was lit when Jim referred to T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. "For some reason, I remembered the line about the gods saving the king and dragon, long may his reign drag

on, and she knew it too, and I was just stunned that anybody else had known that. We shared these cultural reference points. It was one of those times when she first said, ‘Uh-oh, this is somebody I could see myself marrying.’”

When Gillian was seven or eight years old, she first became aware of class distinctions in the apartment complex where the Brunets lived. Although all the families were then situated in similar economic circumstances, Gillian realized that she and her parents were different and that those differences seemed rooted in literacy.

There were, of course, the fourteen bookcases. Other families may have had books, but Gillian noticed that her parents actually read them. Watching TV was not important, and the rule in the house was that Gillian could not watch TV until her homework was done. Ann read to Gillian every night until the child was in fourth or fifth grade.

“From the time I was very small, my parents really felt reading and books were always important,” Gillian said. “I know that even among my peers, that was not that common. I have always been an obsessive-compulsive reader, which most people aren’t, and a lot of that was given to me by my family.” She continued, “Literacy definitely made me feel separated.”

When the family did watch television, Gillian realized that they watched different TV shows than other families did. “My parents didn’t usually watch TV shows until after I went to bed,” Gillian said. “They did watch sports and things, and everyone else did that too, and they would watch the news, but the TV was not on as often in our house. We never had the TV on during dinner, and a lot of other families did.

“When I was younger, we were probably a social class lower [than we are now], and we lived in a very middle-class area with a lot of apartment buildings. But because my parents were so literate, it always felt weird going into the other kids’ houses. Class is mostly defined economically, but it is also a school of thought, and there are certain expectations. It is generally formed by economics but is not simply economic. It always felt weird, and it wasn’t something that I could ask anybody about. It was just something I figured out as I got older.”

She also realized that her parents’ social circle reached beyond the apartment complex to include other well-read people like themselves. “My parents really did have a wider circle of friends than other people’s

parents that I knew,” Gillian told me. “There was definitely a realization that this is our socioeconomic group, this is what we can afford, this is the level of restaurant that we go out to. It is something you are not even aware of as a small child, but it is there.”

Indeed, as a Santa Monica real estate agent with close ties to UCLA, Jim Brunet figures that as much as a third of his business stems from referrals to UCLA professors and administrators looking for new homes. “I tend to do my most comfortable work with other educated people,” Brunet told me. “Pretty much everybody we know and friends we socialize with have gone to college, and they have intellectually oriented jobs and careers, like professors and writers.”

Having well-educated parents meant a richly literate way of life for Gillian. As the only child, Gillian went with her parents to places where children didn’t normally go. Jim Brunet recalled Gillian, at age ten, being the youngest person in the audience of a Shakespeare play at the summer festival in Ashland, Oregon. Brunet described one play in particular. “I didn’t know if she was tracking, and I looked over, and there were tears just rolling down her cheeks. She got it, she was engaged, she understood exactly what was happening.”

Throughout Gillian’s childhood, the Brunets subscribed to both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, and they made an effort to discuss articles with Gillian that might interest her. “While she might not always invest the time to religiously read something, the discussion was in the air around her,” Brunet said.

Then there was ballet, which Gillian performed throughout her childhood. She had considered dance to be her calling since age two, when she saw her first *Nutcracker*. As her father, a baseball aficionado, put it, she became good enough to be the equivalent of a solid Double A ballplayer. Indeed, ballet would become an important consideration in Gillian’s eventual choice of college.

“The whole ballet side of things is funny to me,” Jim Brunet said. “I was never a jock or that sort of thing. But, I mean, I could still give you the starting lineup of the 1969 Chicago Cubs,” which he then proceeded to do. “When my daughter started doing ballet, I didn’t know a plié from a pipe wrench.”



But Brunet did know his way around the Santa Monica school system. As the parent with the most flexible working hours, Brunet took on the

role that many mothers in affluent households play, staying on top of the details of Gillian's school life to ensure that she took maximum advantage of opportunities in school.

Brunet understood that Gillian's transition to middle school would be critical, a realization that was reinforced by other sources of family cultural capital, particularly Gillian's aunt. As the chief financial officer at Seattle's Lakeside School—the private Seattle prep school from which Bill Gates graduated—Aunt Sylvia impressed on the Brunets the importance of Gillian getting on the accelerated track in middle school, to position her for the high school path that would lead to selective colleges.

Even before Gillian was in elementary school, Brunet began assessing her middle-school options. The family had considered sending her to a magnet middle school for gifted children in the Los Angeles district. But Brunet was keen on Lincoln Middle School in the Santa Monica district. Compared to the magnificent facilities and teaching staff at Lincoln, even the LA gifted program fell short, in Brunet's considered view. Hence, Brunet chose Gillian's elementary school, McKinley, in large part because it was among the three elementary schools that fed into Lincoln.

"I asked for McKinley because I had visited it and was comfortable," Brunet explained. "It was very diverse. My wife has a better eye than I did; she knows, for instance, that the kids weren't ethnically clumped on the playground when we visited. It was very integrated. I had scoped out the situation. Part of being a real estate agent is meeting people and talking about schools, like, 'Oh, you have kids. Where do they go to school? What is your experience there? How do you like it?'"

He went on, "So I had sort of built up this mental database about Lincoln Middle School. It was like a California Distinguished School, National Blue Ribbon School, yada, yada, yada—awards out the wazoo—and I really wanted to make sure she went to Lincoln. I mean, this was my thinking when she was four years old. I wanted her to go to Lincoln Middle School in terms of preparation for high school. So to that extent I can sometimes put the 'a' in anal-retentive."

The Brunets were not disappointed in Lincoln, which proved to be academically a good choice for Gillian, setting her up, Brunet said, "for a really good run at high school." Still, there were times when he had to intervene on Gillian's behalf.

For example, the school assigned students to one of three "cores" per grade level, clumping together their math, English, and science sequence around a core group of teachers. Brunet lobbied hard for Gillian to be assigned to the "Bronze Core."

“By all accounts, in talking to students or parents that had been there before, the Bronze Core was significantly better,” Brunet said. “I mean, they always tried to balance the kids; it wasn’t a case that ‘one core was for dumb kids and one core was for smart kids’ kind of thing. I was just looking for where the teachers were. I wasn’t trying to make a major pain in the ass of myself, but it’s sort of like you’re on the sidelines and the ball comes rolling along, and you reach out and kick it in the direction you want it to go. So I did that.”

There were various important milestones on Gillian’s path to Smith, much like the father-daughter talk in first grade. Another important event came during the spring of her eighth grade year at Lincoln, when Brunet sat down with Gillian to literally map out her entire curriculum plan for her four years at Santa Monica High. And, because Ann had worked at UCLA, Brunet says he was intimately aware of the course requirements for admission to the University of California system, and those requirements served as the baseline for Gillian’s four-year plan.

“We sort of sat down, Gillian and I—I don’t know what Ann was doing, but I think she was probably present for most of the discussions—and we talked about what’s available in high school and sort of blocked out most of her four-year schedule,” Brunet said. “We knew she would take AP language, figured the math sequence, figured the history sequence. . . . In terms of college, I said, ‘You need the four years of English, the four years of math; you will be going into honors geometry, and so the sequence from there is this,’ and so on. We mapped it all out for her.”

There would be as little as possible left to chance or logistical oversight. As I listened to Brunet describe the details of the family’s plans for Gillian’s high school career, I couldn’t help but be impressed by their store of cultural capital—their knowledge, information, social networks, and, perhaps most important, their commitment of time that allowed them to be fully engaged in Gillian’s school life, a commitment afforded by a sufficient degree of economic comfort. And I couldn’t help but compare the Brunets’ surplus of cultural capital to the scant resources available to Ashlea. I recalled our conversation with Gary Jackson, who had not been familiar with the term “GPA.”

Listen to Brunet. His knowledge of what it takes to get his daughter into college is of a different order altogether.

“Part of it is our own experience having gone to college ourselves. Part of it also is that Ann works at UCLA. She doesn’t work in admissions, but working in external relations she has to be familiar with what UC

requirements are—three years of math, four preferred; the language thing. By our design, Gillian took two years of Latin, freshman and sophomore year, and three years of French beginning sophomore year, so sophomore year she doubled up on language. She is glad she did it. She is taking Latin now at college and plans to take intermediate French.

“A lot of colleges say they want four years of the same foreign language, and she did three and two, so she actually has an extra year of language, but it wasn’t the same one. I still think she did the right thing; it’s what she wanted to do, but it nags me that it hurt in terms of her admissions profile. And the response in my internal voice was, ‘Look, she’s at Smith, she’s having a great time, let it go.’ But the questions are there.”

Brunet continued, “Taking the three years and two years of language was mapped out for her in eighth grade. We said, there are six slots a day, seven if you go for the optional A.M. period. Now you will be in band, and there really aren’t that many elective choices. There was not an AP bio class that she could get into. By the time senior year came around, she had too many singletons classes and doubletons classes, where there were only one or two sections offered. Two sections of French 3, only one of band, only one of orchestra, only two of calculus. So putting together a schedule just became problematic, and she could not get the AP bio in there. That and a one-semester art elective were probably the only deviations from what we laid out as a team in eighth grade.”

“I remember sometimes I wanted to kill him,” Gillian told me, recalling the occasions, beginning in middle school, when her father would bring his *Barron’s Guide* to family dinner outings in order to launch Gillian’s college search. They would eventually develop a list of some sixty-nine colleges and universities, to be pared down over the next few years.

“There was no question of if I would go; it was where I would go,” Gillian recalled. “My dad would help me with the process. He would go buy books. He would read a lot of the books on financial aid and stuff. I remember my best friend: her parents made her apply to a lot of public universities, and she really could have gone to a much better place. She ended up going to a private school, but it wasn’t as good as a lot of the private schools that she could have gone to. Her parents didn’t realize for a long time that she could get better aid at a better private school. My dad definitely knew that.

“We had all of those college guides. I did my share of the reading on stuff, but my dad would do a lot of the background research because I

had so little time with all of my homework, et cetera. We would go out to dinner, and he would drag the big college book along. While we were waiting for the food, he would want me to read through stuff.”

The engineer in Brunet thus began to transform the information he gleaned from the college guides and Web sites into a computer spreadsheet, in which he entered the SAT scores of a college’s admitted class, tuition costs, financial aid information, and so on. When Gillian was in ninth grade, the Brunets took her on her first college visit. Seeing an opportunity when the family was vacationing in the Midwest, Brunet made a side trip to Northwestern, near Evanston, where he had spent his high school years.

“On the tour, they asked for a show of hands, and it was, as you expect, mainly high school seniors, maybe a few juniors,” Brunet said. “She was the only freshman. She felt awkward, she felt a little bit dragged along, but this was one of those cases where we were exercising parental rights, so just go along with the program.” Several more college visits would follow. By the end of the eleventh grade, she’d visited at least ten other colleges and universities, all private, on the East Coast.

Why and how were Gillian’s aspirations seemingly unlimited compared, say, to Ashlea’s? In Ashlea’s case, her aspirations, if not her opportunities, were confined to Boise, Idaho, and, if she got lucky, perhaps a private two-year college in Wyoming.

Considerable differences in family economic circumstances, of course, explain much of the gap between Gillian and Ashlea. But there is more to it. Pierre Bourdieu captured this sense of “more” with a concept he called *habitus*. McDonough explains one’s habitus as “a deeply internalized, permanent system of outlooks, experiences, and beliefs about the social world that an individual gets from his or her immediate environment. . . . Habitus is a common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations.”

She continues, “Those aspirations are both subjective assessments of the chances for mobility and objective probabilities. They are not rational analyses, but rather are the ways that children from different classes make sensible or reasonable choices for their own aspirations. They do so by looking at the people who surround them and observing what is considered good or appropriate across a variety of dimensions. . . . Students believe that they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family’s habitus or class status.”¹⁴

McDonough’s interpretation of Bourdieu has the benefit of clarity,

though she may overstate the permanence of one's habitus. Rather than considering it a fixed and predetermined reflection of one's social and economic conditions, Bourdieu would argue that habitus is a "system of enduring dispositions" in one's social identity.¹⁵ The notion of habitus was the linchpin of Bourdieu's project to explain how vastly unequal social and economic conditions, particularly in advanced democracies, reproduce themselves generation after generation. In the realm of education, the disadvantaged "know their place," as it were, often failing to recognize that seemingly universal evaluation and selection methods (such as the IQ tests required for entrance to prestigious preschools or the admissions tests for elite universities) are rooted in the struggle for power, serving to legitimate the reproduction of the social order.

"Habitus thus refers to the way in which an individual's instinctive sense of what might be achieved is structured into a pattern of behaviour, forming, in Bourdieu's own words, 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted,'" writes Jim Wolfreys. "The modes of behaviour, or dispositions, produced by the habitus are passed on through the generations, inculcated from an early age and socially reinforced through education and culture."¹⁶

Gillian's being "entitled" to attend a good college on the East Coast was not how Jim Brunet accounted for her decision to confine her college search to private and elite colleges and universities. Rather, Gillian's opportunity horizon was established early in the college search process, Brunet told me, with the posting of her PSAT scores in high school.

Her first try on the SAT produced a score of 1400 (on the old version of the exam)—a very good score, but not one that would allow her to play in the "big leagues," as Jim Brunet put it. The family hired a private SAT tutor for Gillian because her ballet classes conflicted with the test prep firm's scheduled sessions. With more test-taking experience and the training she got from her tutor, Gillian managed to raise her composite SAT score to 1580, a score that would surely put her in the game for elite college admissions.

Brunet, who told me he had a dim view of the SAT as a measure of academic merit, justified the extra attention the family paid to Gillian's SAT preparation this way: "Gillian needed to work mainly on test-taking mentality. Sort of like, you don't have to work the problem to get the answer," he explained. "It's a test that really doesn't measure anything

other than how well you take the test. So teaching Gillian to basically be aggressive and to make informed guesses or to be able to exclude answers quickly and really concentrate on the others was probably the biggest thing. I have a very—well, moderate—dose of hypocrisy about this. I actually don't approve of test prep, but it's an arms race kind of thing: if you don't do it, you're at a disadvantage. So we went along, and we went with the flow."

Indeed, among Gillian's peers at Santa Monica High, receiving such private tutoring from sources outside school was commonplace—not simply for the SAT but for many academic classes, particularly the more challenging Advanced Placement classes. The extra tutoring expense for the SAT paid off. "She had been looking for around a 1530 to 1540," Jim Brunet explained. "That seemed to be the severe drop-off point for a lot of the top schools. Even though she probably would have gotten into Smith, Wellesley, and Barnard anyway, the test scores helped her get some fairly nice scholarships and stuff at Smith, so it wound up being worth it."¹⁷

After arriving at Smith, Gillian's opportunity horizon grew even wider, becoming international in scope. She decided to major in the unusual combination of government and math and was relishing the fact that her classes were taught by professors, not the graduate assistants she would have found at large research universities, even at the best of the Ivys. She was taking a political theory course taught by the department chair. Her classes were small, with never more than twenty students in each. What's more, she got the chance to work on a research project for the chair of the computer science department. She was narrowing her choices for a semester studying abroad; an intensive mathematics rotation in Budapest was at the top of the list. Another semester in D.C. working at CNN was also an intriguing possibility.

"She's looking at all sorts of different options for junior year abroad," Jim Brunet explained. "I think she's trying to figure out how she can do a semester in Washington for political science and a semester either in Budapest for math or in Oxford for government. Apparently, Budapest is the place to go for math. It's the traveling to Vienna and Prague that kind of opened her eyes up just a little bit and gave reality to what Europe was like, and in some ways gave her a taste for more."

He recalled the moment when the years of family preparation and planning for Gillian's academic future led her to an important, emotional

realization. “She had been turned down at Stanford, Harvard, and Yale. Her hopes came down to Wellesley, Smith, and Barnard. We flew into Boston to revisit Smith, and when we were listening to a presentation by students about internships abroad, this one student was telling about her experience as an intern in the political unit at CNN, and Gillian was just enraptured,” Brunet told me. “I could see that on her face, and I said, ‘You’re going to go here, aren’t you, honey?’ And she just nodded. She couldn’t even speak. That idea of, ‘Wow, an internship at CNN.’ It sort of gave her like a crystal idea: ‘Yeah, I can see myself doing all that. I’d like to do that kind of thing.’”

Gary Jackson’s face still lights up at any mention of his only daughter. His hopes for Ashlea are large, but he articulates them only as that—hopes.

“Ashlea—she’s my Ashlea. She’s my girl, she’s pretty smart, she’s working hard, and she’s, you know, different than my boys,” Jackson said. “My boys just aren’t—they’re not trying, I don’t know, they’re not trying to excel. But Ashlea is. Ashlea is going to be my key,” Jackson said to me.

“Be your what?” I asked.

“She’s like a key, you know, she’s going to be the first one of our family that goes to college. I’m really proud of her. When she goes to college, I’m going to miss her.”

A few months later, Kathleen and I were talking to Ashlea about her college plans. She had come to dinner at our house. We were standing in the kitchen, and she couldn’t wait to tell us her big news. Part of it was that she had recently taken the ACT college entrance exam and thought that she’d done pretty well on the math part. But something even more thrilling had happened.

For years, the Boys and Girls Club in Garden City had been a reliable source of summer activities for the Garden City kids, and when she got to high school, Ashlea became a volunteer for the group. She loved working with the kids and felt as passionately about helping them as she did about journalism. After all, she had been one of those kids. And now the Boys and Girls Club had just informed her that she would be the recipient of a \$1,000 college scholarship.

With such good news, Ashlea’s getting to college somewhere was becoming a more realistic possibility. Then she said something that made clear just how much more work there was to do. Ashlea said she might start out at Boise State University near home and then transfer

to the two-year college in Wyoming for its journalism program. Kathleen corrected her, explaining how the transfer system worked: Ashlea would have to start out at the two-year college and *then* transfer to the university.

Nobody had ever told her otherwise.

Several months went by, and through Kathleen, I heard nothing but good news about Ashlea, and I thought that the young woman just might pull off her goal of not ending up like her brothers. She'd been excited about heading into her senior year, working as the news editor on the paper and planning for college. She was also looking forward to summer school and the chance to retake biology, learn a lot, and perhaps get a better grade.

Then one day in July, Kathleen got a call from Ashlea. She was frantic and crying. The days had turned brutally hot in Boise, and Ashlea was alone at home in the family's small apartment without air conditioning. The power company had shut off the electricity because of unpaid bills.

Two nights previously, Gary Jackson had been riding his bicycle home late at night and was pulled over by the police because he didn't have a rear reflector. Apparently, the officers found an outstanding warrant concerning some unpaid fines that were owed by his minor son, and Jackson was taken to county jail. He wouldn't get out for ten days or so, which meant that he would be unable to pick up his last paycheck and use it to pay the power bill. Ashlea's mother, still recovering from breast cancer, went to stay with a friend, leaving Ashlea to fend for herself.

Not knowing where she would sleep from night to night, Ashlea gave up on summer biology.

The latest crisis made me realize just how precarious Ashlea's hopes for college remained, despite Kathleen's occasional help and the modest scholarship fund we set up for her. With just a few untimely events at home, the Jackson family could come apart. What would happen if Gary's supervisors at work were not understanding about his legal predicament? What would happen to the family if he was fired from the job that had provided so much stability over the past few years? They'd been homeless before, and being homeless again just as Ashlea was entering her senior year could prove devastating for her. The possibility that she might have to drop out of school to earn money loomed larger than I dared think.

A week later, the unthinkable did happen. When Gary Jackson got

out of jail, his steady job at the convention center was gone. His employer said he'd missed too much work. For the time being, however, the family still had a roof over their heads.

I was worried for Ashlea that summer before her senior year. I wondered how, with so much to think about at home, she could possibly cope with the details of financial aid and college applications—the sorts of details that kids like Gillian took for granted that dads like Jim would handle.

In fact, Kathleen discovered that summer that Ashlea had forgotten to follow up with an appointment to learn about test preparation for the SAT. It was then that Kathleen realized that someone in Ashlea's life needed to become far more proactive about her college planning. Her school counselors were of limited use. There was nobody else.

So Kathleen asked Ashlea, "How would you feel if you and I sat down with our calendars this fall and planned out every detail, every deadline you need to meet this year? How would you feel if I bugged you until you got it done?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Ashlea said.

Later, the three of us were again in our kitchen, the day after Ashlea found out about her dad going to jail. We had invited her over for dinner to keep her company, to get her out of her hot apartment, and to try to cheer her up. Ashlea's eyes brightened when she and Kathleen started telling me about their plan of action for the fall. No detail within their control would be left to chance. Those things that were beyond young Ashlea's control—well, we could only hope for the best.

The stories of Ashlea and Gillian illustrate the profound effect of family social class on the ability of children to succeed in school and on the futures that children envision for themselves. But, as we shall see in the following chapter, the influence of families on children's academic success doesn't stop at home. That influence goes deep into the belly of the American school system, as affluent and politically powerful families wield inordinate influence on the way that schools function.