

## Mike Flaherty

# Growing up Southie

When I came to Southie I was about five or six. The first thing my mother said to me was, "Go out and make friends." So I went out.

I didn't know about companionship or honesty and all that at that time. The only thing I could relate to was money. I had a nickel and I saw this kid and he looked like a good kid, so I said, "Hi, how you doing? My name's Mike and we just moved in next door." And I said, "Hey, you want a nickel?" He was scared—he ran into his house. So I could forget about him.

I went off to this dirt yard in the Old Colony Projects. I leaned against this fence and I saw this kid, Billy, and his brother. They had a course in the dirt and they were playing with Hot Wheels and G.I. Joes.

Billy said, "Hey how you doing? What's your name?" I said, "Mike." He said, "Do you want to play?" One of the kids next to him said, "No, he can't."

Billy said, "Shut up! Climb in!" So I hopped over the fence and started playing with them. I know him today. We're best friends because I hung with him for a long time. We grew up together in Southie.

In fact, if anyone would do anything to me, bother me in any way, my friends and I would take care of it. We weren't introduced to gang warfare or anything like that. It was just being together with your friends. You knew nobody was going to bother you. You could do anything you wanted—play G.I. Joe or take a little plastic horse and try to shoot it down with elastics.

When I was younger, I looked up to my brothers and sisters. They had a lot of wisdom as far as I could see. My brother John used to always take us everywhere. He took me to my first baseball game.

He used to point up and say, "See the camera? We're on TV." I could never find the camera. I'd look up, but I could never find out where he was pointing.

He was the first one to teach me how to swing a swing. That was a big thing, to learn how to swing a swing.

I remember one time we went to the store and he said, "Go get anything you want." I knew we didn't have any money, so I was kind of confused. I said, "Anything I want?" He said, "Anything you want." So I grabbed a big bag of pretzels I didn't even like, but they were the closest thing to me. My twin brother grabbed a bag of chips, and John grabbed a bunch of other stuff.

We walked to the door and he said, "Run!" So we just ran up the street with all this stuff and no one ever came out of the store. The owner was pretty fat anyway so I guess John knew he wouldn't run after us. Then I realized that we had robbed the store. I was about four or five.

I guess I knew I was poor all the time. I didn't think of food as being either good or bad. I just thought of being full or empty. With clothes, I was either warm or not

warm. But to my standards, I was fed and clothed well. We didn't go into all the nice colors and complicated stuff that you can get into, but my mother did an extremely good job. I have to hand it to her. She's a remarkable woman.

When we were a little more well-to-do, she'd buy a certain amount of candy to give out at Halloween. When she ran out, she didn't want to stop giving out candy. So as we came in with our candy bags, she'd throw our candy in a big pot and give that out. Then we'd have to go out and fill our bags again. I didn't mind that at all.

From the first grade to the sixth grade, I got all A's. Nothing lower than a B. It was in the sixth grade that I first got bused to a school. That was the first time I went lower than a C in my marks.

My brother Dave missed a whole year because of forced busing. The reasons behind parents not wanting their kids to go to school wasn't because of racial mixing. It was just the fact of telling the kids where to go to school. Everybody in the neighborhood wasn't going and my brothers and sisters said they weren't going. I don't remember my mother saying much.

I had good friends from



Michael Tierney



Andrea Blaugrund

Columbia Point in the sixth grade, but I also had enemies and I remember fights there. I guess that's why the racial stuff is so big—because you don't remember the friends.

When I was going into seventh grade, I took an entrance exam and passed it and I went to Boston Latin. For the first three report cards, I did pretty good. But I met kids who were really snobbish. They must have had everything they needed throughout their lives.

I remember this Oriental kid who wore the same clothes every day. He was always clean though, which is all right in my book. I don't care what the hell a guy wears as long as he's cool and doesn't make fun of other people. But these kids used to laugh at him all the time, and it really bugged me.

So I dropped out. That wasn't the sole reason I dropped out, don't get me wrong, but that was

one of the reasons. Another reason was the commute. Taking a bus and a train, it bothered me. And maybe because of the fact that I was going to a different school from all my friends. People kept calling me "scientist" and "egg-head." I didn't like that. I beat somebody up for doing that.

I thought Southie High would be switchblades, blacks and whites clashing together in mortal combat. But I found out different. I went there and it was just a school like anything else, with kids that go there for an education and kids that go there just because they have to.

Actually I only had one fight there. It was down in sheet metal shop with a black kid. He had two hammers in his hands, and he was smacking them together. I needed a hammer, so I walked up and put my hand on one of his hammers. He said, "That's mine." So I just took it from him.

I started on my project and he

advanced on me. We had a fight, and I punched him in the nose and dazed him before the teacher came between us. The next day in shop, nothing happened. He was reading a newspaper. I just went on with my work.

I nearly dropped out halfway through. I guess I was just getting into learning about drugs. I was probably having minor problems at home and with my friends. And I just didn't go to school.

I'd hook school and then go get high. We used to go to Faneuil Hall. We would steal things and watch the girls go by, and sometimes we would meet some. We had a lot of fun, but other times we'd be pretty miserable. Because there's not much to do in the wintertime hooking school. We'd go out and be really hungry and cold, just continuously looking for stuff to do.

—Carol Lynch,  
Robert Lee Morris