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## FROM HARVARD TO HARLEM

### Why one guy left the white-collar world for the police beat

By Adam J. Sacks

When Bill describes himself as a "normal-looking white guy," his self-appraisal is as red and as loud as a police siren: This normal-looking white guy is a tweed jacket turncoat who's refusing to follow the line of succession of the "ruling class." If the white, neo-conservative revolution devours its young (like every other), then Bill's story is an example of how pushback is possible from inside the belly of the beast.

The son of an executive from one of the world's major corporations and a graduate of both an elite New Jersey prep school and Harvard University, Bill (who's name has been changed) left behind a six-figure salary at a top, white-shoe law firm in Boston to move to Harlem six years ago. But Bill didn't move to the neighborhood as a Starbucks nation conquistador, instead he unwittingly subverted and inverted the whole paradigm of gentrification as we know it when he decided to embrace a humble, modest lifestyle that eschews all notions of the urban playground for "the creative class." That's right, Bill works the beat as a patrolman in Harlem.

To hear Bill tell it, it was the abysmal, long hours of indentured servitude at the law firm that turned him from white shoe to blue shield. He didn't enjoy being around lawyers or the isolation behind closed doors. "You were made to feel guilty having a conversation, because those were minutes that couldn't be billed and had to be made up at the end of the day." And at the end of the day, no one was smiling.

When he decided he couldn't take it anymore, packed it all up and left, his friends and family didn't immediately tell him he was loony, instead he found support.

Bill left Boston and the law firm at the age of 26 and returned home to northern New Jersey. Once back, he temped in Newark and began handing his paycheck directly over to his father, a 40-year veteran of corporate America. He was worried about his parents' reaction to his choice, so he was surprised when his dad told him, "We don't want to lock our kids into anything. We spent a lot of money on your education, but it was from our hearts."

Tipped off by his older brother, a judge, Bill thought, "Playing cops and robbers with lights and sirens might be real fun." As he likes to say, "To be satisfied in this life you have to know what you are doing, more than having a lot of money." It was a way to continue working with the law while opening a path to a whole new invigorating kind of existence—living a different lifestyle and serving a completely new sort of clientele. Most of all, it was a first-class ticket to a world that someone from his background would not typically gain access.



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News travels fast at the police academy, and other recruits were soon aware that a Harvard man was in their midst. Many of the guys around Bill who were seriously studying for the first time in their lives asked him to "host" a study group before the test. As for himself, he barely looked at the material and finished first in his class, posting the highest combined score in academics, firearms and physical fitness.

After graduation, Bill was sent to West/Central Harlem, which continues to be a fertile crescent of crime. Mutual harassment and negative interactions with law enforcement had become a kind of cultural tradition in the neighborhood, and Bill found it difficult to find a way to connect with the community so that he felt like he was providing a vital service. Due to heavy policing, Giuliani-era low-grade "quality of life" offenses were doled out in great numbers—an ironic twist that affected Bill deeply since the area was plagued by actual serious crime.

After a year, he was moved over to East Harlem, where community interaction was more plentiful and "service is 90 percent of the job that I do." Bill is now a 911 first responder, patrolling the streets in a car with his partner during the day, mostly answering "52s"—non-emergency incidents. When a woman in a blue cocktail dress is kicked out by her boyfriend and decides to weave in and out of oncoming traffic on the FDR at 9 in the morning, Bill is there to hold her hand. But, that doesn't mean he couldn't just as easily find himself slipping through pools of blood, chasing two armed perps down dark hallways. It's the life of a Harlem cop: You go wherever the day takes you.

Sometimes the calls—animal sacrifice on the street or a request to help with a tooth pulling—don't really make sense, and then there are the constant "care packages" for the police specially delivered from above: anything from used diapers to phone books. Forget about being locked in your office all day—there are maybe two working computers for a hundred cops. And, needless to say, the locker room atmosphere is not exactly Ivy League.

Bill also doesn't worry about securing a table at Rao's, now 32, he can barely even splurge to buy the restaurant's gourmet sauces. Unlike his friends and family, he's streamlined his life: ditched his car and many of his possessions, takes maybe one vacation abroad a year and goes out to eat maybe once a month. He and his girlfriend, an undercover narcotics detective, have purchased a small apartment in Flushing, Queens, for less than \$200,000 on a 30-year mortgage. It smacks of a rich boy's guilt, a self-imposed jail of pseudo-poverty, but it's a conscious choice he's made, and he says he wouldn't choose anything else.

When asked about his experiences and why he continues to do it, Bill begins with unbelievable tales: 60-inch, flat-screen TVs on milk crates; cockroaches on every wall and children slipping on urine. As he puts it: "They don't see you seeing them." They're not aware that anyone could be shocked by the conditions in which they live. For them it's normal, and they certainly don't factor in the possible upper-class background of a white cop.

In the last few years, Bill has watched as vacant lots have turned to high-rise condos. Harlem's new inhabitants have little interaction at all with their neighbors: "They are shuttled back and forth to their work in mini-buses, have four of five people working around the lobby of the building at all hours, especially those new condos on 100th street," Bill remarks.

So, why doesn't he move up, test to become a higher-ranking officer? When pressed about why he doesn't have ambition to go for the extra \$15- to \$20-thousand-a-year a promotion would entail, he replies, "My job is by far the best in the department"—meaning he wouldn't want to give up his beat for another desk job. As is often the case in civil service, the office jobs provide great opportunities to indulge the lazy reflex. "Even if I got bumped 50-thousand, I don't know what I'd spend it on. Besides, I'm not gonna sacrifice my life for any kids I may or may not have."

Maybe you're feeling cynical, laughing at Bill's desire to sculpt his life to be the antithesis of the elite. How long is this guy's youthful self-denial gonna last? But it makes some sort of pop-psycho babble sense: At the end of the day, Bill's work restores order and security to others' lives and takes it away from his own. It was exactly what he always had too much of and finally jumped at the escape into freedom.

He still recalls when he gave the word to the law firm in Boston, a leading partner sat him down. "Twenty years ago there was a lawyer like you just starting out, already married with kids. He didn't have the balls to leave. Don't second-guess yourself, and I'll see you on the other side."



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