



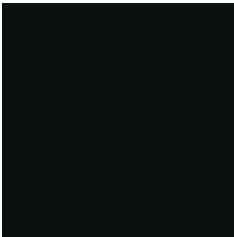
For Malik Vincent, a single magazine article he read as a child helped to stir his imagination and spur his pursuit of a journalism career.



LIVABLE FOR ALL?

THE PROMISE OF PITTSBURGH'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY HAS NOT BEEN AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE. AS A RESULT, SOME RESIDENTS HAVE PUSHED FORWARD USING PATHWAYS OTHER THAN THOSE OFFERED BY THE GROWING TECHNOLOGY AND SERVICE INDUSTRIES. BY MALIK VINCENT

Although Pittsburgh's economy has undergone a renaissance since the decline of the steel industry, not everyone is sharing in the decades-long recovery. Researchers with University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems have found that in "America's Most Livable City," African Americans remain at the bottom of every



quality-of-life measure, including indicators of economic status, educational achievement, family stability and violence. In recent years, the unemployment rate of blacks in Pittsburgh has been two-and-a-half times higher than that of whites. Despite these statistics, there are stories of resilience and accomplishment. This is one of them.



**ONE CRISP FALL AFTERNOON
IN 1997, I WALKED ABOUT THREE BLOCKS
FROM HOME TO BUY A LOAF OF NICKLES
BREAD THAT MY MOM REQUESTED.**

Vincent's family struggles mirrored those of Wilkinsburg, where he lived for a number of years during his childhood. The borough east of Pittsburgh continues to deal with drug and violence problems today.



It wasn't uncommon in those days to see 9-year-old boys like me at corner stores in Wilkinsburg, using paper food stamps to pick up groceries for their families. Yes, that was before the EBT— electronic benefit transfer— card.

On the way back to the house, I noticed an issue of Sports Illustrated at a nearby newsstand. The cover photograph of a shirtless Jerome Bettis, then in his second season with the Pittsburgh Steelers, had caught my eye. The headline read “Phat Backs.”

I ran home to grab a fistful of nickels and dimes that were in a small tin in a corner of my closet and rushed back to the newsstand to buy the magazine. I pored over the feature penned by Austin Murphy. It described how the NFL was recruiting heftier running backs such as Bettis, who was 5 feet 11 inches tall and weighed almost 250 pounds.

As a kid with a similarly chubby frame, I remember asking myself, “Can I do this stuff when I grow up?” And my longing was not only to play sports, but also to tell stories about them.

That desire tugged at my heart into my teenage years and even included closely following the lowly Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team, who in 2001 finished with an overall record of 62-100. I remember sitting in my room some nights, pretending to be a sports broadcaster. Undeterred by the fact that my mom and I couldn't afford cable, I went downstairs to the basement and brought up an old, dusty radio. I was determined to find a way to follow my teams. I'd listen to games on the radio and wonder how the commentators knew all of those facts and statistics about the players and sports franchises.

According to the NCAA, 6.4 percent of all high school football players make it to any of the association's three collegiate levels. The probability of getting into a Division I program, the biggest stage for college sports and the surest path to the pros, is even slimmer. But for many youths, particularly black boys like me who yearned for ways to escape struggling communities and overstressed families, the fame and glamour of professional athletes made the dream of a sports career appear worth pursuing, regardless of the odds.

When I tried playing, I wasn't half bad. On my flag football team, sponsored by Dapper Dan Charities, I led in stops and was near the top in receptions as a middle linebacker and tight end in 2000. My team claimed the Boys & Girls Clubs midget league championship at Three Rivers Stadium that year.

But I would not play another down of football because I soon learned that I had “slipped capital femoral epiphysis” in both hips, which meant a shift had taken place in the upper part of both femurs, causing my hip joints to weaken. The result was pain not only in my hips, but in my knees, legs and other parts of my lower body. It was a condition that required surgery and forced me into a wheelchair for eight weeks. The doctors told me it would be at least five years before I could participate in competitive sports again.

I was crushed over not having the chance to play high school football. At age 12, I stood at 5 feet 9 inches and weighed 170 pounds. I knew that if I'd worked hard, I would have become a good player. As bleak as my situation seemed at the time, it carried a silver lining— one that would direct me toward another coveted career.

Since high school athletics were out of the question, attending summer football camps and getting swept up into strategizing ways to advance in the sports field did not become a part of my routine or mindset. So, the summer before my senior year, I was open to suggestions that I enroll in the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation's journalism workshop. The weeklong residential program was directed by co-founder Chris Moore, a television and radio talk show host, and Olga George, a local television news assignment editor.

At that stage of my life, the timing of my involvement with the program was perfect. My mom and I were trying to survive the hardships of poverty, her abusive relationships and periods of homelessness. My father wanted nothing to do with me. During my adolescence, there were numerous occasions when I would knock on his apartment door and hear his footsteps as he walked away, despite my yelling. He didn't open his door to me until I was 19.



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The workshop, with Moore’s affirming presence as a strong black man, met both my emotional and educational needs. His voice boomed when he spoke the program’s motto: “This is a workshop, not a play shop.” The words also described how the program could compress a year or two of post-secondary media training into seven days.

I didn’t immediately take advantage of what I experienced in the journalism program. My unstable home life contributed to subpar high school grades and discouragement that I tried to mask with an I-don’t-care attitude. I missed opportunities that could have helped me attend nearby four-year colleges. I was expelled from high school my senior year after getting into a fight with another student because he called me a racial slur, and then I had to attend an alternative education program for four months to complete my classwork and receive my diploma.

I started working at a grocery store to earn money and enrolled in Community College of Allegheny County almost a year later. I became editor-in-chief of the Allegheny View

Since graduating from high school, Vincent has worked in several freelance or internship positions, including at the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, where he still stops by to see former colleagues such as Doug Gulasy, a sports reporter.

student newspaper and won campus awards for my work with the paper and student government. These experiences helped me to gain the confidence I needed to seek professional opportunities to improve my writing skills.

At 20, I decided to seek a reporting job at the New Pittsburgh Courier, successor of the Pittsburgh Courier, which during the middle of the last century had been one of the most widely circulated black newspapers in the nation. With notes that I’d taken in the high school journalism program and samples of articles by professionals in the field, I sat down to write an audition piece. My story was about J. R. Holden, a fellow Wilksburg native who played on the Russian basketball team in the

2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. The piece was published on Aug. 20 of that year. It marked the day I officially set out on the journey to achieve my Plan B childhood goal.

For the next several years, I juggled school and work. I transferred to Point Park University in Downtown Pittsburgh to study multimedia and journalism, and freelanced at different times for the Courier, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review and Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Because of financial challenges, I haven’t completed all the requirements for my degree—but that’s still on my must-do list.

Last year, I became associate editor of a community arts and entertainment magazine called Soul Pitt Quarterly, which has a circulation of nearly 10,000. I’ve written several cover feature stories for the magazine about nationally known athletes and entertainers from the Pittsburgh region.

My life continues to have its struggles, but the chubby kid who spent an afternoon savoring words in Sports Illustrated 17 years ago is realizing his dream. *h*