

from “The Hock” to “The Hill”

CENTRAL ALUMNUS **JOHN LARSON** FINDS HIS STRIDE IN WASHINGTON

It sits just off Burnside Avenue in East Hartford, a drop kick from the venerable Marco Polo Restaurant, hard by “The Hock” (local-speak for Hockanum River) and up the street from the now-abandoned Molinski’s Garage. The Community Center still stands, as does Labor Field, the playground dedicated to the union laborers who called this village home and worked, in round-the-clock shifts, at the massive Pratt & Whitney plant off Main Street.

It is Mayberry Village, an unassuming community of 600 or so modest, weathered single- and multi-family homes that, like Pratt & Whitney and East Hartford itself, has experienced both prosperity and pain.

And it is the boyhood home of John Barry Larson ’71, son of Raymond and Pauline, Central alumnus – and Connecticut’s 1st district congressman, vice chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Democratic Caucus and the House’s fifth-ranking Democrat behind Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

How it is that this gregarious, self-described “chubby Irishman” – a former high school history teacher and insurance executive whose political career appeared derailed after a crushing 1994 Democratic gubernatorial primary loss – today stands as one of Washington’s rising House Democrats is a story inextricably tied to his East Hartford roots.



During a recent visit to campus, Congressman Larson debates economic theory in Vance Academic Center’s Financial Technology Room with Dr. John A. McDonald, associate professor of finance, and student Marcus Buffaloe.

Andy, Opie – and the Larsons

“We used to say there were two kinds of kids in East Hartford,” says Larson’s boyhood pal and later campaign organizer Craig Jordan. “Those who grew up in Mayberry Village and those who wished they did.”

To know Mayberry Village in the 1950s and ’60s is to know John Larson. Not to be confused with the fictional television nirvana of Andy and Opie, Mayberry Village was nonetheless a little slice of heaven for the families who grew up there back in the day. It was not unlike thousands of government-subsidized housing developments across the country in the wake of World War II;



victorious vets were coming home, and with them came the prospect of good jobs, economic prosperity – and the need to house the by-product of these glad tidings, America’s baby boomers.

“It was a wonderful place to grow up,” says the 58-year-old Larson, the oldest son in a large Irish-Catholic family of five boys and three girls. “We didn’t have much money, but we never lacked. My parents were of the Greatest Generation; they placed sacrifice and family above all else.

“The neighborhood was full of large families,” he continues. “We played in the streets all day, and if we weren’t doing that we were putting cement tubs on the ‘Hock’ and paddling around – against the will of our parents, of course.”

Making friends, influencing people and perfecting the fine art of compromise – particularly in a household with eight children and one bathroom, as Larson says, “the size of a pay telephone booth” – were skills Larson learned early in life. He would use these skills to become a star athlete and senior class president at East Hartford High School. Today, some of Larson’s closest friends and advisors remain people he played with in Mayberry Village.

“Guys from that neighborhood learned to survive,” says Bob Carlson ’70, who grew up with Larson and would become his roommate at Central. “John has the strongest people skills of anyone I’ve ever known. He just knows how to treat people, respect them and listen to them.”

Central Days

Carlson remembers when Larson, a year younger, joined him at then-CCSC in 1968. They shared an off-campus apartment on Allen Street and became members of the athletic fraternity Omega Kappa Delta. Carlson, a biology major, would go on to a 35-year teaching career ►

History Alive

at CCSU

When John Larson studied Jacksonian democracy at CCSU under the tutelage of Dr. Peter Tolis ’54, he no doubt learned a historical lesson in Manifest Destiny. As though realizing a manifest destiny all its own, Central’s Department of History and faculty are earning notice thanks to a variety of diverse initiatives.

A \$1 million U.S. Department of Education grant – secured in part with assistance from Congressman Larson – has made possible a groundbreaking teaching partnership with six local school districts, the state’s technical high schools and the Connecticut State Library. HISTORY is CENTRAL aims to raise student achievement in U.S. history by connecting participating teachers to the best in history scholarship, local historical resources and an ongoing network of colleagues. Dr. John Day Tully, MA ’95, assistant professor, is academic director of this enterprising project.

Another CCSU history professor, Dr. Matthew Warshauer ’90, was recently featured prominently in *The New Yorker* magazine. In a feature story examining the lessons and legacy of Andrew Jackson’s use of martial law during the Battle of New Orleans, Warshauer’s 2006 book *Andrew Jackson and the Politics of Martial Law* (University of Tennessee Press) is cited as “lucid and well-researched.” Warshauer’s book engages the age-old controversy over if, when and who should be able to subvert the Constitution during times of national emergency.

Dr. Warshauer, not incidentally, is also the editor of *Connecticut History*, the state’s only professional journal devoted to the history of Connecticut. The journal is integral to the entire department, including the HISTORY is CENTRAL project.

Meanwhile, the Department of History’s new master’s degree program in public history is using the entire state of Connecticut as its “field lab” to prepare graduates for work as public historians, front-line interpreters who bring historical knowledge to a broad public audience through their work at museums, historical societies and the like. Dr. Briann Greenfield, associate professor, is coordinator of this innovative program.

For more information on all the happenings in CCSU’s dynamic Department of History, visit www.history.ccsu.edu or call (860) 832-2800.



Congressman Larson at a November, 2005 education lecture sponsored by CCSU's Department of Political Science.



at Rockville High School, while Larson studied history. (Larson would eventually teach for about six years in Farmington and East Hartford before entering the insurance business and, later, politics.)

Having been the star quarterback in high school, Larson had designs on playing football for then-CCSC coach Bill Loika. “When John didn’t make the football team, it was a disappointment,” Carlson says. “It was a pivotal moment in his life.”

“I thought about transferring, but I had so many friends here,” says Larson. “My goal was to teach and coach. I was fortunate to have great professors like Dr. (Peter) Tolis ’54 and Dr. (William) Winter. I still have notebooks from Dr. Tolis’ class.

“I don’t think I could have met any more decent, fun, caring, good people than those I met at Central,” he continues. “People who went here came from blue-collar backgrounds. We had a lot of similar experiences; maybe we had to work a little harder. I’m proud to be a Central grad and very proud of the school’s growth and accomplishments.”

Dr. Tolis, retired and living in Old Saybrook, fondly recalls Larson.

“John was a very sincere, very bright student,” says Dr. Tolis. “He was a voracious reader, and wrote very well. We had a rapport between us.

“John always had what I call a very public personality,” he continues. “I can recall discussing John’s future with other professors and saying, ‘We are going to hear from John Larson.’”

A Public Life

Larson put his “public personality” to work in local East Hartford politics before being elected a state senator in 1982. He quickly – and surprisingly according to veteran State Capitol observers – rose through the ranks, achieving the position of President Pro Tempore of the State Senate in 1987 while only in his second term. Larson’s upset victory over then-Senate minority leader and odds-on favorite Cornelius O’Leary was a precursor to his unexpected rise in Washington 20 years later to the caucus’ vice chairmanship, a bruising, intra-party battle in which he began as a lightly regarded third candidate only to end up with the big prize.

“I never saw someone so determined and tireless,” says Joe Harper ’78, MS ’99, who chaired the General Assembly’s Appropriations Committee during Larson’s eight-year run as Senate president. “John was always the kind of guy who, if he didn’t endear himself to you the first time around, he kept coming back until he found a common thread that won you over.”

Between 1987 and 1994, the Central alumni troika of Larson (Senate president), Harper (Appropriations) and Bill DiBella ’67 (Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, Senate majority leader and a Larson fraternity brother at Central) wielded extraordinary power at the Capitol.

“We were respected, and we were resented. But we got things done,” says Harper. “John provided leadership that was new to that institution. He was bold enough to say that we are not just going to react to what the governor wants. The whole paradigm changed under John.”

While in the Senate, Larson authored the nation’s first family leave law. And he – and the troika – was instrumental in the legislature’s reworking of how the state funds the Connecticut State University system, of which Central is part.

“The CSU system had always been the stepchild of UConn,” says Larson. “We changed the formula by which these schools received funding. We wanted to make sure that CCSU got what it so richly deserved.”

Adds Harper, “John and I are products of these schools. We are fervent believers in public higher education. The stage for UConn

2000 (the state's major infrastructure funding initiative for UConn as well as CSU) was set with our move to increase funding for the state's universities."

Washington Bound

Larson's rise took a decided detour in the 1994 governor's race. The Democratic front-runner, he dropped a bitter primary battle with Bill Curry that stunned his camp and placed his political career in limbo. He'll be the first to say he looked too far ahead to the November election.

"I think sometimes you have to lose to know how to win," he said afterward.

His youngest brother Tim, a former mayor of East Hartford, remembers the disappointment.

"He felt terribly about it," says Tim Larson. "But it was good for him from the perspective of taking it on the chin, dusting yourself off, learning from your mistakes and getting back on the horse."

That "horse" arrived in 1998, when 1st district Congresswoman Barbara Kennelly's failed run for governor opened the door to her coveted House seat. In a political resurrection of historic proportion, Larson put to good use the lessons learned from his defeat four years prior; he won handily.

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John Larson

During his 10 years on Capitol Hill, Congressman Larson has found his stride; in addition to his plum Democratic Caucus assignment, he currently serves on the powerful House Ways and Means Committee.

Among his legislative initiatives, he has championed a decrease in dependence on foreign oil; the government's negotiation of lower drug prices for the nation's 40 million Medicare beneficiaries; and incentives for technology partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions.

But it is the nation's growing disenchantment with the war in Iraq, Larson's fervent opposition to it and the nationwide Democratic



Congressman Larson and family clockwise from left: daughter Carolyn, wife Leslie (Best) '80, daughter Laura and son Raymond.

victory last November that have helped raise his profile. He has spoken passionately on the House floor during Congress' debate over the war, and on his home turf he has conducted a series of public forums on the war throughout the 1st district.

Larson today is one of Pelosi's most trusted allies. The high-profile California Democrat has even been a guest at Larson's infamous annual summer bocce tournament for friends, family and colleagues at his East Hartford home, which he shares with wife Leslie (Best) '80, teenage daughters Carolyn and Laura, and son Raymond.

Dare it be asked if the House speakership might be in the future?

"How can you not have aspirations for Speaker of the House when you are fifth in line in your own party?" Larson asks rhetorically. "People even ask me if I'd like to run for governor again. Listen, these are jobs that anyone who likes to look at big issues and effect change would want.

"If you work hard, if you are diligent, if you have the enthusiasm, then opportunity will present itself," he adds. "My mother said to me after I lost the governor's race that when one door closes, another opens; that the hard work I did will serve me well in another capacity."

Larson's political rebirth is compelling evidence that his mother may have been on to something. Those days long ago on the streets of Mayberry Village have provided, perhaps, much more than nostalgia. The cement tubs on "The Hock" may be a distant memory, but John Larson's political career remains buoyant, sailing forward to a port to be determined. 