

PERSPECTIVE



PAUL CHOINIERE
p.choiniere@theday.com

Could NL produce Providence’s next mayor?

Do you remember Robert DeRobbio’s run for the New London Board of Education last year?

I didn’t think so. Even politically involved city residents reacted with a, “Who’s that?” when DeRobbio’s name showed up on the list of Democratic candidates. His candidacy only lasted a few weeks. Endorsed by the Democratic Town Committee on July 25, DeRobbio dropped off the ballot by early September.

Now he is running to be the mayor of Providence, R.I.

So how did that happen? DeRobbio was happy to talk about it when I was able to track down his cell number.

DeRobbio, 72, was not thinking New London politics when he bought a home at 16 Jerome Road, a street located between Ocean and Pequot Avenues. He was thinking grandchildren. He and his wife have 11 of them, the products of six children, and they wanted a place for them to visit in the summer. After looking in Westerly and South Kingstown, Stonington and Groton, the couple settled on the Jerome home, closing in April 2017.

It didn’t take long for some Democratic leaders to discover they had a potential candidate in their midst. DeRobbio is the former executive director of business operations for the Providence school district, and spent time serving as interim superintendent.

He has a solid progressive record, a good political fit for New London. In Providence, DeRobbio has spent time as treasurer and an executive board member of the city’s NAACP chapter. He is past chairman of the Urban League there and spent time on the R.I. Ethics Board.

Putting that experience to work on the New London school board made sense. But after initially saying yes to running, DeRobbio had second thoughts, concerned that his part-time status and brief residency could become an issue. He withdrew.

A long-time Providence resident, DeRobbio’s heart lies with that city, as much as he may enjoy his weekend opportunities in New London.

So he is running for mayor, collecting the signatures that will be necessary to complete in the Sept. 12 Democratic primary. To win, he would have to unseat incumbent Democratic Mayor Jorge O. Elorza, seeking a second four-year term.

DeRobbio pointed to several issues that make Elorza vulnerable. The incumbent got the bright idea to install speed cameras in neighborhoods near city schools. They worked too good, producing more than 12,000, \$95 tickets in the first month.

Residents flooded the city’s traffic court and the judge proceeded to toss out hundreds of the tickets on technicalities. The speed-ticket crackdown also gave rise to a class-action lawsuit. DeRobbio, if elected, vowed to shut the cameras off.

“It hit the people who could least afford to pay,” DeRobbio told me.

Elorza faces criticism for taking 59 trips while mayor. “There is no reason for Jorge Elorza to be leaving Providence 59 times,” DeRobbio told the Providence Journal. “Providence’s mayor should be working at City Hall solving problems, not working toward his Platinum frequent-flyer status.”

Which makes you wonder how much time DeRobbio would have for his New London summer home if he becomes “his honor” of Providence.

DeRobbio reeled off a list other issues, common to many cities — parking policy, crime, deteriorating schools and labor disputes. Negotiations with the teachers union are at an impasse.

“I believe that I have the ability to work with unions and to sit down and discuss and reach mutual agreement,” he said.

Having downsized, DeRobbio now lives in an apartment at Providence Place, part of an area revitalized under the leadership of the city’s most famous and infamous mayor, the departed Buddy Cianci.

He never ran for New London school board.

Paul Choiniere is the editorial page editor.



Cincinnati Reds starting pitcher Matt Harvey, above, throws during the first inning of the team’s game against the Los Angeles Dodgers on May 11 in Los Angeles. Below, Harvey as a Met in a 2016 game against the Washington Nationals at Nationals Park in Washington.

MARK J. TERRILL/AP PHOTO

The sad tale of our DARK KNIGHT

By MATTHEW DOYLE

It has been said that the brightest stars burn the fastest. Six years ago, Matt Harvey thundered into baseball. New Yorkers were dazzled by his dominance, baseball media swooned and southeastern Connecticut watched as a local legend and neighbor ascended to national stardom.

At 6-feet, 4-inches and 220 pounds, Harvey was a terror on the mound, his fastball blazing, his slider filthy. Batters looked foolish, occasionally driven to flinging bats in frustration. As well-branded a pitcher as there ever has even been, The Dark Knight was selected to start the 2013 All-Star Game at his home field in New York, just two and a half hours from his hometown.

Rapid rise, swift fall

Harvey’s rapid rise to the top of America’s game seems to have been followed by an equally swift crash to the bottom. October 2015 marked the pinnacle of Harvey’s career. The boy from Fitch won Comeback Player of the Year and helped march the Mets to a World Series.

Harvey’s agent publicly criticized the Mets’ decision to push



ALEX BRANDON/AP PHOTO

Harvey into the playoffs. Exorbitant innings post Tommy John surgery could be calamitous for his ace, he argued. Lo and behold, Harvey hasn’t been the same player since. Injuries, frustration and a skyrocketing ERA have followed. People pay closer attention to what he’s up to off the field.

Exactly a year ago, Harvey was in the headlines and on the minds

of his fans in New London County. Harvey didn’t show up to a game at Citi Field, citing a migraine. He was not slated to pitch. The media reported Harvey had been out late the previous night, putting down tequila shots with friends.

A couple weeks later, I found myself sitting at Otto’s Barbershop on Bank Street in New London. It was a Friday, and I was cranky. I had spent

the workday staring at Excel, and another 45 minutes staring at the tops of my shoes waiting for my haircut.

The topic of conversation turned to sports. A boy a few seats down from me asked one of the barbers if he was a Matt Harvey fan. The barber said he was. I offered that Harvey was a bum, and the conversation livened.

A history of injuries

The barber claimed to be Harvey’s cousin. I laughed. Another customer defended the pitcher’s talent, pointing to his fast-growing injury history as the source of his problems. His argument seemed to be gaining momentum. In retrospect, he is probably right.

But in my mind, injuries weren’t the culprit. New York City had gotten the best of Matt Harvey. NYC is not UNC; 1 Oak is not Voodoo Grill. The Mystic kid was now beholden to an MLB front office and the court of public opinion. I had to set things straight. “Matt Harvey’s problem,” I said “is that he was too drunk to go to work.”

The buzzer stopped. The barber looked up. “You know he’s really

SEE THE BASEBALL GODS PAGE B7

Should author’s bad behavior ban the book?

By BETTY J. COTTER

The news that author Junot Diaz has been accused of inappropriate sexual conduct filled me with dismay for two reasons. One is the cumulative effect of so many badly behaving males in our patriarchal culture. In Diaz’s case, I felt added disappointment, because he is a contemporary writer whose multicultural experiences have inspired my students at Three Rivers Community College.

The story is familiar: Several women say Diaz made unwelcome sexual advances or lashed out at them in anger. The news comes just months after Native American writer Sherman Alexie, who also is popular among high school and college students, was accused of sexual harassment. The drumbeat is endless: Bill Cosby is now a convicted felon, a spate of media men have lost their jobs, and the Nobel Prize in literature will not be awarded this year because of a harassment scandal within that organization.

The case of Diaz affects more than the publishing world or his own personal fortunes. A native of the Dominican Republic, he came to this country when he was 7, living the poor immigrant experience that is reality for so many of my students.

Through education — he has degrees from Rutgers and Cornell — Diaz rose above the challenges of his home life. His novel “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008, and he holds a professorship at MIT.

In short, he has served as a shining example of education’s importance and literacy’s power. In vivid, realistic prose, he takes on the personas of struggling immigrant boys trying to fit into American culture while negotiating the hazards of their own. The stories he tells are ones my students, in one degree or another, have lived.

In “How to Date a Brown Girl, Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie,” Diaz takes us into the world of Yunion, a scrappy adolescent boy dodging the neighborhood bully Howie and trying to seduce girls. Speaking with the narrative distance of second person — a sign of his disconnection — Yunion advises the reader on what techniques to use depending on a girl’s ethnicity. In any case, if he can get her back to his apartment, he must hide the “government cheese,” that universal signifier of poverty.

Yunion warns the reader that you — that is, he — will not always be successful, and if the phone rings after the girl leaves, “you will be

tempted to pick it up. Don’t.” Despite his bravado, Yunion is a lonely adolescent boy marooned between his Dominican background and American culture.

In “Fiesta, 1980,” Yunion is a younger, anxious boy who keeps getting car sick in his father’s van. His visceral reaction is not related to motion sickness so much as his sensitivity to the violence and sexuality all around him, which he does not yet completely understand.

Great stories, flawed author

These stories hum with electric feelings — shame, confusion, yearning, desire — and are written in language both lyrical and street-wise.

In 2016 Diaz appeared at Expressiones in New London, which cosponsored the event with Three Rivers Community College as part of the InFusion literary art series. When I arrived with my husband that April evening, the narrow venue was already packed, and I was delighted to

SEE TEACHER’S DILEMMA PAGE B7



Junot Diaz

EVAN AGOSTINI, INVISION/AP