Going the Distance, an interview with Luke Harris
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Associate Professor Luke Harris, of the Political Science Department, appeared on ABC News Nightline Fri., 1/26/2006.

POUGHKEEPSIE, NY — B.A. in political science from Saint Joseph's University; J.D. and L.L.M. from Yale University Law School; Fulbright Scholar; law clerk for a prominent federal judge; litigator at a top New York City law firm; Ph.D. in political science from Princeton.

Not bad for a guy whose ninth-grade guidance counselor told him he wasn't college material.

"I don't believe in the idea that 'the cream rises to the top,'" says Luke Harris, assistant professor of political science at Vassar. "I believe that people need to be reached out to and nurtured. Even though in some respects I grew up in difficult circumstances, I was fortunate that there were always people who nurtured me and helped me become the person I am. That really informs my teaching because I want to give back to my students what was given to me."

Born to a New York City prostitute who was addicted to alcohol and drugs, Harris and his brother, Larry, were adopted and raised by their great aunt, Mrs. Eva B. Cox. They grew up in a small town near Camden, New Jersey, lived in a segregated neighborhood, and attended a segregated elementary school. Mrs. Cox, who worked as a domestic for most of her adult life, was their first nurturer and their "spiritual shield" against adversity. "Propriety, the church, decency, good manners, hard work, selflessness, being seen and not heard-those were her ground rules, the rules that she felt would lead us to success," says Harris.

But it would take more than good manners and hard work to counteract the numbing effect of institutionalized racism in the public schools. Told by his ninth-grade counselor that he was "not the kind of person who was ever going to learn how to master subjects like algebra, chemistry, and physics," Harris gave up the idea of going to college. By the 10th grade, he was no longer taking a full load of college-prep courses. "I was on my way to nowhere fast."

Just before his senior year, he was training for the upcoming cross-country season in a park near his home when an older white runner, a man he didn't know, jogged up alongside him and struck up a conversation. "At first I wondered: 'What's up with this white guy? Who is he to be talking to me?' But after he identified himself as a former All-American cross-country runner and the author of a book on distance running, I was suitably impressed and wanted to get to know him."

The white runner, Tom Osler, was a mathematics professor at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. The two became friends, running 15 to 18 miles together every Saturday; Osler planted and nurtured the idea that Harris could, and should, further his education. Although he had too few college-prep credits to be accepted at a liberal arts college straight out of high school, he was accepted at a New Jersey teachers college and was able to transfer to Saint Joseph's under its Affirmative Action program. Years later, as he was about to head off to Yale Law School, Harris learned that Mrs. Cox had asked Osler to encourage him.

Inspired by legal giants like Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Leon Higginbotham, Harris's original plan was to go to law school, get a few years' legal practice under his belt, and then teach law. Along the way, he developed an interest in international law and human rights issues; earned a second law degree (L.L.M.) at Yale; studied British race relations and legal theory at the University of Warwick as a Fulbright Scholar; clerked for the federal judge he so admired, Judge Higginbotham; and landed a job on Wall Street with a large corporate firm. "All of this was building towards what I thought was going to be a career in law school teaching," says Harris. He'd actually gone on
the market and had heard from about four dozen law schools, including several of the best law schools in
the country, when he decided to jump tracks and go to graduate school instead.

After completing the coursework for the doctorate at Princeton, Harris came to Vassar as the first scholar in
the college's Minority Dissertation Fellowship Program and taught part time in the political science
department while he finished his thesis on the jurisprudence of race relations. Now a full time faculty
member, Harris doesn't regret the move to academe. "As a professor, I get a chance to work with
undergraduates on a regular basis, which I like, and I get to spend 100 percent of my time teaching and
writing about issues that I am deeply interested in and committed to. If I had Judge Higginbotham's job,
maybe 20 percent of the cases would be about issues that are of interest to me, but the rest is anti-trust stuff,
commercial stuff, real estate stuff, and I'm just not interested in it."

During the academic year, Harris lives on campus during the week and then heads home to New York City
on weekends to be with his wife, filmmaker Kathe Sandler. Sandler is best known for her film "A Question
of Color," a one-hour documentary about color consciousness in the black community, aired nationwide on
PBS in 1994. Harris worked with her as cowriter and chief consultant on the film and hopes to collaborate
with her again soon on a new project, a documentary on Affirmative Action.

Harris served for three years as Vassar's Affirmative Action officer and has written extensively on the
subject from a theoretical as well as a personal point of view. According to Harris, everything from braille
signs in elevators to access ramps in public buildings to gender equity in sports programs to minority
scholarships should be seen, not as preferential or compensatory, but as egalitarian, as a means of leveling
the playing field. "We need to ask ourselves what kinds of changes need to be made in our post-apartheid
culture to promote full citizenship and equality," Harris says. "We need to reenvision our institutions so that
they embrace the experiences of all Americans."

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may not be available.

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1861.

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