

HAIL WE AKRON!

A Small Turn of Fate

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In the middle of a day in the middle of a week in 1982, at a time when no one expected him to be anywhere else but at work, Gus Hall walked through the side door of the family home in Goodyear Heights, set his lunch pail on the counter, and announced that he was laid off. He'd been the family breadwinner, thanks to a solid job at Akron Standard Mold, which manufactured equipment for the local rubber industry, which in turn had offered a middle-class life for Akron families for most of a century. But 1982 was a rough year, the beginning of a steep industrial decline, and the end of a time when a man like Gus Hall, who'd dropped out of high school to fight in

World War II, could feed and clothe seven kids by working in a factory.

Unemployment in Akron that year approached fifteen percent. Like thousands of others, Gus went to everyone he could think of for help. He happened upon a friend who worked at The University of Akron, who steered him toward a job delivering campus mail. The University has always been a vital institution, but never more than when the city is in hard times, when it could offer hope—training for new work, the empowerment of knowledge, the dignity of a decent job. When he returned home and reported the good news, Gus finished by turning to his daughter Gina, sitting at the kitchen table, the youngest of his seven kids and the last still in school, finishing her senior year at East High School.

“And guess what,” he said. “You’re going to college.”

The words sounded almost foreign. The prospect of higher education had never been considered in a household where everyone was expected to get a job at sixteen and aim toward the working world. Gina was in the vocational track at East, studying to be a secretary, never any thought of education past that spring. But here it was, the offer of free tuition, a benefit of her father’s new job. College. Huh. And so, she finished the year, graduated, and joined some 5,000 other new freshmen on campus that fall. I was one of them.

We would soon meet, and soon start finding excuses to run into one another in the Chuckery or under the old Gardner Student Center steps, sometimes delivering notes to

each other in the paper-littered mailroom across from Ayer Hall. We would begin dating, fall in love, graduate, marry, and begin a long life together, a life meshed to the fabric of the University, where I now teach, where both our children are students, and where Gus rose through the ranks and proudly retired as a buyer in Purchasing.

Every fall, new lives begin on this campus, a new series of chance events and happenstance meetings that change entire futures. That's what I think of every time I descend the concrete steps toward the Student Union, passing the spot where Gina and I sometimes sat together. I think about the small turns of fate—a man loses his job, the city university lifts him up, a surprise opportunity, two strangers converge—and not so much that it happened to us, but that it happens season after season, semester after semester, again and again and again.