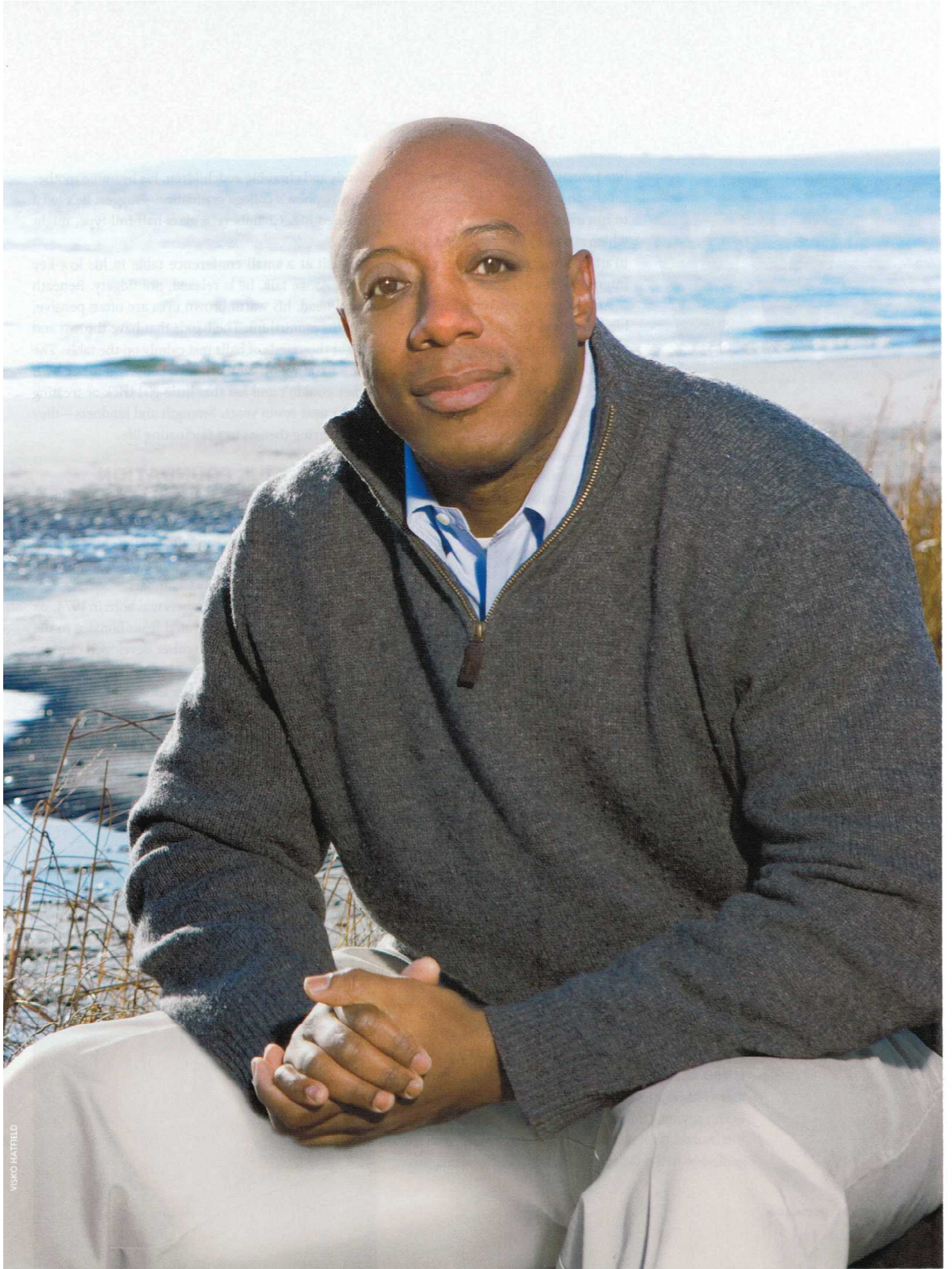




*an inspiring*  
**JOURNEY**

As a kid **Michael Chambers** was a self-proclaimed Eddie Haskell. But now that he's all grown up, the director of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Agency is impacting the town he loves through his job and his charity work  
*(and by the way, he's still pretty darn charming)*

by **JILL JOHNSON**



VISKO HATFIELD



hen I e-mailed Michael Chambers to set up an interview, he threatened to run away or “crawl up in a shell, which at 6 feet 3 inches and too large to attach a weight, would be a pretty interesting story in itself.”

At the agreed upon time, the humble director of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Agency was not in his office at Town Hall. As I studied the posters on the wall, “Wetlands—Wonders Worth Saving” and “Rivers of Life,” I wondered if Chambers might leave me high and dry. I had assured him that I’d focus on raising awareness—about the agency he works for and the causes he champions—and not so much on Chambers himself. Perhaps he had an inkling that his story would find its way into the heart of mine.

friends and cherubic godchildren, his beaming mother at his nephew’s college graduation—suggest he’s led a charmed life. Chambers, a glass-half-full type, might agree.

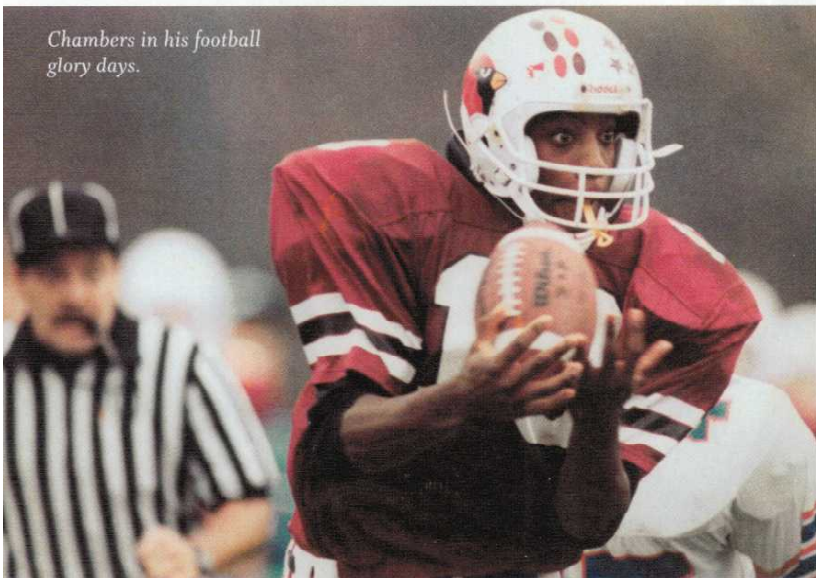
We sit at a small conference table in his low-key office. As we talk, he is relaxed, not fidgety. Beneath a bald head, his warm brown eyes are often pensive, sometimes mirthful. The hands that have thrown and caught thousands of balls rest calmly on the table. The same hands soothed a friend’s baby when her own father couldn’t and led that little girl trick-or-treating for the next seven years. Strength and kindness—they are recurring themes in a fascinating life.

### A TRUE FOUNDATION

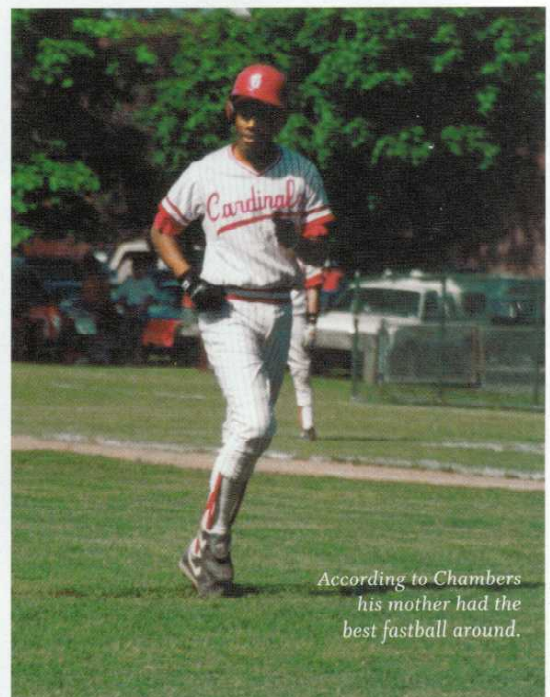
“I’ll tell anyone quite proudly that I began my life in Wilbur Peck. It’s an area that’s focused on only when something negative happens, but looking at me and my family as well as a number of other families, it was a great place to grow up,” says Chambers.

The youngest of five, Chambers was born in 1974, six years after his parents emigrated from Jamaica to the States. After his birth, his mother developed chronic migraines coupled with skyrocketing blood pressure that frequently landed her in the ER. “She could be out for two days or for a month,” recounts Chambers. Her ongoing battle with health problems is the only aspect of his childhood Chambers defines as tough, even though his dad left when he was five and his mom supported her large family by cleaning houses.

*Chambers in his football glory days.*



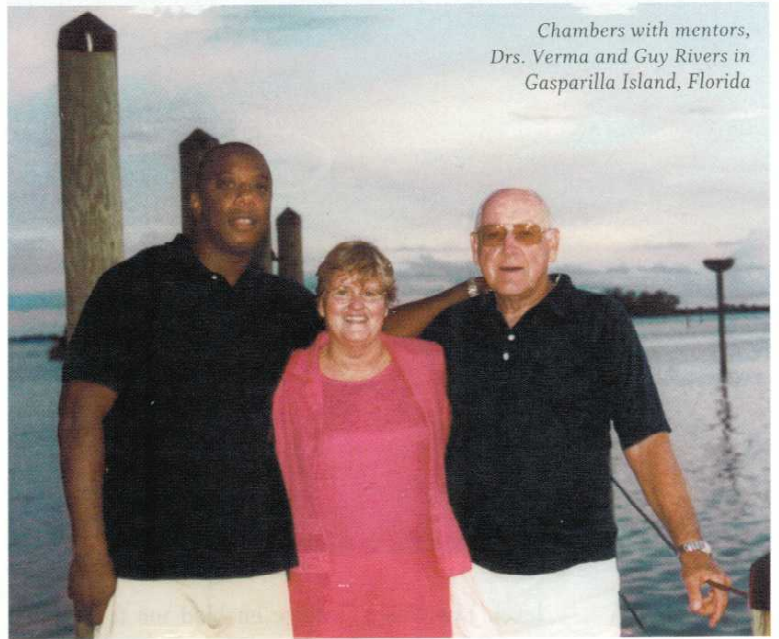
Dependability prevailed over modesty. Chambers appeared with a smile on his face, which is at once boyish and heavy with experience. He isn’t as hefty, or shy, as his e-mail implied. Chambers has the solid build of an athlete; he was a football star at Greenwich High (’92) and went on to play at Hofstra. He also was Homecoming King. (His mom passed along that tidbit, saying, “He’s gonna kill me!”) These facts and the framed photos around his office—a trip with his godfather to the Galapagos Islands, photos of longtime



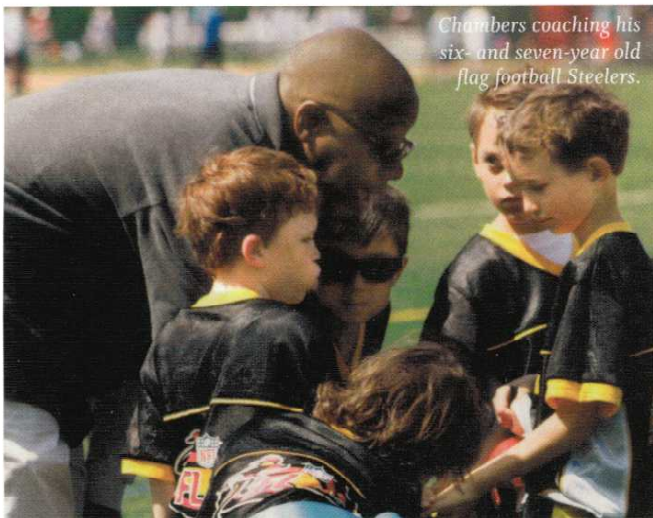
*According to Chambers his mother had the best fastball around.*

"Mom knew how to stretch a dollar. I wish I had learned that trait!" says Chambers, chuckling. His relaxed outfit—black slacks, blue button-down, gray sweater—doesn't look like it came from the closet of a spendthrift. But if Jennifer Chambers failed to instill frugality in her son, it may be the only way she failed him.

"I often say Mom was our resident drill instructor," says Chambers, fondly. "There was a time when homework and chores had to be done, and there was a bedtime. Through structure, Mom instilled success." She had not gone to college, but four of her five children did. "That in itself is a testament to how strong Mom was. She also strategically placed people—my two sets of godparents, parents of my friends, the church—as a support net to pull us along. The Presbyterian Church of Old Greenwich was home for Mom, not our apartment."



*Chambers with mentors, Drs. Verma and Guy Rivers in Gasparilla Island, Florida*



*Chambers coaching his six- and seven-year old flag football Steelers.*

"Being the director means something because I feel like this town has provided me a lot in life."

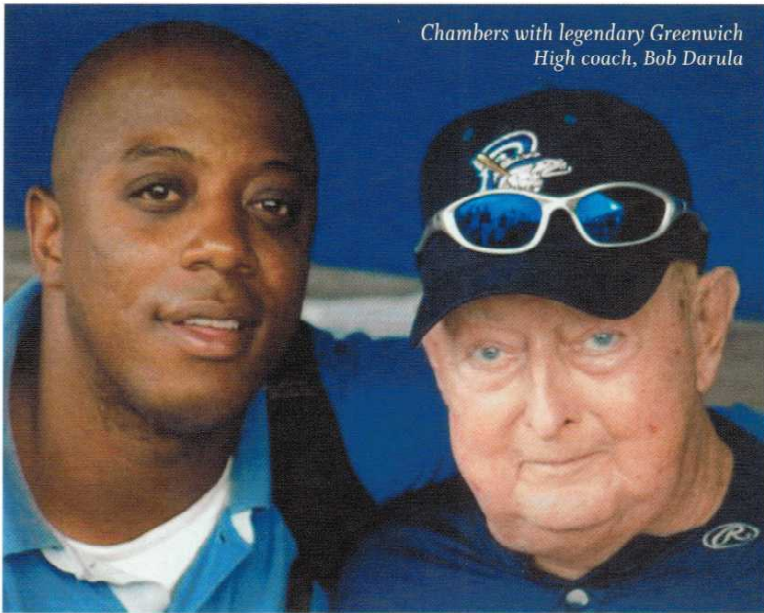
That was the loving net Chambers fell into when his mother was ill. One friend's father introduced him to football and sports soon became his passion. His brother saved up one summer and surprised him with his first baseball mitt. Community Centers Inc. and the Boys and Girls Club helped shape his athleticism, as did a string of supportive coaches who recognized a good kid with a lot of potential. "The best fastball I ever saw came from Mom, though," Chambers says, with a grin.

By high school, Chambers knew sports would be his ticket to college. Three concussions during the county championship football game his senior year almost

changed that, and his life. "The doctor said that had I taken another blow, it would have been a case of mental damage, if not death," recalls Chambers, who wasn't allowed to play in the state championships. "It was scary because my identity was sports. There was a question whether I'd ever be able to play football again." Northern Arizona considered taking a chance on the stellar defensive back, but with his mom facing life-threatening heart issues, Chambers opted for Hofstra University in Long Island. "I would be able to come home and check on Mom. It was better for my peace of mind," he says.

### **TENACITY & DEDICATION**

Chambers, an environmental science major, eventually sought a smaller school with less emphasis on sports and transferred to Lynchburg College in Virginia. "I had always been a mediocre student. I was a typical Eddie Haskell—I'd smile and put on the charm—and I used my athletic ability to make it to the next



Chambers with legendary Greenwich High coach, Bob Darula

level. Lynchburg College enabled me to redefine myself,” explains Chambers. “I hung up the cleats and hit the books.” He played baseball there but focused on his training as a coastal ecologist and bonded with Dr. Guy Rivers, a professor. “We had totally divergent personalities. Dr. Rivers was the old Southern boy and I was a young black guy from the Northeast, and the two of us were arm in arm all the time,” says Chambers. Dr. Rivers became a mentor and Chambers became “like a family member” to his professor.

“Michael is an interesting character, vocal and very enthusiastic,” says Dr. Rivers, from his winter home in Florida. “He was in my ecology class and we went on a field trip to Chesapeake Bay. We were collecting fish and there was a terrible storm. The others fled out of the water, but there was Michael out in the cold with his net. I was impressed by his tenacity. Soon he was helping me in the lab and acting as my assistant and driver,” says Dr. Rivers. “Michael had the ability to get along with everyone. It was obvious he would go a long way and he’s done so.”

After graduating in 1997, Chambers began working for the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Agency, an independent agency that “oversees development projects and makes sure they preserve or enhance the overall quality of wetlands and watercourses [ponds, streams, marshes, etc.] in Greenwich,” explains Chambers. A year later he left to pursue marine research, but he returned to the agency and the town he loves in 1999. In 2007, he was promoted to director.

“As director, I oversee the administrative and professional staff. I guide them as they make their reports

and recommendations to the board. We look at the environmental impact that will result from development and put forth alternatives that are designed to reduce that impact. We see projects as small as putting in a deck or as large as doing a 60,000-square-foot home. We’ll advise reducing tree and shrub removal and the import of fill to a property, both of which affect drainage patterns. We’ll suggest a gravel driveway instead of a paved one. Where ground infiltration is difficult, we look for drainage solutions at the surface: directing water to a pond, creating a pond, or a cistern where water can be reused. A great example is the new campus at Greenwich Country Day. They did a wonderful job in reusing the water generated from the increased buildings and driveways on the property.”

On the flipside, Chambers and his staff see plenty of blunders. “The one everyone remembers is the infa-

“Michael is an interesting character, vocal and very enthusiastic.”

—Dr. Guy Rivers

mous Judge Judy issue. Her neighbor cleared three acres of trees to create a soccer/lacrosse field for his kid. This affected the drainage pattern in the neighborhood and filled Judge Judy’s basement with water and her pool with sediment. A drainage system had to be installed to mimic what was lost with the absence of trees and he had to replant a sizeable portion of that property. More recently, a gentleman built a 45-foot vertical wall without a permit. The contractor received a fine. After going to court, the homeowner agreed to remove the wall.”

Chambers can’t go out to dinner or for a stroll down Greenwich Avenue without being solicited about projects. “I don’t mind because my job allows me to actively participate in the town I grew up in,” he says genuinely. “The big problem, actually, is remembering the names and faces!” Chambers has had eight or nine concussions all together and says, “Memory is not one of my better traits.”

Fortunately, recalling who's who isn't as big a factor in what Chambers does as making sure expansion doesn't dry up the area any more than it already has. "At one point our town was 35 percent wetlands and watercourses. Now it's significantly less," notes Chambers. Tom Baptist, his former boss and a fellow Audubon Connecticut board member, says, "Michael is a very highly regarded wetland scientist among his peers here in Connecticut. He provides an essential service to the town as the principal professional responsible for Greenwich's water quality and natural habitat." He adds, "He's also a terrific guy."

"Michael is willing to give back to the town, which for someone his age is noteworthy," says Glen Dell, his godfather, "Pops," who has been a father figure to Chambers.

For the director of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourse Agency, it's just a matter of quid pro quo. "Being the director means something because I feel like this town has provided a lot to me in life," says Chambers.

## KIDS AT HEART

Chambers's contributions to our community go way beyond his job and position on the Audubon board (which is composed of twenty-four of the best conservation minds in the state). Chambers is also on the board of Community Centers Inc. (CCI).

"CCI works with the indigent community here, which folks don't want to believe exists. CCI deals with the mentally challenged and the immigrant population. It offers ESL classes, after-school programs and family counseling. It's an organization that doesn't stop at the doorstep; it comes into your home. They know the families intimately. I was a CCI kid. I learned how to swim at CCI. My first baseball team was at CCI. I'm a product of CCI and really believe in its mission," says Chambers. He credits Barbara Nolan, the former executive director, with seeing the athletic and academic potential in Devon Wilson, a friend from Armstrong Court, and giving him the support that ultimately led to a degree from Bucknell. "If anyone thinks the housing

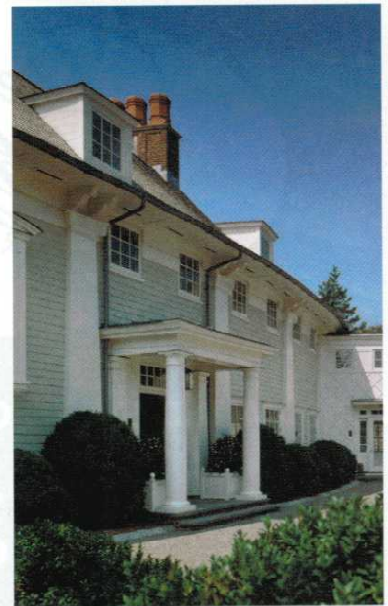
"At the end of the day, if you can make a kid smile, make a kid smile."

projects are just warehousing problem kids, that story shows they're wrong. The partnership between Greenwich housing and CCI makes life easier for kids who would probably be overlooked in any other community."

That being said, Chambers thinks we could do a lot more to give impoverished children a chance. To start, parents need more resources to help them cope. "Once the parents have goals and are doing well, then that is passed along," says Chambers. As both parents and teachers are often overextended, Chambers believes strongly in after-school programs that "introduce these kids to a routine in how to perform academically. This community has the means to take care of a very small percentage of its populace, which is an investment not only in their futures but it also improves the academic standing of their own kids. As the scores at the bottom improve, so do those at the top."

An attitude adjustment is also in order. "The biggest problem low-income kids have," emphasizes Chambers, "is that people want to pacify them, to make excuses for why they don't achieve. Street kids are savvy; if you give them an out, they'll take it. A kid who is challenged will perform."

Chambers likely learned this from his mom. "I was always struck with how his mother raised the bar for him and he lived up to it," says Barbara Nolan, who worked at CCI for fifty years. "She is an exceptional person." Barbara says that, likewise, Michael was an exceptional child. "He was always the kid you could count on. He always listened. If kids argued, he was the



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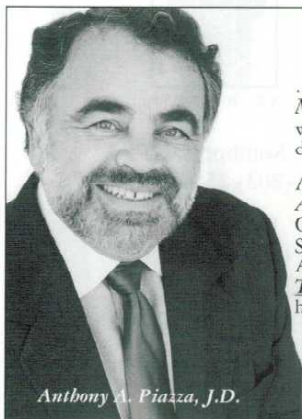
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mediator... I feel as though something CCI did was right because Michael came back to volunteer." Barbara noted that Chambers's sister Angela spoke at CCI's fiftieth anniversary and until recently was an associate producer of *20/20*.

Unlike his mother and her support net, who "wanted nothing less than greatness for us," Michael says he encountered some doubters when he was a kid: for example, a youth division police officer who told him, "By the time you're sixteen, you'll be in my office" (he never was); and some teachers at Greenwich High. He's now mentoring a student there, which brings back memories—mostly good.

"One of the amazing things about the public school system in Greenwich is that the kids are very down to earth. At least when I was there, they didn't flaunt their wealth. Some kids had really nice cars, but a fair number of those kids were very humble," recalls Chambers, whose family didn't own a car. "Their parents also gave them a clear set of rules. They did really well academically and many were very giving. I never felt like a poor kid at Greenwich High School. I never felt like a poor kid, period."

Chambers involvement with AmeriCares and AmeriKids puts him in contact with a whole other level of needy kids. "I joke that I have 250 kids every summer," says the bachelor. He works as a counselor at AmeriKids' camp for inner-city kids affected by AIDS/HIV. "Either they have it or a family member does. I put in a fair amount of time trying to raise money and cultivating volunteers. At the end of the day, if you can make a kid smile, make a kid smile, especially when they have taken on something like AIDS/HIV and it's not their fault. As the kids don't know why they're there, it's just like any other camp." And nothing like where they're from.

"One year we were headed up to camp from Harlem. We were still a good half hour away when a kid said, 'We're here!' I asked why he thought that and he replied, 'There are trees!' You think, holy cow! Another kid panicked on a nature walk. We were only 100 yards into the woods and he said,

'We're lost!' Meanwhile this kid could hop on the subway and take it all over the city. A lot of these kids have hard luck stories.

"Some have been taken from their families and put in foster care," he continues. "They may be seeing their siblings for the first time in a year. That's the magic of camp. For a week they have no ties to any social services. They are carefree. It's one fun innocent week."


Chambers has recently received an award from GEMS (Greenwich Emergency Medical Services) for outstanding community service for going door to door and encouraging his former neighbors to take CPR and first-aid classes.

"It's easy to get caught up in work," says Chambers, "but if you can reset yourself with community service—it's the stuff that matters."

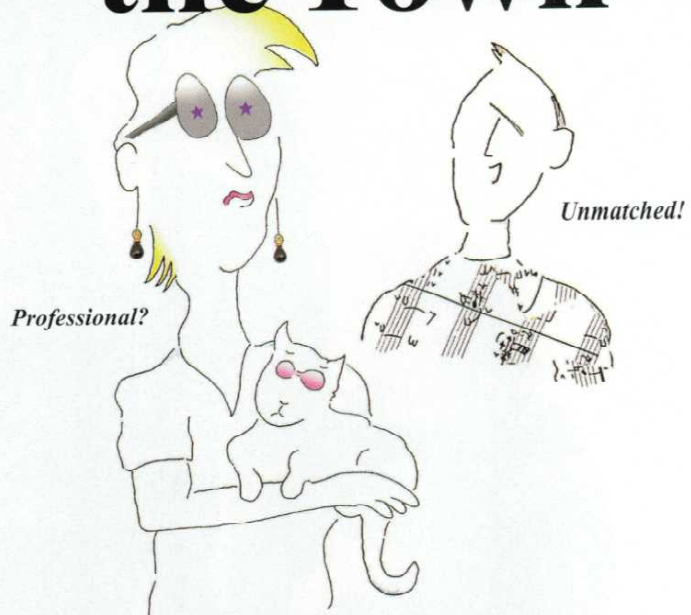
According to Jennifer Chambers, Michael was unique from day one. "He never cried," she says, when discussing her struggle with migraines after his birth. "It was like he knew what I was going through. Michael was loved by everybody who touched his life. I can't even begin to tell you how wonderful a child he was." Michael tirelessly researched doctors and helped nurse his mom through cancer and the loss of a kidney. "If he comes here and I'm upset, he will try anything to make me laugh," she adds.

Michael gives his mom primary credit for his success. "She is at the epicenter," he says. Her parenting advice? "My kids were very busy. They never ran the streets like some kids do. I learned from my mom who was strong and strict. I was the same. They couldn't get anything past me. I taught them that life is what you make of it. We had some ups and downs," she says, "but we had a good life here."

Jennifer laments that when the media write "about black kids, they never talk about the kids who are good." She'll be overjoyed to see in print what she has known all along: "Michael is special."

Michael, on the other hand, plans to fly down to see Dr. Rivers and hide out until the fuss blows over. 

# The Talk of the Town



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