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52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02109
617.951.1433
bsa@architects.org
www.architectureboston.com

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Beyond the Highways

Portraits of a Small Town

Text by Ken Richardson

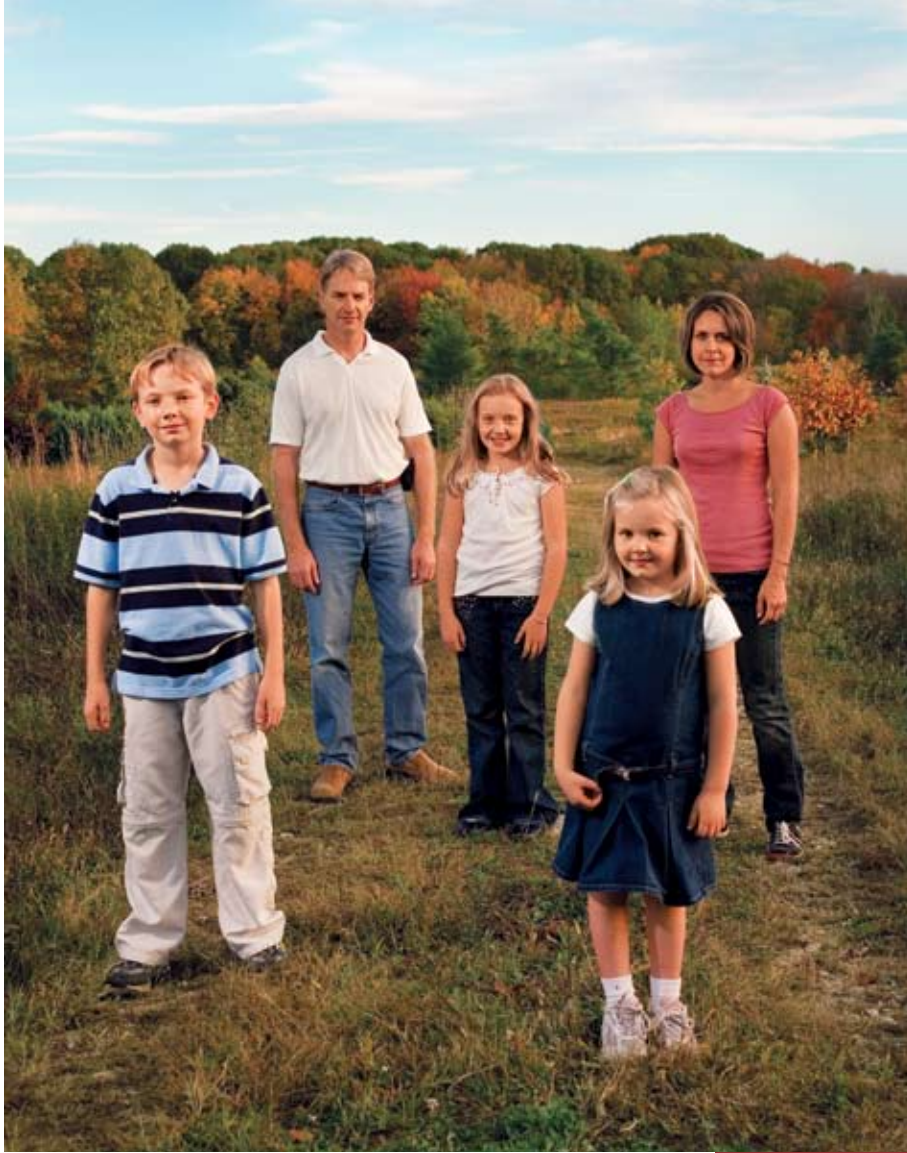
Photographs by Ken Richardson and CJ Heyliger

My parents moved my brother, sister, and me to Hopkinton in 1978, when the population was less than half of the more than 14,000 residents who live there today. I remember only one stoplight in town, and the woods behind my parents' house seemed to be endless. When I graduated from high school in 1991, I was one of 68 in the senior class. Today, the classes each number more than 250 students, the woods behind my parents' house are now a small neighborhood, and quite a few new stoplights are trying to handle the swelling traffic downtown. During my high-school years, one of the things that always made Hopkinton seem special to me was its small-town, rural feel, despite its location close to a major city — 26.2 miles to be exact. Telling new acquaintances I was from Hopkinton always elicited a blank look until I learned to append “the place where the Boston Marathon starts” to the town's name. It's the kind of town where the school sports teams — the Hillers — are named after

the minor topographical distinction that the highest point in Middlesex County lies within its borders. This safe, small-town character and the proximity to Boston and major highways have made Hopkinton attractive to many people in search of a good place to raise a family.

Going back to Hopkinton makes me realize that, although much has changed in the town, much of its character has remained the same. With its recent population increase, Hopkinton is struggling to find its place and its identity. Can Hopkinton retain its rural charm? Can it make room for new businesses that will serve the town and bear some of the tax load? Or will this growth jeopardize Hopkinton's essential appeal? Planners and policy-makers have written about changes and challenges that the town faces, but its people tell the story best.

Ken Richardson and CJ Heyliger are the principals of Richardson Heyliger Photography in Somerville, Massachusetts.



Karen and Peter

Peter Mezitt grew up in town and is now president of a fourth-generation family-run business that for many outsiders defines their image of Hopkinton. Weston Nurseries was established in 1923 and has been in Hopkinton since the mid-'40s. Peter and his wife, Karen, who also works in the family business, live near the nursery and are raising their three children there. Peter has noticed a shift in the nursery's business over the past few years. "It has gone from do-it-yourselfers to do-it-for-me. As a result, our services have expanded — more landscape design and installation, more customized containers

that you just pick up and put on your porch. Fewer people have the time to plant their own trees and shrubs because those people are working more. They don't want to be doing that kind of thing in their spare time. They want to enjoy their quality of life, but they want to have their yard look good, too. There's a competitiveness."

Weston Nurseries recently sold much of its acreage in order to restructure its business. This 700-acre site will be developed for commercial and residential uses as well as open space. The sale of such a large amount of land has been

the focus of much attention from town officials and residents and has contributed to broader discussions about the character of the town. Karen observed, "Many people in town want more fine dining and nice shops, and I think that's why people are really excited about the development of the downtown. They don't want to drive outside of Hopkinton if they don't have to. People are willing to trade some development for a tax break and to support new amenities." Peter added, "They want a village center that is more upscale."



Burt, Alex, and Matt

On a recent afternoon, Burt, Alex, and Matt, three students from Hopkinton High School, were hanging out at the town's skatepark, within EMC Park. All three moved here from out of state — their families chose to live in Hopkinton because of jobs and, in one case, to be closer to relatives. Although the town can seem too small, they agreed that it is a good place to grow up; one even states that he definitely plans on coming back after college. They like the fact that the town has places like the skatepark for kids but wish for a few more conveniences:

“If you want to get something to eat, you have to drive to the next town over.” Alex had positive things to say about the community at the high school: “It’s not cliquey or anything like that movie *Mean Girls*. It’s pretty good.” Hopkinton has built new schools and athletic facilities in recent years to handle the increase in the student population; in turn, this has helped to make the town more attractive to new families. Burt, Alex, and Matt were all in agreement that Hopkinton is a great sports town: one yelled, “Go Hillers!” as I turned off my tape.

Lauren

Lauren Bassick has been cutting hair for 22 years in a busy shop in the town center, called The Razor's Edge. She took this job as a 19-year-old living in nearby Franklin and, since then, has seen the town grow: "It's changed a lot. Every town does." Even so, she runs a business that thrives on the familiar. "For the most part, the clientele that I draw in has stayed the same. Real, true, blue-collar, somewhat white-collar folks, just real good people." It's certainly a loyal clientele — as Lauren spoke, she greeted one customer who has been coming to The Razor's Edge since before Lauren bought the business from its previous owner. She knows a lot about her customers and talks to them as if they are all old friends; she has little patience with some of the newcomers in town: "They're very nice people, but it's almost like they come in with an entitlement attitude. I don't deal with that. That's not the kind of clientele I want. We're real people here." And her customers speak up: "You hear a lot of people talk, people who are on committees in town, trying to keep the town the way it is. So they'll fight hard to keep it that way." As a business owner in the downtown, she expressed concern about the traffic and the need for a downtown revitalization: "The traffic is crazy in this town. Try pulling out of this driveway at four o'clock in the afternoon to take a left. You can't. You just stick your nose out there and hope that somebody will be nice."





Bob and Judy

Bob and Judy Benson have lived in Hopkinton since 1976. Before retiring, Bob commuted to Boston to work as a civil engineer; Judy recently retired from her job of 35 years as a schoolteacher in nearby Framingham. Their original plan had been to retire on Cape Cod or in Maine, but instead they decided to add on to their home and stay in Hopkinton where they can be near family and friends. They live on North Mill Street, a designated “scenic road” that winds through the woods. The stone-wall- and tree-lined street is so narrow that you have to pull over to allow oncoming

traffic to pass. This is part of what makes Hopkinton special to Judy: “To me, it was the perfect place to live. I always felt that Hopkinton was so bucolic, yet in a matter of 15 minutes you can get to somewhere that feels like a city, which is what Framingham started to feel like. I could always come back home to Hopkinton and this wonderful, quiet setting with the animals and the trees. It really felt like ‘all is well.’ And I think Hopkinton has maintained that character.”

Bob, who also served on the planning board in the ’70s and ’80s, observed: “Hopkinton, in the 30 years that we’ve

been here, has grown from what some may have called a hick town to a community that is more educated about and more aware of development issues. Development of all types is watched carefully. The demographics have changed somewhat since we moved here because, with the commercial and industrial development in other towns, more jobs have developed in the surrounding area. People who move to Hopkinton now don’t have to work in Boston. They can find jobs in Marlborough or Westborough or even in Hopkinton.”

Brian and Mary

Brian Herr and Mary Murphy came to Hopkinton eight years ago and have been very involved with the community. They first got to know the town by running in the Boston Marathon and previously lived in Natick, which Mary describes as developing “more of a city feel”; they were also concerned about its school system. Brian is the regional manager of a major electrical supply company — which means he travels frequently throughout New England — and was elected a town selectman last year. Mary, a former elementary-school teacher, started Hooray for Books in downtown Hopkinton, teaching reading and cooking classes to young children. Mary described their reasons for moving to Hopkinton: “It seemed to be a very up-and-coming town. It was just opening a brand new high school, and the town seemed to be investing a lot of money in education. We also liked that it had a small-town feel, but we felt it was a town that was going to move into the future.” They have five children and have found Hopkinton to be a great place to raise a big family: “Hopkinton is an extremely family-oriented town and we have met a lot of really good people who have the core

values that are important to us: they work hard and care about the community, and they’re very involved with their children.”

They worry about the increasing cost of housing and taxes. Mary is concerned that seniors might be forced out — “a dangerous thing” — although they don’t feel that pro-growth and anti-growth sentiments in town necessarily fall along newcomer versus oldtimer lines. The political climate in town is very energetic, and as a selectman, Brian is in the middle of the debates about the growth of the town. “The biggest problem is we want to have our cake and

eat it, too. We want to have as many trees as possible and winding country roads, and we want to have great schools. But we don’t want to pay for them. It’s a no-win situation. You’ve got to increase the revenue somehow, or the schools are going to deteriorate. If the schools deteriorate, home values deteriorate, and it becomes a vicious cycle. We have to accept the fact that we have grown. We use the term ‘rural character’ a lot out here. But we’re 25 miles from one of the hottest cities in the world. So there’s not much that’s really rural about it.” ■

