

Driven, visible mayor sparks interest in Braddock's revival

By LEXI BELCULFINE
The Lion's Roar

Driving down the main corridor of destitute Braddock Borough with locked doors, a visitor can hardly imagine that it was once a bustling town of 20,000 people.

That was five decades ago, when the steel mills were booming.

Today, nine miles outside of Pittsburgh, fewer than 3,000 residents live in Braddock among crumbling buildings, which thieves have stripped of their copper wiring to be sold to scrap yards. Ninety percent of the town's buildings have been demolished, leaving behind overgrown and littered lots.

Braddock Borough is the personal reclamation project of Mayor John Fetterman, a 6-foot-8-inch, 350-pound, tattooed Harvard graduate who has done more for the town in the seven years that he's been there than anyone else has even tried.

The bald, goateed Fetterman, 41, is redefining local government, carving his own path as he goes, much like Braddock.

Fetterman understands the challenge the town faces.

"It's important to have reasonable expectations," he said with confidence and poise. "I don't have a messiah complex. I don't think for a second that Braddock can ever be what it was 30, 40, 50 years ago."



But what Braddock can be, he said, is a community that saves the last 10 percent of its standing buildings, provides opportunities for young people and is safe for its residents. That is what he is fighting for, to show that "no community should be written off and forgotten. Things can and should get better."

Fetterman's road to the borough was neither direct, nor intentional, but now that he's there, he said he's not leaving until his constituents tell him it's time.

A football player in high school and college, the York native graduated from Albright College in Reading. A stint in AmeriCorps from 1995-1997 sent Fetterman to the Hill District, a notoriously poor and violent group of Pittsburgh neighborhoods. In many respects, the Hill and Brad-



Braddock Mayor John Fetterman knows he'll never lead a complete revival of the borough, but he hopes to make the community safer.
(Photo by John Beale)

dock are similar, but Fetterman said that on the Hill he never felt the "deep visceral connection" he has with Braddock.

While working on the Hill, Fetterman helped establish the first two computer labs at a community center. He then went to Harvard and received a master's degree in public policy in 1999.

All the while, Fetterman said he was trying to find a place to call home and hoping that he would be of some service to that town.

"You don't fully understand the community until you actually live there 24/7, and you get a sense of what quality of life is," he said. "I wanted to fully be involved in a community and that ended up being here in town."

Born and raised in Brazil, Fetterman's wife Gisele, 28, said she understands why he fell in love with Braddock.

"It's where he found home," she said. "So many of us search for years, or a lifetime, for their calling or meaning, and I think he found the answers in Braddock."

Fetterman met his wife in 2007. With a background in nonprofit work herself, Gisele traveled to Braddock hoping to bring a nutritional program to the community.

"He is like no one I've ever met," Gisele said. "He would give you the shoes off his

feet, and has. He came home one day in socks after giving his sneakers to a young man playing basketball at the courts by our house."

When Fetterman moved to the area in 2003, he quickly became involved in Braddock, but he realized he could accomplish more in an official role. So, in 2005, Fetterman ran for mayor of Braddock against two opponents, one of whom was the two-time incumbent and a lifelong Braddock resident.

Fetterman won by one vote out of 425 cast.

Four years later, he beat another lifelong resident. This time it wasn't close.

With his "get the job done or step aside" mentality, complaining—even on the roughest days—isn't an option.

"It's like eating," Fetterman said. "There are days like Thanksgiving when you say, 'Oh my God. I just cannot eat one more bite.' But no matter how much you overeat, you always get hungry again. I've never felt burnt out or discouraged or anything like that, but there are moments when I need a vacation."

That hunger always comes back, Fetterman said, because he lives in a great community and feels lucky to serve.

There is no set routine for Braddock's mayor. No chief of staff. No regular work day.

"No secretary," said Gisele with a laugh, in a recent interview in the living room of their home.

And no dress code.

"I don't own a suit," Fetterman said. "That's not like a rebellious thing. I feel it would be inappropriate and out of touch for someone coming from a community like this to worry about, 'Well, I need to wear a suit.' People don't wear suits here. It is a working town."

The John Fetterman walking down Braddock Avenue or working on the Nyia Paige Braddock Community Center is the same John Fetterman who has met presidents Clinton and Obama and spoken on national television, he said.

"I met the president no differently than I am now. In fact, if my memory serves, this is the shirt I wore when I was on 'The Colbert Report' the first time," he said, tugging at his blue short-sleeved Dickies work shirt. "I am what I am. For good or bad."



Fetterman's mayoral position pays only \$150 a month, and the couple has depleted their savings and 401k plans. The family lives frugally, without a mortgage or health insurance, but Fetterman's parents, who own an insurance business in York, assist the young family financially, enabling Fetterman to make his mayoral position—technically a part-time job—a full-time commitment.

"Braddock is part of John's DNA," Gisele said. "He never shuts off from work."

For Fetterman, the successes and failures of Braddock are personal. So much so, that the mayor has tattooed the borough's ZIP Code (15104) on his left forearm.

"I got that as a way to express how I feel and my commitment," he said.

And on his right forearm, a list of numbers: "01.16.06"; "10.08.06"; "12.04.06"; "02.03.07"; "12.12.07" — the dates when people were murdered in Braddock on his watch. Each one has affected him deeply.

"02.03.07" represents the death of a 23-month-old girl—slightly older than Fetterman's only son, Karl, is now. The girl was

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sexually assaulted by her father and left outside to freeze to death. Braddock's community center and the line of black ink on Fetterman's arm are dedicated to the memory of Nyia Page.

"These were the shoes I wore when we went to look for her," he says, motioning to his size 13, black high-top boots.

Fetterman's devotion to Braddock has gone even further. In an act of civil disobedience, Fetterman was arrested in late November after refusing to leave downtown Pittsburgh's U.S. Steel Tower.

He was protesting a decision by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to close its hospital in Braddock earlier this year. Not only was the hospital the borough's largest employer, but it also housed the borough's only ATM and only restaurant—the hospital cafeteria.

Fetterman carried a sign during his protest: "Please UPMC open an urgent care center like the one in Shadyside."

"It was an attempt to start a hopeful dialogue. A plea that they do the right thing and open, staff and manage an Urgent Care Center for the community of Braddock," Fetterman wrote in an e-mail the day after he was arrested.

Paul Wood, UPMC's vice president of public relations, said 85 percent of Braddock Hospital's 600 employees who wished to stay with UPMC were offered other positions. He also said the ATM was moved to the municipal building.



When Fetterman moved to Braddock in 2003, he purchased two buildings: a church and an abandoned warehouse. The church became a community center, and the warehouse became his home.

In July 2003, Fetterman's father extended a loan to John's newly established nonprofit, Braddock Redux, to purchase the First Presbyterian Church. Like so many other buildings in Braddock, the church awaited demolition. For the next nine months, Fetterman lived in the basement of the church while he created a home from the red brick warehouse that he had bought for only \$2,000.

The Fettermans' industrial loft-style home is sandwiched between the church-turned-Nyia Page Braddock Community



Nearly 500 businesses used to call Braddock Borough home, but that number has decreased significantly in the past three decades—and creating a revival has been a difficult chore for those who remain. (Photo by John Beale)

Center and the community basketball courts.

"I want my house to be a metaphor for Braddock, because it was written off and nondescript," Fetterman said.

Retaining much of the warehouse's original architecture, Fetterman added the essential systems such as lighting and heat to create a livable space.

Graffiti decorates the cinderblock walls of the entryway and staircase leading into the living room, where an entire wall is covered in black-and-white photos of borough scenes.

"He sees the beauty in demolition and decay," said Vicki Vargo, the library's executive director of nine years. "And he sees the potential for it."

The living room is lit by enormous windows with a view of a treed lot and the nation's first free Carnegie Library. A wood-burning stove heats the room, and the Fettermans' 20-month-old son's toys litter the floor. As Karl runs around in his Superman costume bought for Halloween, Fetterman says:

"My dream for Karl is to be as happy as I am, doing what he wants to do, with whom he wants to do it with."

Fetterman doesn't have to leave his doorstep to be reminded of the town's troubles.

"If you walk out my front door and look to the right, you see a building literally coming down on its own," he said.

Braddock is among Allegheny County's poorest towns, the median family income barely \$25,000 in 2008. The estimated median home value at the same time was less than \$29,000, compared with the Pennsylvania median of almost \$165,000.

Fetterman said Braddock is a prime example of the damage a recession can inflict.

"Back when the recession really took grip, I said, 'We're waiting for the country at the finish line, and if anyone wants to know what the end point is for what's potentially going on in the county, well, come to Braddock.'"

He often wonders what Braddock and other Rust Belt towns would look like today if the federal government had intervened in the '70s and '80s and saved blue-collar manufacturing jobs the way it has saved automotive and financial jobs during the recent recession.

But Fetterman believes that 30 to 40 years of decline are enough.

"It's time to change course and hopefully create an upward trajectory," he said.

Realistically, the town has no hope of becoming prosperous, such as Pittsburgh's Carson Street or Shadyside, Fetterman said, so he is just trying to make fundamental improvements—saving Braddock's buildings, helping its youth and making the town safer.

Such basic quality-of-life issues can have significant ramifications, he said.



Braddock Redux was founded in 2003 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to serve as a vehicle for saving buildings that otherwise would have been abandoned and to provide programming for the community's youth.

Redux holds the title to the community center and other structures, including the Ohringer building, a former furniture store being converted into free environmentally friendly studio spaces for artists.

"If I owned that church, for example, we could have never gotten it fixed up. You can't give money to a person to fix up a building. It has to be owned by a nonprofit," said Fetterman, who also serves as the president of Redux.

With 90 percent of the town's original structures gone, Braddock will look like "a mouth with no teeth in it" after the next round of buildings is razed in the next year and a half, he said.

Along Braddock Avenue and its many side streets, these buildings bear the signs of impending destruction: sloppily spray-painted neon numbers noting their street addresses.

With those buildings disappearing, it is all the more important to save structures like the Braddock Carnegie Library.

The library is alive. Even on a warm October day, a clicking typewriter and running children's steps echo off its mint-green walls and wooden bookcases. Seven PCs, one marked out of order, and the typewriter are all in use.

"Even though it's a beautiful day, there are things to do here," said librarian Vargo, 53.

Like the town itself, the library isn't in the clear yet.

Every year, the library is lucky to be able to continue providing services, Vargo

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said. Next year, the library faces a potential budget deficit and roof repairs.

"The library really is a symbol of the perseverance in this town," she said. "The building just won't die and neither will the spirit."

Across Library Street, a black banner is strung against the yellow brick façade of the community center.

In white capital letters, the sign reads: "Restore Library Street, Restore Braddock."

Years ago, the services offered in Braddock and other local communities were evaluated, and Library Street was identified as a plausible entertainment corridor.

Though no one has officially acted on that assessment, Vargo said she had seen positive change on the street.

Up the hill from the community center and library is a once-overgrown lot that has been turned into basketball courts.

Vargo said Fetterman is "a good neighbor" and most people support him.

Another supporter of the mayor and his wife is Dorothy Guy, 60, who grew up near Braddock. "They are not just the mayor and first lady," Guy said. "They are my friends. And they are doing a fabulous job." She sits at the Library Street basketball courts, watching her five grandchildren and their friends play.

Guy is opening a day-care center next to the First Church of God in Christ, where her father was the pastor for decades.

Fetterman spoke at the church's 83rd anniversary in mid-October.

Guy met Fetterman a year ago at a harvest weekend. "He gave those kids everything," she said. "Raffled bikes, gave games and baby dolls out."

And he did something special for her granddaughter Israel, 9.

"She cries about everything, and he took her ticket right out of her hand and called her numbers," Guy said. "She won a bike. A bike, you know."

A train horn cut off Guy, and the ground around the basketball court shook as the train passed.

"This is Braddock," she said, motioning to the hillside where the train ran. "Trains on every other street."

Guy said she remembers Braddock's prime. Braddock Avenue was a bustling row of grocery stores, banks, theaters, bars

and bowling alleys.

Gisele Fetterman said that a century ago, there were 495 registered businesses in Braddock. Only a handful remain.

For the most part, people in Braddock hold multiple jobs and commute to those jobs elsewhere. In Braddock, the steel mills and mom-and-pop stores are no longer the lifelines.

But some of the small businesses not only survived the recession, but have been in Braddock for decades.

Golden Treasures, 709 Braddock Ave., has been there 10 years.

"The mayor has always been great to us," said the owner, Anna Golden, who lives five miles away, in Wilkins.

When members of a film crew recently came through Braddock, they purchased many of their props from Golden Treasures, she said.

On the same block, Thomas Beauty Salon, 719 Braddock Ave., has been in business for almost 30 years.

Owner Ella Thomas, of North Braddock, said her dedicated clients keep her in business. Now she's doing the hair of some of her original customers' grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Like many other residents, she feels Braddock's hardships.

"The lowest point is right now," Thomas said. "We have nothing, not even a gas station."

But not since she has been in business has she seen a better mayor than Fetterman, she said.

Willa Mae Wooten, who grew up in Braddock, sat under a dryer in Thomas's salon with her hair in curls.

"People ask what happened to Braddock," Wooten said. "A town is only as good as its politicians."

Though Fetterman said he doesn't have a long-range plan, he said the ultimate benchmark for Braddock is curbing crime, particularly violent crime.

For two and a half years, there hasn't been a homicide in Braddock—this, after the five now etched in his arm, during his first two years in office.

"We've been effective in making sure that our community has an ever increasing respect for human life," he said.

Serving fewer than 3,000 constituents makes the scale of Braddock small and personal.

"If you are the mayor of a big city, you get the report on your desk the next morning that there were three shootings last night. You never see it," Fetterman said. "But in a place this size, it's very, very personal, and I would say that's the hardest part of all of it."

Even at 2 a.m., Fetterman is at all of the crime scenes, because once crime is taken care of, everything else will fall into place, he said.

"Have we saved more buildings? Are we consistently putting kids to work? Are our outcomes getting better and better or are we going backwards?" Fetterman said.

In some cases, like the basketball courts, demolition has helped move the community forward. As buildings come down, they make room for green spaces and community-oriented projects like playgrounds and the basketball courts, Fetterman said.

And such projects put Braddock's kids to work in the summer.

Braddock partners with AmeriCorps each summer and hires about 100 young people to work on projects from community art to an urban garden, where locals farm and sell produce at a discounted price.

Fetterman also oversaw the construction of a community playground in an empty lot where a department store stood. Kaboom, Home Depot, Heritage Health Foundation and local volunteers constructed the playground in just one day, according to Braddock Redux's website.

Fetterman said he isn't biding his time in Braddock with an eye on higher office.

"I would miss all of the things that make this so difficult," he said. "I just like the scale of it, I guess."

And even Braddock Borough Council President Jesse Brown—one of Fetterman's starkest opponents—predicts that he will be reelected in 2013.

In what Fetterman has called an "embarrassment of publicity," Braddock and its revolutionary mayor have appeared on "The Colbert Report," on CNN, on NPR and in *The New York Times*.

"The attraction is him," Vargo said. "They never would have come here without him. They want to see the man behind the town."

Fetterman gives people a reason to believe—even outside the town lines of Brad-

dock.

On Oct. 24, a fan posted on Facebook, "Don't believe u can grow up to be anything u want? Google John Fetterman."

For Vargo, this kind of publicity is important. It allows people to view Braddock in a new light.

Braddock Borough Councilwoman Tina Doose said: "He has drawn national attention to our community and uses that attention to garner needed support to help with problems that exist here. I don't have a problem with Braddock being in the spotlight if it can help our community."

But Brown disagrees and said that Fetterman tends to focus on Braddock's problems. "There are a lot of positive things that have happened in the community," Brown said. "But during his media coverage, he seems to play up the negative more than any positives." Brown named new housing and the basketball courts as such improvements.



This summer, Levi's Jean Co.'s "Go Forth" advertising campaign was looking to "explore how a new generation of real American workers is rolling up their sleeves to make real change happen," according to a Levi's press release.

Levi's found that in Braddock.

With the town serving as a backdrop, a dozen residents were featured in the comprehensive, nationwide ad campaign, appearing in television commercials, in print ads and on billboards.

In what Fetterman calls an "entirely positive" partnership, Levi's is helping to refurbish the Nyia Page Braddock Community Center and is contributing to Braddock's urban garden.

Other residents were paid for being in the Levi's ads, but Fetterman said he unfortunately had to be in one of the commercials and "didn't receive any compensation or a free pair of jeans." The Screen Actor's Guild's mandatory pay was channeled into Redux.

Guy's grandson, Jonathan White, 12, got to be in the Levi's commercials, too. And while he's not entirely sold on the promise of the town, he knows one thing: "I feel safer now because the mayor's here." ●