

*A series
profiling
your fellow
Routematchers.*

by Laura Lee Huttenbach



Pepper Harward

Vice President, Transit Solutions

The sixth-born of eight children, Pepper Harward grew up in Phoenix, Arizona. As a kid, thanks to his three older brothers, his arms and legs were usually bruised. “I would get beaten up on a daily basis,” he recalls. “But it gave me a scrappiness. It made me tough and independent.” He had a lot of jobs growing up. At seven years old, he started working his own paper route. At fourteen, he picked grapes and loaded tractors at a local farm. “I would do that under the table for five or six hours, then go to basketball camp,” he says, adding that all of his colleagues at the time were migrant farm workers from Mexico. At sixteen, he started bussing tables at Sizzler.

As his high school team’s point guard, Pepper’s dream was to become a professional basketball player. Today his dream job is a high school civics teacher. “I would love to semi-retire and teach social studies,” he says. “Almost all of my own free time, I spend reading and studying the Supreme Court and the Constitution.” He pauses. “I know,” he continues, “it’s a really nerdy thing, but I’m just super passionate about it.” >

Q&A with Pepper Harward

Q: What's it like being named Pepper?

A. It stinks now. I used to think it was cool, but I'd rather have a name that gives me a little more anonymity. Like, when I meet someone on an airplane and have a conversation with them for two hours, I'd like to just leave it there. But then the next day I get a Facebook request or something. All they knew was Pepper from Phoenix, and they can find me!

Q. What's the story behind your name?

A. People ask me that all the time, and there really isn't one. Sometimes I'll make something up. But the truth is my dad named me, and I'm the only one of eight kids who my dad named. The rest of my siblings have regular names. Maybe they thought, Eh, we have five normal people already, let's try something different.

Q. What did you study in college and how did you choose it?

A. Economics. I'm drawn to the normative economic side—the policy, the trends, the concepts. I think in models. Particularly, I like to think about any time you're going to add a new factor into a model: What might the consequences of the new factor be? How will people react? What's logical and what's not? My worst tendency is when somebody brings up an idea, I immediately ask questions to test it. My mind will go a year or two out front, to all the issues and uncertainties. A lot of times I get misunderstood because when I start to question the idea, it sounds like I'm attacking it, or the person. I'm trying to be more conscious of how I react to an idea in facial expressions and all that, to take a step back and say, "I like this idea, it's great," and then ask questions.



Q. So when someone presents a new idea, your instinct is to question it, but not as a way to kill the idea, but as a way to make sure it has the best chance for success?

A. Yes. Exactly. To me, attacking an idea isn't the same thing as attacking a person. But for a lot of people, the style or the way in which things are said are equally important to the substance. But I love it when somebody questions my ideas and debates with me, as long as it's all about the substance. That's what gets me excited.

Q. What type of basketball coach motivated you best?

A. I was part of a pretty big program in Phoenix, and it was very structured. The focus was on the fundamentals. This was the age when everybody was starting to push for self-expression. Tattoos were coming out for the first time. People were wearing shoes in different colors like blue and black. But we were forced to wear white tennis shoes. We couldn't have our shirts un-tucked, or you were running laps. That kind of discipline was drilled in. That's all I really knew, and I appreciated that, but I feel like I could've benefitted a ton from a different coach at another time that pushed more toward creativity or being okay with breaking some of the rules.



Q. What do you like about Constitutional law?

A. That's how I love to learn history. With the benefit of hindsight, people can change their reasoning and rationale for their political arguments. They can rewrite their stories. But with the Supreme Court, you have to provide that rationale at the time. It's all written down; there's no hiding from it. I think it's the clearest apolitical history, in terms of people's ideas.

Q. What is a fun fact about the Supreme Court?

A. Well, it's not a "fun" fact, but it's a story I've told my daughter. Every year, there's a tradition that all the Supreme Court justices take a picture together, and the only year we don't have a picture of everyone together is 1924. That's because Justice James McReynolds [who sat on the court from 1914 to 1941] didn't want to stand next to Justice Brandeis, who was the first Jewish American on the Supreme Court. When a female advocate would come in courtroom to argue, McReynolds would stand up and leave. When an African American advocate would come in and argue for African American rights, he would turn his back to them. So McReynolds goes down in history as probably our most bigoted justice, and all his accomplishments are rightfully tarred by that fact. But at the time he thought he was right and wasn't afraid to speak

up. He was even applauded by others for doing so. The lesson I take from this is that it's not enough to simply have the courage to act on your convictions or stand up for what you believe in. You have to be willing to challenge yourself to make sure the substance of your beliefs is right, as that is ultimately what shapes our legacy.

Q. What five guests would you invite to your dream dinner party?

A. They'd all be Supreme Court justices. In order: Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I'm a huge fan of hers. Then Thurgood Marshall. Earl Warren. John Marshall. And the fifth is a tie between Louis Brandeis and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Wow, if I had dinner with all of them—I could die after that.

Q. What superpower would you want?

A. I'd love to be able to live in other people's minds for brief periods. Not just for what could be accomplished with other people's minds, but I think I'd get so many insights into how much we have in common and how different we are. I think I'd be surprised by both of those things.

Q. What's your favorite smell?

A. That's a deep question. One of my favorites is the smell of a new book when you open it up. I find comfort in it. I feel like society is going to lose something when we go to all electronic versions.

Q. What book has changed your life?

A. I don't think there's a single book that changed my life. If you're talking about pivotal moments, everything changed for me when my dad died. He died unexpectedly fifteen years ago. It's so crushing. There's anger and resentment and a lot of different things, but it's also an opportunity to think through his legacy. He intentionally focused on his kids and those relationships, as opposed to a career. When he died, I asked myself what I wanted to be beyond my career. With my own kids, I try to live up to his example.

Q. How many kids do you have?

A. Three. My oldest daughter is twelve. My son is seven. My youngest daughter is three. My number-one goal is to be a good dad. That's what I would consider is the best version of myself, when I'm hanging out with my kids. I remember a Taylor Swift song came on when I was with my daughter the other day, and she has a line about her father, and my daughter had tears down her face. I'm so proud of being able to have that relationship with her. And being a father makes me appreciate my own father a lot more.

Q. Can you give an example?

A. In my freshman year of high school, my basketball team had team shoes. They got white Nike Air Flights. They're like \$120, and money was tight at the time, so my parents couldn't afford them. I was so upset and angry. My father went out to a shoe factory outlet or something like that and found a pair of shoes that looked almost exactly like the team shoe. He made this great effort to find these shoes, and he must've been so proud. I remember being in the car with him when he gave them to me, and I noticed that they were different, and I was a little ashamed. When I look back now, I see it was just a stupid pair of shoes. But I cried about that. I think about what that experience must've been like for him and how frustrating it must've been to feel like he was a constraint on me. Reliving those things makes me have a more realistic view of what his sacrifices were. He always did the best he could.



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach is the author of "The Boy is Gone" and "Running with Raven" (Kensington Press, May 2017). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.
