



# Heart of Ice

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## About the Project by Claire O'Reilly

Every Monday morning in the first grade, we had to journal about our weekends in our black and white marble composition books. The weekend I went to my first Rochester Americans hockey game, I couldn't wait to sit in my desk the following Monday morning and pick up my pencil. I had fallen in love.

The fast pace of the game, trying to keep up with the puck and the size of players had my 7-year-old self in awe.

Fifteen years later, I still feel that awe.

I was raised a hockey fan and the sport came to mean a lot to me. Some of my favorite memories include going to Sabres, Amerks or high school games with my family and friends. I feel the same way walking into a rink now that I did back in first grade.

This mini publication takes a look at what it means to be a player, the connections that fans feel to the game and what it's like to grow up in a hockey city and become a reporter.

Cover photo taken in the KeyBank Center in Buffalo, New York/Claire O'Reilly

## 'It has become mine and my mom's thing – and nothing can really beat that'

Mother and daughter bond through hockey

**S**unday afternoons spent tailgating in Orchard Park or nursing a beer behind the glass in the KeyBank Center on a Friday night are far from uncommon activities for Kathleen Bates and her daughter, Kelly Bates.

As season ticket holders for the Bills, the Sabres and the Rochester Americans, the pair has spent the past few years growing closer through sports.

"It has become mine and my mom's thing — and nothing can really beat that," said Kelly. "When I was away at school at Fredonia and [the University at Buffalo], it was a nice way to be able to see each other during the week."

Kathleen shares a similar sentiment.

"Every time we attend a game together, it is making memories," she said.

Kathleen became a hockey fan at a young age and the passion for the sport was passed down to the next generation.

"When I was younger, my parents brought us to a bunch of Sabres and Amerks events. I quickly fell in love," said Kelly. Kelly's first time at a Sabres game was also memorable for her mom.

"While taking my daughter to her first game, Drew Stafford had a hat trick — my first one I witnessed," said Kathleen.

This past season, watching Jack Eichel christen the KeyBank Center with his first hat trick also ranked high on the list of Kathleen's favorite memories.

Of all of the memories, though, one in particular stands out for Kelly.

"... Just about seven years ago I was at the last Sabres playoff



**(Top) Kathleen Bates (far left) and Kelly Bates (far right) pose with Sabres alumni Jason Woolley (Bottom) Kathleen and Kelly Bates attend a Sabres game / Courtesy of Kelly Bates**

game [they've] played. My mom and I chose to attend the game seven against the Flyers. It was on Easter, so we skipped our family party for it," she said. "Even though they lost, it was such an exciting experience. It was also the first time I met Rob Ray."

For both Kelly and Kathleen, Dominik Hasek was an important

player.

"Dominik Hasek was my first favorite player," said Kelly.

"In the [old] days, the best part about attending a live game was sitting at the end of the arena where Hasek was in goal," said Kathleen. "Watching him was [worth] the price of admission."

For Kelly, the "thrill of rebuilding" has been an exciting movement to witness.

"The Sabres and One Buffalo staff [have] put a lot of effort into reforming the organization as an attempt to bring in fans," she said.

Kathleen had her reasons for becoming a season ticket holder. "During the 1998-1999 season when the Sabres went to the Stanley Cup Finals, I waited in line overnight at Tops Market in Hamlin to get tickets. They sold out just before it was my turn to purchase," she said. "Being a season ticket holder would guarantee me tickets to playoff games. I am still waiting ..."

Gaining season ticket holder status wasn't all that easy. Kathleen was on the waiting list for years before finally getting her seats three years ago. The long process, and the undying

hope that maybe, just maybe, the next year might bring with it a better season, makes it difficult

to give the tickets up — despite how terrible the Sabres may be.

As for Kathleen's thoughts on how the Sabres could possibly improve as a team?

"That is the million dollar question," she said, "I wish I had the answer."

## '[Hockey is] anything and everything I know'

Max Blitz, Fredonia hockey player, lives for the sport

**W**hat started out as a couple games of street hockey in his childhood neighborhood turned into years of lacing up skates and heading out on the ice.

"When I was younger my next-door neighbors used to play hockey in the street and I'd always watch them," said Max Blitz, a Fredonia defenseman from Chino Hills, California. "One day they let me play with them and then they got me a stick and some rollerblades, and I kind of didn't look back from there."

Some of the best parts of the sport, for Blitz, have happened alongside teammates.

"Going to hockey tournaments when I was younger, being around my buddies and screwing around in the

hotels, and then playing juniors when we're all on our own and we lived together," he said. "The bus trips — those were pretty fun ... just being with all the boys all the time."

As for any stories about the "screwing around"?

"[There's] probably none that you can document," he said, laughing.

Aside from the bus trips, the hotel rooms and the buddies, hockey is a cathartic outlet for Blitz.

"It's anything and everything I know," he said. "I've been doing it since I was 4 years old, so it's like my release. If I have a bad day, [I] just go beat somebody up or — I don't know — it's just my source of where I can let all my energy out. And I love doing it."

Blitz's love for the game is obvious, especially when you look at all of the hard work that he, along with the rest of the team, puts in to play at this level.

"I mean, we get back here in August and right when we get to school we're practicing, lifting — everything. Even in the summers, once we're done with the season, we have about a week off and then

we start lifting again," he said. "We don't have to stay here, but we have to train every day. It's pretty much like a 365-day job. Obviously we take days off here and there, but it's pretty much like a job."

The weather in Western New York is wildly different from that of the sunny west coast, and the sporting culture is equally as different.

"Hockey out here is way more popular than it is back home, which is really cool. Playing hockey is something mostly everyone here has done, or tried," said Blitz. "Hockey back home? It's like 'Oh, you play hockey? Woah,' which is cool, but at the same time, people don't know what you're talking about. You tell people here you played juniors, and they're like, 'oh, yeah, I know what you're talking about.' Back home,



**Max Blitz (#23) warms up for the Fredonia men's hockey Stroke Awareness game/ Courtesy of Max Blitz**

it's like 'oh, what's that?' I like being back here and playing hockey, it's very different."

Despite how nice it is to play hockey in a region that understands and respects the sport, playing so far away from home can sometimes be difficult.

"My family obviously doesn't see all the games I'm playing in in person, which is a bummer, but they can watch online," said Blitz. "I know a lot of my friends from home are trying to come out and see me play before I graduate, which is tough, obviously, because it's far and expensive ..."

Family ties close by in Ohio and a younger sister committed to Niagara University next year to play volleyball, though, make the distance a little easier.

Playing at the college level was always in Blitz's plans.

"When you're about 15 or 16, that's when it really starts to ramp up. Either you're picked to play hockey or you go try something else," he said. "When I was 14, I was like, 'this is what I want to do,' and I set a goal to go play juniors and then eventually college, which fortunately I was able to achieve."

He was drawn to Fredonia by former teammates and it ended up becoming home.

"Three of my really good buddies from juniors go here, and so I was like, 'I'd love to go play hockey with them for three, four years, whatever it may be.' I came here, [and] I really liked the school," he said. "I just liked everyone here, they made me feel really welcomed, and I love the coaches. I came here to see a couple games, and I was like, 'this is where I want to be.'"

Even after his time on the Steele Hall ice comes to an end, Blitz has no plans to stop playing.

"I hope to play professionally somewhere, whether it's here in the United States or overseas in Europe somewhere. Hopefully I'm good enough to do that and stay healthy."

Hockey is about more than just the goals, the ice time, the checks or the power plays. The bonds formed run deep.

After the tragic events that occurred in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, that bond was felt in hockey communities across the United States and Canada.

When the bus carrying the Humboldt Broncos junior hockey team collided with a tractor-trailer at an intersection, 16 players and coaches lost their lives. It hit home for hockey players everywhere, including Blitz.

"Actually, what happened to Humboldt hit close to me because I traveled right out there when I was 15, and I made some buddies that I still talk to. [My buddy] sent me one of these [Humboldt Strong] bracelets. I texted him the next morning and he was like, 'I never thought I'd get a text message that my best friends died,'" he said. "It was pretty — it hit close to home. I was shaken

up about it for about a week. Obviously it hits home because I've been on thousands of bus trips and it's like that could've happened to anybody, any one of us."

Blitz referred to the hockey community as a family. "You obviously make memories and friendships," he said. "Most of these guys I'm playing college with now are gonna be in my wedding and probably [be] the friends I'll be with for the rest of my life."



**Blitz is a sophomore on the Fredonia men's team/Courtesy of Max Blitz**



**Blitz plays in the Jewish Olympics in Jerusalem, Israel/Courtesy of Max Blitz**

# 'There's artistry in hockey'

Mike Harrington of The Buffalo News discusses the game

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**T**he year is 1971 and Gilbert Perreault, Gerry Meehan and Phil Goyette take the ice at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium dressed in Sabres sweaters. Six-year-old Mike Harrington takes his seat in the stands and gets ready to witness his first hockey game, unaware that the sport would one day become his job.

"The background to it is I'm from Buffalo ... So I've always watched hockey, always followed hockey," said Harrington. "But I worked for The Buffalo News for 19 years before I covered hockey."

Spending years covering high schools, college basketball and baseball, it wasn't until 2007 that Harrington started covering hockey.

"When the Sabres went to the Conference Final in '06 and '07, we needed [four-to-five] people to cover Sabres games. So I said to [The Buffalo News], 'hey' — and I said it just as a way to see the games, really — 'you need someone to [cover] the Ducks' locker room sidebar and have your fifth guy there,'" he said. "I'll do it."

In a hotel room in Cleveland, one phone call made it a permanent gig.

"I was ... getting ready to cover an Indians game and the phone rings and the executive sports editor is like, 'Hey, we want you to cover hockey this year,' and I'm like, 'Really? We can talk about that next week.' [He says], 'No, we're gonna have a conference call in two hours.' I said, 'What?' And he says, 'Yeah, we're gonna have a conference call in two hours with Howard.' Howard [Smith] was the managing editor," he said. "Basically, it was decided for me."

Harrington's coverage isn't limited to just the Sabres, though.

"I've been able to do other things," he said. "I've been able to do the Cup final, I've done the World Juniors championship, I've done the World Cup of Hockey — that was great to cover. [I've done] All-Star games."

One memory stands out in particular.

"The singular best thing that I've done that freaked me out was a year ago. [It was] January in L.A. at the All-Star game when they unveiled the 'NHL 100.' We watched that show from an adjacent building. At the end of the show, they took us over to the theatre and we got to go on the

stage after they signed off and interview who we wanted to. And thank God I needed to interview Perreault, Hasek and LaFontaine," he said. "I'm glad I just had to worry about them because I would have freaked out about who to interview ... you turn to your left [and] there's Larry Robinson, there's Marcel Dionne, there's Peter Forsberg, there's Borje Salming, there's Niklas Lidstrom, Billy Smith and Phil Esposito. It was like a 'who's who of hockey' standing on the stage, and you could just walk up to any of them.

"... I said to the Sabres [public relations], 'I need to get these guys together.' So I got an iPhone picture of Hasek, Perreault and LaFontaine that we used on the front page of the paper and all over our website. I was standing 5 feet away from talking to all of them," he continued. "And that, to me, is a singular moment that'll never happen again no matter how many games I cover."

Walking on the ice and interviewing anyone after the Stanley Cup is won isn't too bad a job either.

"Keep in mind, when you cover the final, the other thing that's really wicked [is] the last

game of the final when the team wins the Stanley Cup, the locker room is closed. You do all the interviews on the ice," he said. "After the Cup is passed around and the players form around the cup for the picture, they open the ice ... you get to just walk around the ice and do interviews."

This year, Harrington began working on an oral history of the Winter Classic game held in Buffalo in 2008. The Sabres lost to the Pittsburgh Penguins in a shootout 2-1, the game winning goal scored by none other than Sidney Crosby.

"Over the course of the year, I hooked up with Ryan Miller in Anaheim, I hooked up with Brian Campbell in Chicago. And then I called the Penguins, and I said, 'I need Sid.' [Crosby] will do any interview, but the Penguins really go through [his] requests ..." he said. "... [They] said, 'Here's the deal, we're gonna do the best we can. You need to be in our locker room after the morning skate.'"

Harrington only needed a few minutes.



Courtesy of 97rock.com

“So I go over to the other side of the locker room by the cooler with the Monster drinks and there’s Sid standing there. [We] talked for literally six, seven minutes. I mean, can you write an oral history of the 2008 Winter Classic without Sidney Crosby? You can’t do it. He stood there and answered every question, and he was super about it like he always is,” he said. “Those are the kinds of experiences you just don’t ever forget. I don’t ever take it for granted.”

In 2010, soon after the Vancouver Olympics, Harrington found himself in the middle of Rockefeller Plaza in New York City standing mere feet away from Matt Lauer and Al Roker.

“I covered the Sabres game in Madison Square Garden and I find out the next day, during the game [that] Sunday night, [that] Monday morning Ryan Miller is going to be on The Today Show. I’m like, ‘Oh, well, I’m in New York, so I guess I’m following Ryan Miller,’” he said. “... We got an entire story on our website by like 9:30 that morning. You know, you never thought you’d be standing there with Ryan Miller on The Today Show. You don’t expect stuff like that ever. That’s something that’s unusual.”

Hockey players make a reporter’s job easy.

“It’s a great sport for [reporters] because, for the most part, the players are so cooperative and so respectful. It’s way, way, way better than covering baseball, and I’ve covered 18 World Series. I would cover the Stanley Cup final over the World Series any day of the week,” said Harrington. “You cannot imagine what it’s like talking to a superstar like Sidney Crosby, or Steven Stamkos, who, literally, their [public relations] people almost have to pull them away from the media. They will just sit there and talk, and talk, and talk to anyone who has a question. It’s really remarkable the way some guys in hockey are.”

Harrington commented on what makes the sport of hockey so incredible.

“I like the speed, I like the intensity. Think about how difficult it is to play hockey. You have to skate. Think about what they do on the ice on skates,” he said. “This isn’t basketball where everybody has a pair of sneakers. This isn’t baseball. It’s hard to hit a baseball, but a lot of people can do it. I can do it to a certain degree. Think about what these guys do. There’s artistry in hockey. I know there’s artistry when LeBron [James] goes up for a dunk or whatever, but the artistry in hockey at times is just

off the charts.

“But then at the same time, it’s almost like they’re in a cage with the glass, and the physicality of it and the checking and the fans screaming,” he continued. “... You go to some of these rinks, and you can’t have a conversation in the press box with the person standing next to you. It’s so loud. In a place like Winnipeg, in a place like Calgary, some of these places are amazing to watch games in. You can feel that intensity and that emotion. It’s pretty awesome.”



Courtesy of Firkin/Creative Commons

**“... ‘Think about how difficult it is to play hockey. You have to skate. Think about what they do on the ice on skates,’ said Mike Harrington.”**

# 'Hockey defines [Buffalo]'

'Every fan has a story'

**G**rowing up in the town of Eden, roughly 30 minutes south of the city of Buffalo, Eric Wojtanik had always been exposed to hockey.

"Growing up in the suburbs of Buffalo ... everyone is a fan," said Wojtanik.

While on the SUNY Oswego campus as a junior, Wojtanik heard about a Sabres fan documentary — the rest is history.

"After an extensive casting process, thirteen Buffalo Sabres' fans agreed to share their lives with this documentary. For several years, these fans allowed a camera to be part of their everyday lives; capturing Sabres games, hospital stays and everything in between," the documentary website states. "When not filming fans, the director filmed events, places, and the people of Buffalo as the city took steps to emerge from years of decline."

Filming for the movie allowed Wojtanik, a producer of "The Fan Connection," and director/producer Mary Wall a glimpse into what it means to be a hockey fan — specifically a Buffalo Sabres fan.

In a place where backyard rinks and street hockey are common in many Buffalo neighborhoods, "hockey defines the city," said Wojtanik.

The sport has an intimate relationship with its fans. A personal connection to hockey can be felt in all of the stories Wojtanik and Wall tell. Sometimes, those connections are deeply emotional.

For a mother and daughter, hockey keeps the memory of their husband/father alive. He was a huge Sabres fan before losing his life to a sudden illness a few years before Wall and Wojtanik started filming.

"It was very important to the mother in this particular instance to raise her daughter as a Sabres fan because she

felt like it would help her have a connection to her dad who was no longer with them," said Wojtanik. "To sit in his seats and to wear his hockey jerseys — that [gave them] that connection."

When the mother and daughter were getting ready to sell some things at a garage sale, digging through the past



Courtesy of Eric Wojtanik

uncovered priceless treasure.

"There was signed stuff, pictures of him with different players. They found this hockey stick that was signed by ... some of the most iconic names in the franchise's history: the French Connection and Tim Horton, Danny Gare, all the fan favorites," said Wojtanik. "... It helps sort of keep his memory alive for them and for his family and friends."

That, for Wojtanik, is what sports is all about.

"You go to the games, you have these experiences and these memories and that's something for you to look back upon positively, usually no matter what the outcome of the game is, later in your life," he said.

**"It was very important to the mother in this particular instance to raise her daughter as a Sabres fan because she felt like it would help her have a connection to her dad ...' said Eric Wojtanik"**



In a similar story, another fan also connects to her late parents through the sport.

“She lost both of her parents within a year of each other to various illnesses and unexpected [health related] accidents,” said Wojtanik. “This happened when she was a junior in high school. That’s pretty early in life to lose both of your parents and to go the rest of your life without them.

“Early on in her story, at the time we started following her, she was working for the Sabres as an intern in their [public relations] department. It was very important to her to get a job with the Sabres after she graduated college because her father was a huge Sabres fan,” he continued. “She wanted to maintain that connection with him.”

While her father was a hockey fan, her mother was very involved in social engagement and activism. When she was in grad school, she decided that the Sabres will always mean a lot to her, but she wanted to get involved with helping the underprivileged neighborhoods in the east and west sides of the city of Buffalo.

“Each milestone for her, when she talks about [them] ... you can tell how much it means to her to be able to honor her parents who are no longer with her and sort of carry on the life and legacy that they wanted for her,” said Wojtanik. “She’s able to do that in her own way, but at the same time being involved in things that they were both interested in.”

For one fan in a wheelchair, hockey allowed him to just be a typical kid.

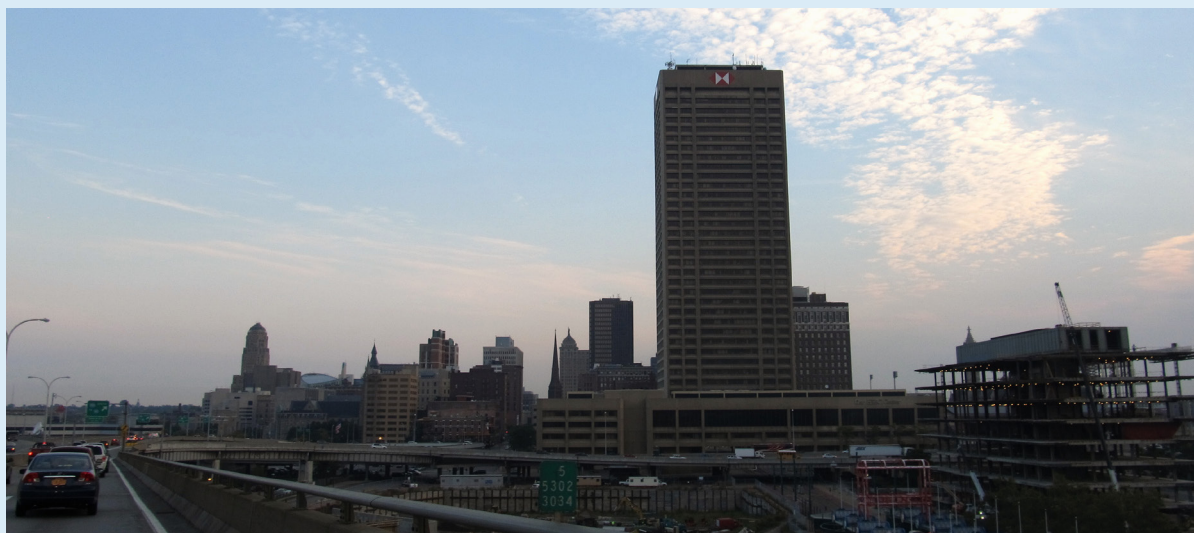
“He went to a SABAH (Spirited Athletes Bold at Heart) event that the Sabres were hosting. [It was] sort of a skate around with some of the players ... giving the children in SABAH an opportunity to meet the players, get autographs and skate with them on the KeyBank Center ice. [He] went to this event and, unlike a lot of

the other children with disabilities, he can’t ever leave his wheelchair,” said Wojtanik. “He wasn’t going to be able to go out on the ice like everybody else — or at least that’s what he was told.”

While he was standing over by the zamboni doors watching everyone else skate on the ice and meet the players, members of the Sabres organization approached him.

“[They asked], ‘What’s he doing off on the side? Why isn’t he on the ice?’ and they said, ‘Well, he can’t get his chair on the ice. He was told that they’re worried about the ice.’ There was actually a barrier, like a lip, that his chair physically couldn’t have gotten over even if he was allowed to go out there. The guys in the organization just looked at each other and said, ‘No, it’s fine,’” said Wojtanik. “So they picked up his wheelchair and put him out on the ice. It just an immediate 180 change in emotion for him — it was incredible. He just sliding around on the ice, intentionally crashing into the boards and stuff, just being a typical 10-11-12-year-old kid ... he got to meet all the players that were there and have a really special day.”

**“For one fan in a wheelchair, hockey allowed him to just be a typical kid.”**



Panorama of Buffalo, New York/Courtesy of Ken Lund

With all of the emotional stories come the eccentric ones, too.

“The closest [the Sabres] came to making the playoffs over the time we were filming was the first year we were filming. I think that was when they were eliminated with about two games to go in the regular season. But leading up to that, we had one of our participants [growing] a ‘pre-playoff’ beard,” said Wojtanik. “Most people grow it once you make the playoffs, but this person started his playoff beard about two months early and then intended to shave it once they made the playoffs and then regrow it again once the playoffs started.”

That wasn’t this fan’s only ritual, though.

“He went to Canisius College so whenever he goes to a game, he has season tickets, he has to wear a

Canisius College t-shirt underneath one of his Sabres jerseys. He has to listen to a certain song on his trip over to the arena, [but] off the top of my head I can’t recall it,” said Wojtanik. “Back in the 2006-2007 season, the Sabres were in a playoff series with the New York Rangers and Chris Drury scored this goal to tie the game with like 6.7 seconds left to go. So before he leaves for every Sabres game, he watches that goal on YouTube maybe six or seven times in a row and then he leaves for the game.”

Wojtanik believes these rituals make the fans believe that they have some sort of control over the game.

“[They think], ‘If I wear that t-shirt under my jersey, if I watch that highlight, then they’ll win because the last time I did that they won.’ It’s an interesting sort of psychological experience for sure,” he said.

**“Back in the 2006-2007 season, the Sabres were in a playoff series with the New York Rangers and Chris Drury scored this goal to tie the game with like 6.7 seconds left to go. So before [the fan] leaves for every Sabres game, he watches that goal on YouTube maybe six or seven times in a row ...’ said Wojtanik”**

Another guy they interviewed proves that not all Sabres fans hail from Buffalo.

“This person is a Sabres fan, but he’s from somewhere in Canada,” said Wojtanik. “He makes the three-to-five hour drive because he has season tickets ... depending on how backed up the Peace Bridge is.”

During the 2011-2012 season, Wall was following him at a particularly important game for the Sabres.

“It was basically an elimination game against Toronto, which you know is a big rival, and the Sabres were in the playoff hunt. They were right on the fringes of making it and Toronto was doing very poorly that year, towards the bottom of the league,” said Wojtanik.

The game wasn’t going well, but Buffalo started to come back and the Sabres ended up winning.

“... Just the reactions of everybody around him on

“It’s genuine, intimate human contact with essentially a complete stranger,” he continued. “You get wrapped up in the moment — that’s the cool thing about sports for a fan.”

When you get down to it, hockey has the power to unite people.

“The highs can be really high and it doesn’t really matter who you share them with. Whoever you share it with in that moment is special for everybody,” said Wojtanik. “It crosses racial barriers and ethnicities and politics and anything that might be a contention point once you leave the arena.

“For the two hours of that game, [all of that]



**Courtesy of Eric Wojtanik**

camera is incredible. Strangers hugging strangers. At one point, there’s a woman sitting next to him who’s certainly elderly. I’d place her somewhere in her late 70s probably, and she just turns and tackles the person that Mary was filming and just bear hugs [him]. There’s so much happiness and joy and they don’t even really know each other.”

sort of goes out the window, and you’re just experiencing this shared thrill, or disappointment I guess, but hopefully it’s a thrill.”



