A Protégé's Story

DREAMS DIE HARD

By David Harris.
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By JOE KLEIN

ALLARD K. LOWENSTEIN was a sad and compelling man who hurtled through life as though someone were chasing him. He seemed to be everywhere in the 1960's, in the midst of the civil-rights and antiwar movements, dashing from campus to campus, organizing committees, creating a network of young idealists whom he inspired and, almost inevitably, alienated. One of his protégés was Dennis Sweeney, who walked into Mr. Lowenstein's New York law office on March 14, 1980, and shot him five times in the chest. Another was David Harris, who wrote this book.

"Fifteen years later, I have no choice but to look back at us across much accumulated cynicism," Mr. Harris writes. "Nothing is simple anymore, so it is hard not to be embarrassed by how simple it all seemed then. Such embarrassment is a disservice to the memory." Unfortunately, Mr. Harris never manages to transcend his cynicism or embarrassment. There is a persistent undercurrent of resentment — especially toward Mr. Lowenstein — that makes "Dreams Die Hard" a distinctly unpleasant piece of work. This is not to say that Mr. Harris has written a hatchet job, although some of Mr. Lowenstein's friends — a particularly ardent crew — may see it that way. Indeed, if Mr. Harris has taken an ax to anything, it is to the memory of his own youthful fervor and, more, to the spirit of the 1960's itself.

By the time Dennis Sweeney and David Harris met Allard Lowenstein at Stanford University in the early 1960's (where Lowenstein was briefly a dean), he was already being described as "the world's oldest student leader." He'd been crusading about the country for more than a decade, spreading the gospel of traditional liberalism as preached by his idols: Eleanor Roosevelt, Norman Thomas and Dr. Frank Graham, president of the University of North Carolina, his alma mater. "Over the years, Allard took a thousand similarly positioned young men under his wing," Mr. Harris writes. "They . . . revered Allard and accompanied him on his various errands for change. They waited for him to arrive, drove him around and were generally available to be thrown into some political breach."

Inspired by Mr. Lowenstein, Dennis Sweeney became a civil-rights worker in Mississippi and David Harris became a campus antiwar activist whose highly principled stand against the military draft eventually led to his imprisonment. Both men soured on Mr. Lowenstein rather quickly, though, finding there was a darker side to membership in his coterie: "Being sent to man the ramparts when Allard was under some 'unwarranted' and 'vicious personal attack' smacking of 'betrayal' was always a central protégé function," Mr. Harris adds with ill-concealed bitterness. Apparently another function was to deal with their mentor's late-night physical advances, as both Mr. Harris and Mr. Sweeney did.

It would be easy to dismiss the resentment that permeates this book as the consequence of an embarrassing moment in a California motel room, but that seems not to be the case: Allard Lowenstein's muddled sexuality is one area that Mr. Harris handles with sensitivity and compassion. He claims to have spoken with other young men — none are identified — who found themselves being hugged by Mr. Lowenstein in similar circumstances: "He left these men with the

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sense that his impulse wasn't so much genital as a desire to hold and be held." In Mr. Harris's case, the contact ended abruptly when he said he was uncomfortable: "On the one hand, I felt totally used and my hero worship ended on the spot. . . . On the other hand, . . . his hugging possessed a childlike desperation I'd never seen in him before. . . . As I lay awake, trying to figure out what had happened, my only clear, unconfused response was that I did not want to hurt him."

Mr. Harris also has a good deal of sympathy for Dennis Sweeney, who emerged from his Mississippi experience disheartened and gradually drifted into isolation and paranoia. He and Mr. Harris lived together in a commune for a time, organizing against the draft and experimenting with various drugs, but their friendship ended when Mr. Harris married the singer Joan Baez and Mr. Sweeney decided that he had "sold out." Dennis Sweeney went on to make unsuccessful stabs at being a musician, a film maker and a carpenter. Soon he began to hear voices that, he was convinced, were being broadcast into his brain through a C.I.A.-implanted transmitter. The voice he heard most consistently was that of Allard Lowenstein. After murdering Mr. Lowenstein, Mr. Sweeney waited in the office for the police to arrest him. He was subsequently judged insane and committed to the New York State mental-health system.

In the end, Dennis Sweeney is described by a friend as the "flotsam of a failed revolution." Someone else also describes Mr. Lowenstein as a piece of "flotsam," drifting through the 1970's in search of a cause — which is probably too harsh a judgment on a man who ran successfully for Congress, served as part of the Carter Administration's U.N. delegation and was an effective political operative in Senator Edward M.

From left, Allard Lowenstein, 1961; David Harris, 1963; Dennis Sweeney, 1961.

Kennedy's 1980 Presidential campaign.

Mr. Harris, meanwhile, has settled into a second marriage and a career as a magazine writer. He is no doubt correct in sensing that there was symbolic resonance in the assassination of Allard Lowenstein, but this remains a cold, unsatisfying book. The characters — compelling as Mr. Harris says they are — are cardboard statues seen through a scrim. Mr. Sweeney is always distant, quiet, elusive; Mr. Lowenstein is manipulative or pathetic; and Mr. Harris has made himself seem pompously naïve. There is a tinge of self-hatred here, in addition to the admitted "cynicism" and "embarrassment."

And what, finally, is the source of his bitterness? One suspects Mr. Harris is still recovering from the realization that the dream he borrowed from Mr. Lowenstein — a just society where "one man can make a difference" — was only a dream. Having tried to make it work in the 1960's, Mr. Harris apparently has abandoned it now. His attitude is reminiscent of the former Communists who emerged as neoconservatives in the 1950's and after, furiously denouncing their own youthful follies. Mr. Harris makes no such ideological pronouncements, though. He is very much a man of his generation, so his hurt seems more personal than political. The description of his marriage to Joan Baez is particularly telling: There are no fond memories. In fact, at one point, Mr. Harris *agrees* with Dennis Sweeney's assessment — that the marriage was just an "ego trip," a sellout: "Ten years after it ended, David Harris's romance with Joan Baez is, for me, indistinguishable from the politics of the moment. We were public creatures. Sweet-voiced heroine of a generation joins with young knight advancing the battle for peace in our time. Without the intoxication of those roles and the image they fostered, I doubt whether the relationship would ever have come off."

But, more important, he seems unwilling to acknowledge that, despite the rampant naïveté and extremism of the times, some beauty and *justice* emerged from the crusades of the 1960's, from Allard Lowenstein's life and even from his own. The notion of creating a world where perfect justice reigns may be youthful folly; but fighting against injustice, as both Mr. Harris and Mr. Lowenstein did, should be good for some nostalgic satisfaction, and it is sad that apparently, for David Harris, it is not. ■