Not just a regular Joe
by Mary Boone

The man whose name is on Harned Hall has never been one to let a little hard work get in the way of making things better.

GETTING H.C. “JOE” HARNED ’51 TO SIT down for this interview wasn’t easy; at age 89, he’s got a schedule that would exhaust most folks half his age. He postponed our meeting once because he’d been asked to toss out the first pitch at a Tacoma Rainiers game and needed to warm up his arm—by hurling apples at deer who dared to enter his garden.

Harned says that the 100-by-20-foot garden at his Puyallup, Wash., home is his therapy; he does all the work by hand. “it keeps me in shape,” he says, flexing well-defined biceps to prove his point. “i have a Rototiller, but i just start it up once in a while to make sure it still works.”

When we finally did catch up with him, Harned had just returned from an Alaska fishing trip; he and his pals had trekked to a spot so remote it took three planes to get back home. He apologized for being so elusive and repented by offering this writer a king salmon fillet and six enormous tomatoes from his garden. the man has as much charm as he does energy—and he has a lot of energy, always has.

Harned, the third of five boys, was born and raised in southwest Pennsylvania’s Turkeyfoot Valley. An economically depressed logging region, people there looked to baseball for diversion and inspiration, and the Harneds were no exception. Family legend has it that when Joe was born—in the midst of the 1917 playoffs—his mother took one look at him and declared: “Looks like a homer to me.” And so the baby became Homer Cameron Harned.

“that was a time and a place when all the boys had names like John or James, so I stuck out like a sore thumb,” says Harned. He went by the unusual moniker until the 1930s, when his military buddies nicknamed him “Joe.”

“i’ve been ‘Joe’ since the Navy. I think it suits me better,” he says.

As Harned recalls his childhood, it’s easy to see his name wasn’t the only uncommon thing about him.

“My family was poor, everybody was, but i don’t think i realized then just how impoverished we were,” he says. “i was thrifty before i knew what thrifty was.”

Early on, Harned understood he’d have to pay for any “extras” he wanted: ice skates, a shotgun, ammunition, baseball gloves. As a 6- or 7-year-old, he started his own business, selling seeds. He’d take orders from neighbors, send away for the seeds, package and deliver orders, and net a small profit for his efforts. When the circus came to town, he sold popcorn. Using a burlap bag as a net, he seined minnows to sell to bass fishermen. He hunted to help put meat on the table and got up early to pick wild strawberries or blackberries.

“I’d pick berries for a couple hours and i was happy if i could sell them for 10 cents a quart,” he says. “i worked hard but, even then, i knew hard work was the only way to get what i wanted out of life.”

Harned left his hometown of Ursina, Pa., in 1934, when he was just 17.

“I worked eight hours on and eight hours off and i took all the hours i could get,” Harned says. “They had me so ragged i could barely stand.”

After three years with the railroad, Harned enlisted in the U.S. Navy before he could be drafted. “i’d never been on a ship, but i knew my two years of college qualified me for pilot training, and i had it in my mind that was what I was going to do.”

Harned began boot camp expecting to get a call to go to pilot school. Instead, he found himself on an aircraft carrier headed from Norfolk, Va., to San Francisco by way of the Panama Canal. Though commanders shared little intelligence with the crew, it didn’t take long before Harned realized his military career would involve the battles children now study in history class.

“We didn’t know it at the time, but the United States had broken the Japanese code and my carrier and four or five destroyers and cruisers were headed to Midway to try to stop...
the Japanese invasion," he says. "It was a horrible time; my ship lost all but four of our 24 torpedo planes. But it wasn't the sort of thing we could sit and feel bad about. We just kept going as well as we could."

Following the Battle of Midway, Harned's carrier docked at Pearl Harbor—just months after the Oahu shipyard was attacked—to pick up a new batch of Marine fighter planes before heading to the Solomon Islands. His ship was involved in a brutally hard air-sea-land campaign for possession of the previously obscure island of Guadalcanal. Some six decades later, Harned wants to be sure readers know the squadron from his carrier was the first to land at Guadalcanal's Henderson Field. The war was a long time ago, but his patriotism has not waned.

"I was lucky—I've been lucky all my life," he says. "So many of the fellows I served with didn't make it, or they were injured. I spent three years on board that ship. It was tiring work, but I feel lucky to be here to talk about it."

Harned spent his last six months of military service in Tacoma, testing catapults at a Navy shipyard on the tide flats. He was discharged in August 1945 and headed straight to Tacoma's employment office to apply for the best-paying job he could find: cutting meat at Madigan Army Hospital for $1.50 an hour.

Harned and his new wife, Vida, whom he'd met at Roanoke College, moved to a rental house on Tacoma's South Fawcett Avenue. He saved his cash and soon was able to buy his first property—a duplex for $2,000.

"I thought that was about the smartest thing I could do," he says. "I could live in part of it and get rent for the other half. The only thing that burst my bubble was when the man who sold it to me later told me I probably could have gotten it for $1,500."

After a couple of years at Madigan, Harned had saved enough money to buy a service sta-

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station along Tacoma's Sixth Avenue. He ran the station while attending classes at Puget Sound, earning a business degree in 1951.

"I had a business degree but I also had the experience of growing up out East and understanding the value of land," he says. "I could see a real need for housing back then, so I started buying apartments and houses to rent."

In the mid-1950s, Harned began buying Lincoln Heights real estate near today's Costco and Tacoma Mall. The federal government had constructed the 415 units of Lincoln Heights during World War II, primarily to house shipyard workers who flocked to Tacoma to build naval vessels. After the war, the desirability of those units plummeted, but that didn't stop Harned from seeing their potential.

With some serious cleaning and a bit of carpentry work—much of which he did himself—Harned was able to upgrade the properties he purchased. Those improvements meant he rarely had a problem finding renters. As he sold property in other areas, Harned bought more Lincoln Heights parcels. At one point he owned about three-quarters of the land bounded by South 35th and 38th Streets, Pine Street, and what is now Interstate 5. Colleagues wondered if Harned knew what he was doing; the property, after all, was so rugged that folks were still hunting pheasants on it.

"I saw the potential for growth in that area. I could see the city had only one way to expand and that was south," he says. "Real estate is all about potential—and luck."

In the mid-1980s, some combination of foresight, keen business sense, and luck helped Harned realize his greatest financial success, as he transformed many of his Lincoln Heights holdings into the 85,000 square-foot Lincoln Plaza, General Cinema's Lincoln Plaza, and the site of Tacoma's first Costco.

"I guessed right," he says. "It was an educated guess, but in real estate, it's always a guess. There aren't many sure things."

Harned's two sons, Keith and Lynn, opted not to follow in their father's entrepreneurial footsteps.

"About six or seven years ago, they came to me and said they didn't want to work 10 to 12 hours a day. I respected their decision, but it made me think long and hard about what I was going to do with the business," he says. "I'd always been thrifty, and I made a bit of money and I wanted to do something thoughtful with it. I didn't want to just piddle it away on small things."

In characteristic style, Harned took on the job of philanthropist the way he has everything else, with grit and enthusiasm.

Two years ago he helped dedicate the United Community Church of God, a church he built in Ursina, Pa. He designed the church to include an indoor basketball court so kids in his hometown—population 250—would have something to do.

Harned is also funding the restoration of a community building in Confluence, Pa., which will house the area's museum, library, and tourism office. He's set up scholarships in his hometown, and he's still trying to figure out where he might build a ball diamond for the youth of Ursina.

At Puget Sound he's contributed to the annual fund for more than 30 years, helped fund two scholarships, set up a charitable trust, and of course made the naming gift for Harned Hall.

"Contributing to education is all about potential," he says. "I like to tell myself when I invest in education, I'm investing in the potential of our city and nation, maybe even the world.

"When you get in a position to do some philanthropy, you think it's going to be an easy matter, but it's not," says Harned. "I'm not working 10-hour days anymore, but I'm still working and meeting with people and asking questions. I've never been the kind of guy to wear out the seat of a pair of pants. I don't plan on starting now."

Mary Boone has written for People, Seattle, Running Times, and other magazines. She's the author of eight books for young readers and is currently writing a biography of Venetian painter Antonio Canaletto.