

# Allentown decline chronicled in book by long-ago resident



Author Jory Berkwits, who grew up in Allentown and whose grandfather helped found Phoenix Clothes, stands by the company's old factory in the city. (CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)



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New book sees Allentown through long-ago resident's eyes

I know there are plenty of successful authors from our area — I've written about a few of them — but I've never had five books with local connections on my desk at one time.

I don't fancy myself a book reviewer, so I'll just tell what I can about four of them and then spend the rest of the column explaining how one of them came about.

One is by [David Lubar](#), terrific author of books for kids and young adults. I read his latest, ["Sophomores and Other Oxymorons,"](#) and I loved it.

It isn't just that Lubar has such a deft touch with the kinds of problems teenagers face and helping his characters work through them in a funny way. I also appreciate the positive messages he subtly delivers, among other things making it seem cool to care about our language and have fun with it. There even are some great Grammar Police-style tips in there, delivered entertainingly.

I envision kids who are fans of these books aspiring to be writers themselves, which is a wonderful legacy.

Another on my desk is "A Readable Feast: Sweet, Funny and Strange Tales for Every Taste," the latest collection of short stories by members of the [Bethlehem Writers Group](#). I enjoyed this one, too, and we gave it out as a prize in my version of the just-completed Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. Another of their books, "A Christmas Sampler: Sweet, Funny and Strange Holiday Tales," is a prize in our [fundraising campaign](#) for Second Harvest Food Bank, which continues through Dec. 17. Get me your checks for at least \$25 made out to Second Harvest for a chance to win a guided tour of the area's best holiday displays. Send them to me at The Morning Call, P.O. Box 1260, Allentown, PA 18105.

Two more books by local authors arrived the same day, and I haven't had a chance to read either of them yet, although I promise I will. One is Len Frenkel's ["Will We Survive Climate Change? One Last Chance."](#) The other is David Clark's ["The Direction of Man \(Externalization Theory\)."](#)

The book I decided to focus on today is by someone who never has written a book before and who last lived in the Lehigh Valley in 1962, when he was 15 years old. It was inspired by a disheartening 2010 visit to Allentown with his daughter — "Let's go see where Dad grew up" — and a fourth-grade class photo from Muhlenberg Elementary School.

Jory Berkwits' book, available here only at the Moravian Book Shop and Amazon.com, is called ["My Bittersweet Homecoming."](#) It chronicles his memories and those of his classmates, his impressions of the ways his hometown has changed and case studies of several local businesses and political figures.

Berkwits' family moved to Philadelphia in 1962, and he ended up in boarding school in Massachusetts, college in New York and graduate school on the West Coast. He settled in the Boston area, working for 40 years in the financial services industry.

That 2010 visit, his first in more than 35 years, didn't go the way he had expected. "It was kind of scary," he told me the other day.

He and his daughter, whom he was visiting in Philadelphia, drove downtown, where crews were excavating for what became PPL Arena. "Everything else was pretty grim," he said. "For sale, for rent, adult books, pawn shops. She looked at me, I looked at her. I didn't know what to say."

About a year later, he was watching an NFL game when a player's name triggered a memory of one of his old classmates. He tracked down that fourth grade picture. "Looking at those faces became almost like a spiritual experience," he said.

He decided to share his memories of the Allentown he grew up in and find out what happened. That research project turned out to be more challenging than he expected, but between a couple of decades of online news stories, microfilm of old copies of The Morning Call at the Allentown Public Library and some fascinating interviews, he found much of what he needed.

Berkwits said he's gotten positive reaction to the book, which he finished last June. "A lot of people who lived here discovered things they didn't know," he said.

As a non-native who has been around the Lehigh Valley as a reporter, editor and columnist since the mid- '70s, I can tell you that was true for me. Yes, I already knew quite a bit about Emma Tropiano, who gets her own chapter, since I wrote so often about her. But it still was fun to see her and other city politicians through his eyes. He's a good writer and researcher and his chapters on Hess's and various local industries all offered interesting information and insights. Likewise his examination of efforts to reimagine the city, including the controversial Neighborhood Improvement Zone.

Berkwits tells some great stories in there, which I'll let you discover for yourselves if you get the book. I will tell you that he believes the city's two biggest challenges are drugs and jobs, and that although he told me the same book 10 years ago might have concluded that Allentown was a lost cause, that's not the feeling he gets today, even though he recognizes the divisions and challenges that remain.

"I feel that there is hope," he concluded.

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*Bill White's commentary appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays*

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