

In Canada, Kamala Harris, a Disco-Dancing Teenager, Yearned for Home

Senator Harris spent her adolescent years in Canada. Friends say being a California girl at a multicultural public high school in Montreal helped shape her.



By Dan Bilefsky

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MONTREAL — There were heirs to Canadian fortunes who lived in hillside mansions and arrived at their high school in luxury cars.

There were children of Caribbean immigrants who commuted by bus or subway from a historically Black neighborhood.

There were Anglophones, Francophones and kids from Chinatown.

And then there was Kamala Harris, an extroverted American teenager who had moved to Montreal from California at age 12, dreamed of becoming a lawyer and liked dancing to Diana Ross and Michael Jackson.

Thrown into one of Montreal's most diverse public high schools, the young Ms. Harris — whose father was from Jamaica and mother from India — identified as African-American, her friends from high school recalled. At the same time, they said, she deftly navigated the competing racial and social divisions at the school.

“In high school, you were either in the white or the Black group,” said Wanda Kagan, her best friend from Westmount High School, who had a white mother and an African-American father. “We didn’t fit exactly into either, so we made ourselves fit into both.”

The future senator spent her formative adolescent years in a multicultural environment typical of many Canadian public schools. As she makes history as the first woman of color on a presidential ticket, Canadians have claimed her as a native daughter, seeing her as an embodiment of the country’s progressive politics.



Wanda Kagan, Kamala Harris's best friend from high school, lived with Ms. Harris's family for a time during a difficult period in her adolescence. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

“Joe Biden’s new running mate, Kamala Harris, is a Westmount High graduate,” gushed the CBC, the Canadian national broadcaster. Such is the Kamala mania here that the school has designated an official to field media calls, which have come from across Canada as well as Latin America and Japan.

Some also have a sense that if her ticket wins, it could mend Canada’s fraught ties with a once dependable ally.

“She got educated in her earliest years through a Canadian lens and that was bound to have rubbed off,” said Bruce Heyman, a former ambassador to Canada under President Barack Obama.

Ms. Harris came to Montreal with her sister, Maya, and her mother, Dr. Shyamala Gopalan Harris, a breast cancer researcher who was divorced from the girls’ father, an eminent economist, and moved the family to pursue her career.

Ms. Harris, who was born in 1964, has downplayed her time in Canada amid a racist misinformation campaign that she was not born American. She declined to comment for this article.

But in her memoir, “The Truths We Hold: An American Journey,” she described the culture shock of the move.

“I was 12 years old, and the thought of moving away from sunny California in February, in the middle of the school year, to a French-speaking foreign city covered in 12 feet of snow was distressing,” she wrote.



The area of Westmount in Montreal was home to many of Westmount High's wealthy students. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

“My mother tried to make it sound like an adventure, taking us to buy our first down jackets and mittens, as though we were going to be explorers of the great northern winter,” she wrote. “But it was hard for me to see it that way.”

Her mother initially sent the sisters to a Francophone school. It was a tumultuous time in Quebec, with an ascendant nationalist party and culture wars over language.

“I used to joke that I felt like a duck, because all day long at our new school I’d be saying, ‘Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?’” — What? What? What? — Ms. Harris wrote in her memoir.

At age 13, childhood friends said, Kamala mobilized local children to demonstrate in front of their apartment building because the owner had banned children from playing on the lawn. He backed down.

Eventually the family settled on the top floor of a spacious Victorian home in an affluent neighborhood bordering Westmount, one of Canada’s wealthiest districts.

“It was a comfortable home, with high ceilings, hardwood floors, Persian carpets,” recalled Ms. Kagan, who first met Ms. Harris in eighth grade and lived with her family for a time to escape an abusive stepfather.

In September, Ms. Harris wrote a tweet about her friend’s abuse, saying, “One of the reasons I wanted to be a prosecutor was to protect people like her.”

Westmount High, which counts Leonard Cohen among its alumni, was founded in 1874. Its catchment included not only the moneyed Westmount municipality, but also Little Burgundy — once known as “the Harlem of the North” — whose Black churches, Black community center and storied jazz clubs made it a center for Black culture.



In 1981, Ms. Harris graduated from Westmount High, one of the most diverse high schools in Montreal. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

The school was roughly 60 percent white and 40 percent Black in 1978 to 1981, when Ms. Harris attended it, said Garvin Jeffers, a former principal who then led the math department.

Still, Ms. Kagan said the school's divisions "were more about who had the latest Jordache jeans than about race."

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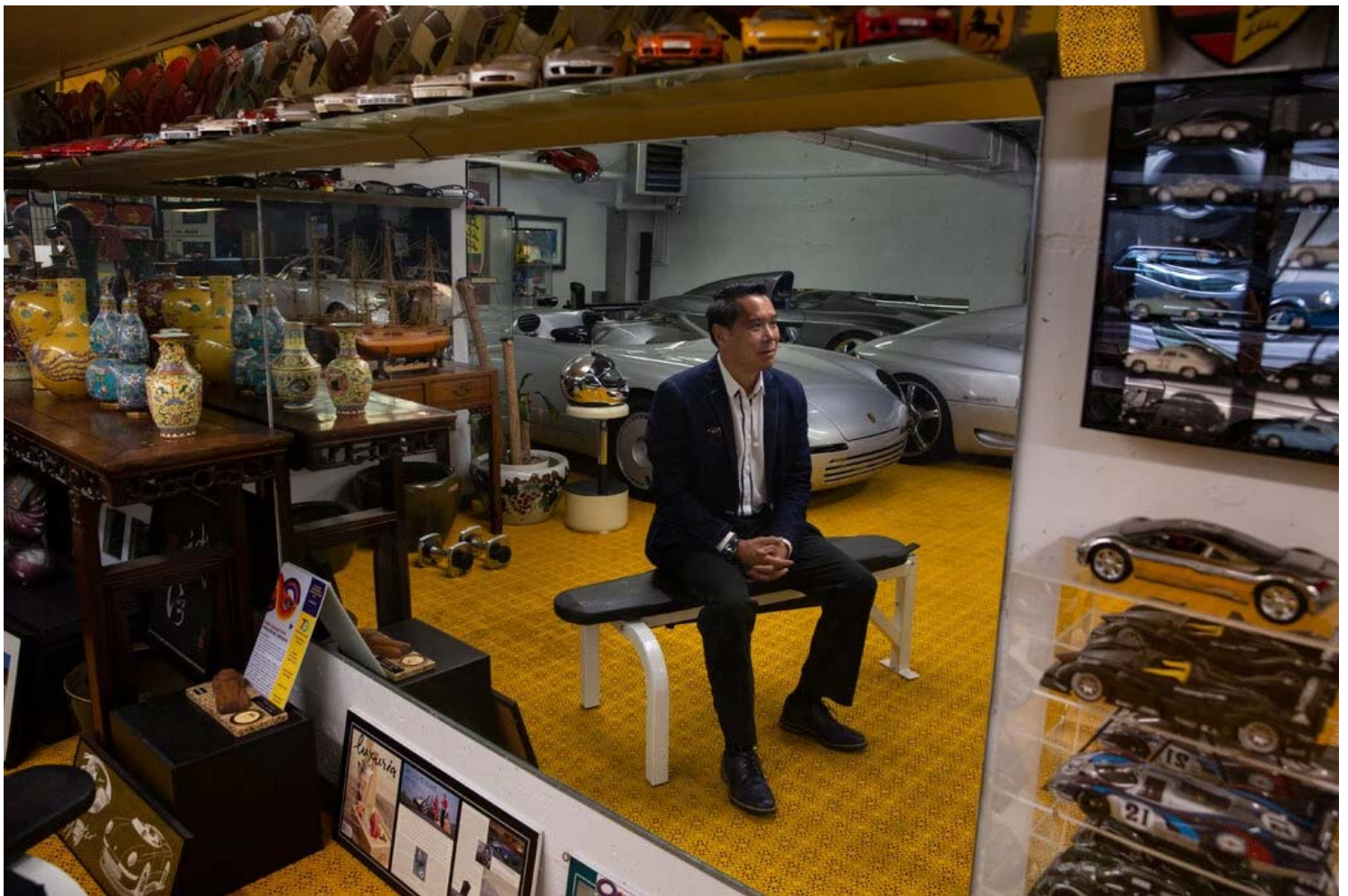
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Ms. Harris straddled the school's diverse worlds, her friends said.

Hugh Kwok, the child of Chinese immigrants, can be seen in a 1981 yearbook photo with Ms. Harris's arm leaning on his shoulder. Ms. Harris, he said, "melted in with everyone."



Hugh Kwok, who has built and repaired Porsches with his father for 40 years, remembers Ms. Harris as a social butterfly. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

Anu Chopra Sharma, who was in Ms. Harris's French and math classes, recalled the two bonding over having Indian names.

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"She said to me, 'You have an Indian name but you don't look Indian,' and I said the same to her," she said.

"You couldn't easily label her," Ms. Sharma added.

Although Ms. Harris mingled widely, Ms. Kagan said "she identified as being African-American." She found belonging in the Black community, and "was drawn to the Little Burgundy kids."

She recalled that she and Ms. Harris attended Black community dance parties and griped about having to be home by 11 p.m.

Above all, she found sisterhood in an all-female dance troupe, Super Six, later Midnight Magic. The girls wore glittering homemade costumes and performed aerobically charged disco moves in front of the school and at homes for the elderly. Ms. Harris was called Angel.



A collection of photographs from Wanda Kagan showing her with Ms. Harris, including when they were in the Super Six dance troupe.

Ms. Kagan said she and Ms. Harris spent long hours rehearsing, inspired by “Solid Gold,” a 1980s pop music television show featuring performers lip-syncing, surrounded by writhing dancers in shiny Lycra.

“We were six girls with big personalities who were every shade of brown and Black, and Kamala could hold her own on the dance floor,” Ms. Kagan said.

Trevor Williams, a former basketball player on the Canadian Olympic team, dated Maya Harris in high school. He recalled Maya as more bookish and shy, and Kamala as more outgoing.

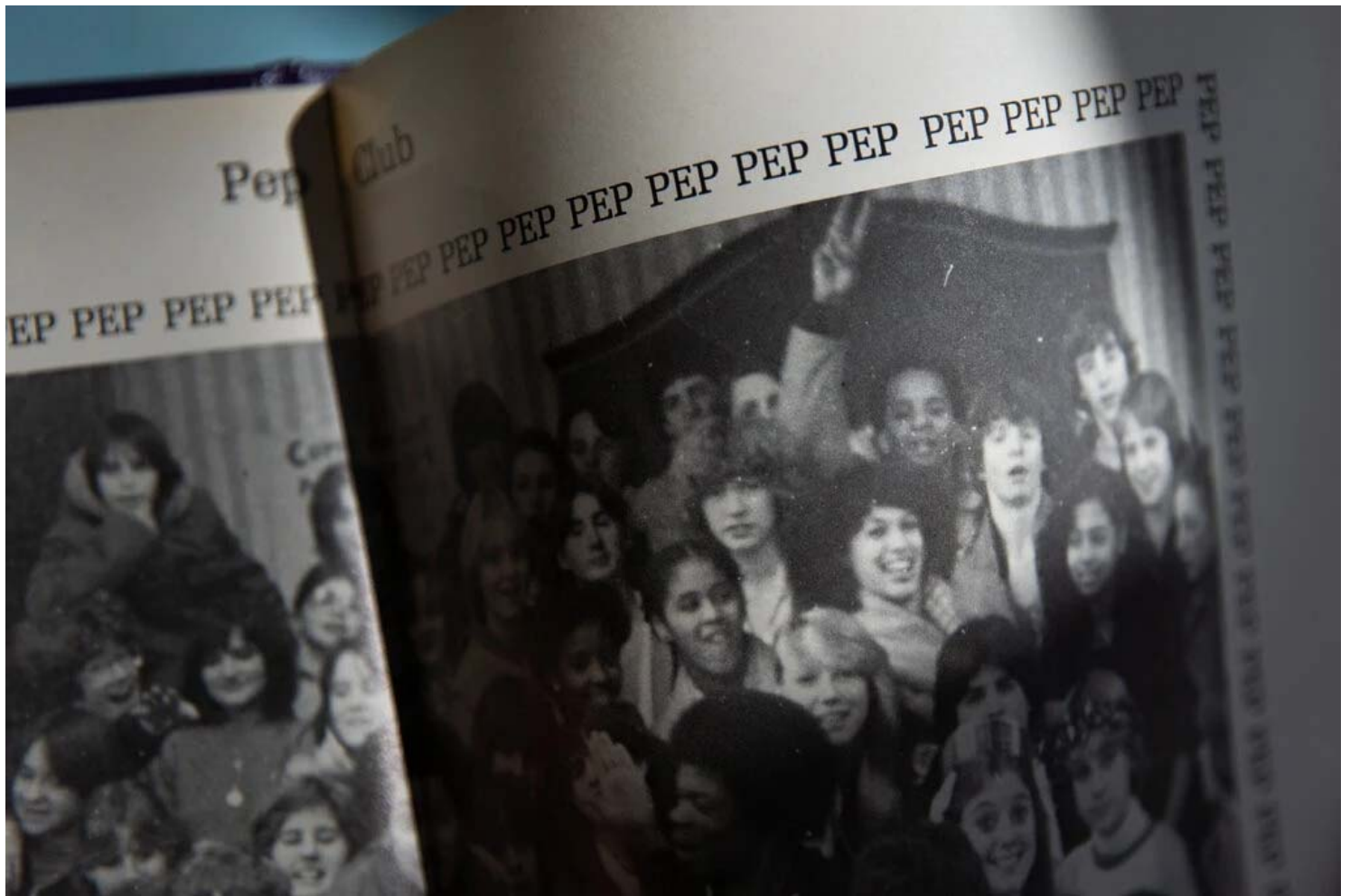
“Maya was more of the brainiac, every test 100 percent, Kamala was a bit more laid back,” he said. “They were always so organized compared to the rest of us.”



Trevor Williams, now a basketball coach and teacher, dated Ms. Harris's sister, Maya, in high school. Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

He recalled that the Harris sisters played down their relative affluence. “I didn’t even realize at the time that their mother was this high-powered doctor.”

Ms. Harris was prepared and forceful in intellectual discussions, her classmates recalled. She was also active — performing in fashion shows, working on the yearbook and part of the Pep Club, whose members yelled and sang at school events accompanied by a rabbit mascot, Purple Peter.



Ms. Harris, center on the right page, in 1981 with fellow members of the Pep Club, in her graduating year at Westmount High.

At the heart of it all, however, was her family life.

Ms. Harris's mother was an abiding influence. Ms. Kagan recalled the warmth of their home, where Indian rice dishes simmered and studying was mandatory. "Her mom was strong and instilled that in Kamala," she said.

Every summer, the girls filled a freezer chest with blanched tomatoes in plastic bags, sucking the air out with straws. The tomatoes were used for soups and sauces.

Dr. Gopalan Harris, who had a doctorate in endocrinology and nutrition from Berkeley, spent 16 years in Montreal, at the Jewish General Hospital and McGill University Faculty of Medicine. She developed a method for assessing cancerous breast tissue that became a standard procedure nationwide.

As high school drew to a close, the Canadian version of the prom arrived. Ms. Harris was part of a group of girls who attended without dates so that girls who hadn't been asked out wouldn't feel excluded.

"We decided that we were going to change the culture," Ms. Kagan said. "Kamala was, like, 'Let's do it!'"

The next step for Ms. Harris was Howard University in Washington. She had already been pining for home.

In the high school yearbook she described her most cherished memory as a 1980 trip to Los Angeles. She thanked her mother and encouraged her sister: "Be cool MA YA!" Her favorite expression? "Naw, I'm just playing."

"By the time I got to high school, I had adjusted to our new surroundings," she wrote in her memoir. "What I hadn't gotten used to was the feeling of being homesick for my country. I felt this constant sense of yearning to be back home."

Dan Bilefsky is a Canada correspondent for The New York Times, based in Montreal. He was previously based in London, Paris, Prague and New York. He is author of the book "The Last Job," about a gang of aging English thieves called "The Bad Grandpas." @DanBilefsky

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