

Confident. Incurrigible. Bully: Little Donny was a lot like candidate Donald Trump

By **Paul Schwartzman** and **Michael E. Miller** June 22, 2016

As a 5-year-old, the boy followed his babysitter on an urban safari, descending into a sewer that was under construction beneath New York City. The light fading, the sitter grew concerned that the boy would panic. But little Donny Trump kept walking into the gathering darkness.

In elementary school, Donny impressed classmates with his athleticism, shenanigans and refusal to acknowledge mistakes, even one so trivial as misidentifying a popular professional wrestler. No matter his pals' ridicule, one recalled, he doubled down, insisting wrestler Antonino Rocca's name was "Rocky Antonino."

At the military academy where he attended high school, Donny grew taller, more muscular and tougher. Struck with a broomstick during a fight, he tried to push a fellow cadet out a second-floor window, only to be thwarted when two other students intervened.

Long before he attained vast wealth and far-reaching fame, Donald J. Trump left an indelible impression in the prosperous Queens neighborhood where he evolved from a mischievous, incurrigible boy into a swaggering young man.

He was Trump in miniature, an embryonic version of the bombastic, flamboyant candidate who has dominated the 2016 presidential race, more than three dozen of his childhood friends, classmates and neighbors said in interviews. Even Trump has acknowledged the similarities between himself as an adult and when he was the boy whom friends alternately referred to as "Donny," "The Trumpet" and "Flat Top" (for his hair).

"When I look at myself in the first grade and I look at myself now, I'm basically the same," the 70-year-old presumptive Republican nominee once told a biographer. "The temperament is not that different."

His face crowned by a striking blond pompadour, young Donald commanded attention with his playground taunts, classroom disruptions and distinctive countenance, even then his lips pursed in a way that would inspire future mimics. Taller than his classmates, he exuded an easy confidence and independence.

“Who could forget him?” said Ann Trees, 82, who taught at Kew-Forest School, where Trump was a student through seventh grade. “He was headstrong and determined. He would sit with his arms folded with this look on his face — I use the word surly — almost daring you to say one thing or another that wouldn’t settle with him.”

About “Trump Revealed”

This story is based on reporting for “Trump Revealed,” a broad, comprehensive examination of the life of the presumptive Republican nominee for president. The biography, written by Post reporters Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher in a collaboration with more than two dozen Post reporters, researchers and editors, is scheduled to be published by Scribner on Aug. 23.

A fierce competitor, Trump could erupt in anger, pummeling another boy or smashing a baseball bat if he made an out, two childhood neighbors said. In school, he misbehaved so often that his initials became his friends’ shorthand for detention.

His father Fred C. Trump’s success as a real estate developer paid for the private schools, limousines and 23-room house to which Donald and his four siblings grew accustomed. Yet Donald also learned that comfort and security could be fleeting if his grades and behavior were poor. When Donald was 13, his father abruptly sent him to a military boarding school, where instructors struck him if he misbehaved and the requirements included daily inspections and strict curfews.

“He was essentially banished from the family home,” said his biographer, Michael D’Antonio. “He hadn’t known anything but living with his family in a luxurious setting, and all of a sudden he’s sent away. That’s a rough way to start out in life.”

Trump, in an interview with The Washington Post, described his years at the military academy in rosier terms, saying his parents thought the discipline “would be good for me because I was rambunctious.”

“I was a wise guy, and they wanted to get me in line,” he said. “Thinking back, it was a very positive influence.”

If nothing else, the military academy taught young Donald a lesson that would prove valuable in adulthood as he navigated two divorces, bankruptcy and regular spasms of bad publicity: No matter the crisis, he could prevail.

The home that stood out

In Jamaica Estates, the Queens neighborhood where Donald grew up, the Trumps’ house on Midland Parkway was distinct, if not for its size then for what it suggested about the wealth of its builder, Fred Trump.

Seventeen brick steps led up a sloping hill to the entrance, which was framed by a Colonial-style portico, a stained-glass crest and six white columns. Two Cadillacs were in the driveway, their license plates bearing their owner’s initials, “FCT1” and “FCT2.”

“No one had individualized license plates in those days,” said Ann Rudovsky, who grew up nearby. “Everyone talked about the Trumps because of the house and the cars.”

Unlike most families in the neighborhood, the Trumps had a cook, a chauffeur and an intercom system. Their color television, a rarity at the time, was among the Trumps’ accoutrements that most impressed Mark Golding, Donald’s childhood friend.

“He had the most amazing train set,” recalled Golding, a lawyer in Portland, Ore. “He had all these special gadgets and gates and switches, more extensive than anything I’d seen. I was very envious.”

Donald is the fourth of Fred and Mary Trump’s five children, the first of whom, Fred Jr., a gregarious airline pilot, suffered from alcoholism and died at the age of 43. Maryanne Trump, Donald’s older sister, became a U.S. Appeals Court judge. Another sister, Elizabeth, was an administrative secretary. His younger brother, Robert, went into business.

Their mother, Mary, a Scottish immigrant, relished attention, thrusting herself to the center of social gatherings. She also loved pageantry, spending hours watching on television the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

Mary Trump suffered a hemorrhage after Robert’s birth that forced doctors to perform an emergency hysterectomy. She also developed an abdominal infection that required several more surgeries, during which she nearly died.

At one point, Fred Trump informed his daughter that her mother “wasn’t expected to live, but I should go to school and he’d call me if anything changed,” Maryanne Trump once told Gwenda Blair, who authored a detailed history of the family. “That’s right — go to school as usual!”

Maryanne Trump declined to comment for this article except to say, “He’s still a simple boy from Queens. You can quote me on that.” Neither Elizabeth nor Robert Trump responded to messages.

Fred Trump, with his thick mustache and hair combed back, was a stern, formal man who insisted on wearing a tie and jacket at home. A conservative Republican who admired Barry Goldwater, Fred Trump and his wife forbade their children from cursing, calling each other by nicknames and wearing lipstick.

Fred Trump “was really very kind of tightfisted,” said Peter Brant, a newsprint magnate who was among Donald’s closest childhood friends. “He didn’t give Donald a whole bunch of rope.”

When Fred Trump visited one of his contractors, he sometimes brought Donald along and hired a teenage boy who lived next door to watch him during the meeting. One afternoon, recalled the sitter, Frank Briggs, 81, he led Trump on a sewer adventure during which “it was pitch black and you couldn’t see the entrance.”

“The thing that amazed me,” Briggs said, “was that Donny wasn’t scared. He just kept walking.”

Dennis Burnham was four years younger and lived around the corner from Donald. He inherited his own impression of his

neighbor from his mother, who warned that he should “stay away from the Trumps.”

“Donald was known to be a bully, I was a little kid, and my parents didn’t want me beaten up,” said Burnham, 65, a business consultant in Texas.

Once when she left Dennis in a playpen in a back yard adjoining the Trumps’ property, Martha Burnham returned to find Donald throwing rocks at her son. “She saw Donald standing at the fence,” Dennis Burnham said, “using the playpen for target practice.”

Creating mischief

For kindergarten, Donald went to the private Kew-Forest School, which required skirts for girls and ties and blazers for boys. Everyone had to rise when their teacher entered the classroom.

Donald was among a group of boys who pulled girls’ hair, passed notes and talked out of turn. “We threw spitballs and we played racing chairs with our desks, crashing them into other desks,” recalled Paul Onish, a classmate, describing himself and Trump as “probably the two worst.”

Donald spent enough time in detention, Onish said, that his buddies nicknamed the punishment “DTs” — short for “Donny Trump.”

“He had a reputation for saying anything that came into his head,” said Donald Kass, 70, a retired agronomist who was a schoolmate. When Trump misidentified Rocca, the pro wrestler, Kass recalled, “We would laugh at him and tell him he was wrong, and he’d say he was right. The next time, he would make the same mistake, and it would be the same thing all over again.”

In his neighborhood, Donald and his friends were known to ride their bikes and “shout and curse very loudly,” said Steve Nachtigall, who lived nearby. Nachtigall said he once saw them jump off their bikes and beat up another boy.

“It’s kind of like a little video snippet that remains in my brain because I think it was so unusual and terrifying at that age,” recalled Nachtigall, 66, a doctor in New Jersey. “He was a loudmouth bully.”

At times, Trump’s classmates fought back.

After he yanked her pigtails, Sharon Mazzarella hit Donald over the head with her metal lunch pail as she followed him down the stairs outside the school. “I must’ve been quite annoyed,” Mazzarella said of the incident, which she described as her only memory of Trump.

In his memoir, “The Art of the Deal,” Trump wrote that his main focus as a youngster was “creating mischief.” As a second-grader, he wrote, he “actually” gave his music teacher a black eye because “I didn’t think he knew anything about music, and I almost got expelled.”

None of Trump's childhood friends recall the incident or Donald talking about it then. Asked about the punch recently, Trump said, "When I say 'punch,' when you're that age, nobody punches very hard."

At a 2009 reunion, Kass said, the teacher, Charles Walker, told him that Trump had never struck him. But Walker, who died last year, claimed no affection for Trump. In the final stages of his life, according to his son, Charles Walker learned that Trump was considering a presidential bid.

"When that kid was 10," Peter Walker recalled his father telling family members gathered at his bedside, "even then he was a little s---."

Aiming to overpower

If his grades suffered and he annoyed his teachers, Trump found success on the playground. During dodgeball games, he was known for jumping and pulling his knees up to avoid balls thrown at him.

"The Trumpet was always the last man standing," recalled Chrisman Scherf, 70, a classmate who is a surgeon in Arizona.

Trump's best sport was baseball, a passion that inspired him, at 12, to write a prose poem that was published in the yearbook.

"I like to hear the crowd give cheers, so loud and noisy to my ears," Donald wrote. "When the score is 5-5, I feel like I could cry. And when they get another run, I feel like I could die. Then the catcher makes an error, not a bit like Yogi Berra. The game is over and we say tomorrow is another day."

By sixth grade, Donald's power as a right-handed hitter was enough that fielders shifted to left field when he batted. "If he had hit the ball to right, he could've had a home run because no one was there," said Nicholas Kass, a schoolmate. "But he always wanted to hit the ball through people. He wanted to overpower them."

A catcher, Trump's uniform was often the dirtiest on the field, and he shrugged off foul balls clanging off his mask. After once making an out, Donald smashed neighbor Jeff Bier's Adirondack bat on the pavement. The bat cracked, Bier said, but Trump did not apologize.

In those years, youngsters yearned for the new mitts with intricate webbing that Rawlings had begun manufacturing. Peter Brant persuaded his father to help pay for the \$30 glove, but Donald could not persuade Fred Trump to buy him one.

Too expensive, Fred told Donald, though he did agree to buy him a cheaper model.

Straight to boarding school

In 1958, when they were 12, Trump and Brant liked to board an E train bound for Manhattan, a distant land of soaring, exotic promise. They did not ask their parents for permission for their Saturday expeditions. Manhattan was too far and too dangerous for two boys from the tranquil, low-slung reaches of Queens.

Exiting the train at 53rd Street and Fifth Avenue, Donald and Peter felt like an urban version of Lewis and Clark. They explored Central Park's bucolic recesses, watched African American men play basketball on courts along the East River and observed the panhandlers and hustlers in midtown.

Around Times Square, they discovered novelty shops, where they bought stink bombs, hand buzzers and fake vomit — perfect accessories for pranking their pals. The shops also sold switchblades. On Broadway, "West Side Story" was a smash, and the boys, imagining themselves as gang members, bought knives to fit the part.

Near the end of seventh grade, Fred discovered Donald's knives and was infuriated to learn about his trips into the city. He decided his son's behavior warranted a radical change. In the months before eighth grade, Fred Trump enrolled Donald at the New York Military Academy, a boarding school 70 miles from Jamaica Estates.

D'Antonio, the biographer who wrote "Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success," said Fred Trump's decision was "a very severe response to a kid who hadn't gotten arrested and wasn't involved in drinking and drugging. He was essentially a smart aleck."

"This was a profound rejection of Donald," he said.

Donald did not announce his departure to his friends, who, when word filtered out, struggled to understand. "It was a very, very sudden thing and I was really surprised and sad," Brant recalled. "I always said to myself, 'Is there something I didn't know about his past that would make his father send him to the military academy?'"

Irik Sevin, a prominent executive who was a year behind Trump at Kew-Forest, described Donald as a "normal, rambunctious kid."

"The rug was pulled out from under him," Sevin said.

Confidence and aggression

At the military academy, Trump wore a crew cut, a thick wool uniform and was awoken daily by a recording of reveille.

Instead of steaks prepared by his family's cook, Donald sat in a crowded mess hall and filled his plate from vats of meatloaf, spaghetti and something called "mystery mountains," a stew of deep-fried leftovers remade as meatballs.

Instead of his own bathroom, he had to shower with fellow cadets.

Instead of his father, Donald's new taskmaster was Theodore Dobias, a no-nonsense combat veteran who had served in World War II and had seen Mussolini's dead body hanging from a rope.

Dobias, who died recently, would smack his cadets with an open hand if they ignored him, students recalled. He set up a boxing ring and forced students with poor grades and disciplinary problems to fight each other.

“At the beginning, he didn’t like the idea of being told what to do, like make your bed, shine your shoes, brush your teeth, clean the sink, do your homework,” Dobias said in an interview last fall, referring to Trump. “We really didn’t care whether he came from Rockefeller Center or whatever. He was just another name.”

Dobias said he recognized in Trump an innate drive: “He wanted to be number one. He wanted to be noticed. He wanted to be recognized. And he liked compliments.”

Trump won medals for neatness and took pride in his grades. He distinguished himself on both the baseball and football teams.

To his classmates, Trump was a blend of friendly and cocky. He boasted that his father’s wealth doubled every time he completed a real estate deal. “He was self-confident and very soft-spoken, believe it or not, as if he knew he was just passing time until he went on to something greater,” said classmate Michael Pitkow.

In his room, Trump played Elvis Presley and Johnny Mathis albums. He liked to screw an ultraviolet light into the overhead socket and lie down for a tan. “We’re going to the beach,” Trump would announce to his roommate, David Smith.

By senior year, Trump was known for bringing stylish women to campus and showing them around. “They were beautiful, gorgeous women, dressed out of Saks Fifth Avenue,” recalled classmate George White.

“Ladies Man” read the caption beneath a photo in the senior yearbook of Trump.

At times, Trump clashed with fellow cadets, including Ted Levine, with whom he shared a room at one point. Donald, Levine recalled, folded his towels and underwear so that “every single one was perfectly squared. Like, insanely neat.”

“Mr. Meticulous” was Levine’s nickname for Donald.

After finding Levine’s unmade bed while on inspection duty, Trump tossed the sheets on the floor. Levine, who was a foot shorter than Trump, said he “grabbed everything that was grabbable,” hurling a combat boot at Donald and hitting him with a broomstick.

Enraged, Trump shoved Levine toward a second-floor window. “He tried to push me out,” Levine said, but two cadets intervened.

Within the academy’s testosterone-driven culture, Levine said, Trump’s aggression was understandable. “Would I have respected him if he didn’t?” he asked. “No. If he took that s--- from the little crap I was, he wouldn’t be where he is today.”

Destiny on Fifth Avenue

In his senior year, the academy appointed Trump to the prestigious position of captain of A Company. As a leader, recalled Peter Ticktin, a company platoon sergeant, Trump could inspire respect without raising his voice.

“He never yelled at anyone,” said Ticktin, now a Florida lawyer who touts Trump’s candidacy on his Facebook page. “He’d just look at you, the eyebrows kind of raised. The kind of look that said you can’t disappoint him.”

A month after senior year started, Trump faced a crisis. One of his platoon sergeants shoved a plebe, Lee Ains, against a wall because the freshman was too slow snapping to attention. At the time, the academy was already dealing with a serious hazing incident and was sensitive to new allegations of abuse. The administration reassigned Trump as a battalion training officer.

Ains said the academy concluded that Trump had not monitored his officers “as closely as he should have.”

Trump described his reassignment as a promotion. “I did a good job and that’s why I got elevated,” he said.

After his transfer, Trump led a drill team in New York City’s Columbus Day parade. Standing on Fifth Avenue, Trump turned to Maj. Anthony “Ace” Castellano and declared his ambition.

“You know what, Ace?” Castellano recalled Trump saying. “I’d really like to own some of this real estate some day.”

College awaited, but Trump seemed to know that he would follow his father into business, telling a roommate that he “felt like he might be missing out” if he did not. He considered attending film school in California but then decided New York would be his destination.

In 1964, after graduating from high school, Trump joined his father at the dedication of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Amid the pageantry, Donald noticed that no one paid homage to the bridge’s 85-year-old Swedish designer, who had traveled from Europe for the occasion.

“I realized then and there that if you let people treat you how they want, you’ll be made a fool,” he later told a reporter. “I realized then and there something I would never forget: I don’t want to be made anybody’s sucker.”

By his 18th year, Donald Trump had a clear sense of his own destiny, a vision he shared with a fellow cadet, Jeff Ortenau.

“I’m going to be very famous one day,” Donald promised.

“You know what?” Ortenau recalls telling Trump. “You’re probably going to be president.”

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