

THE MAYOR

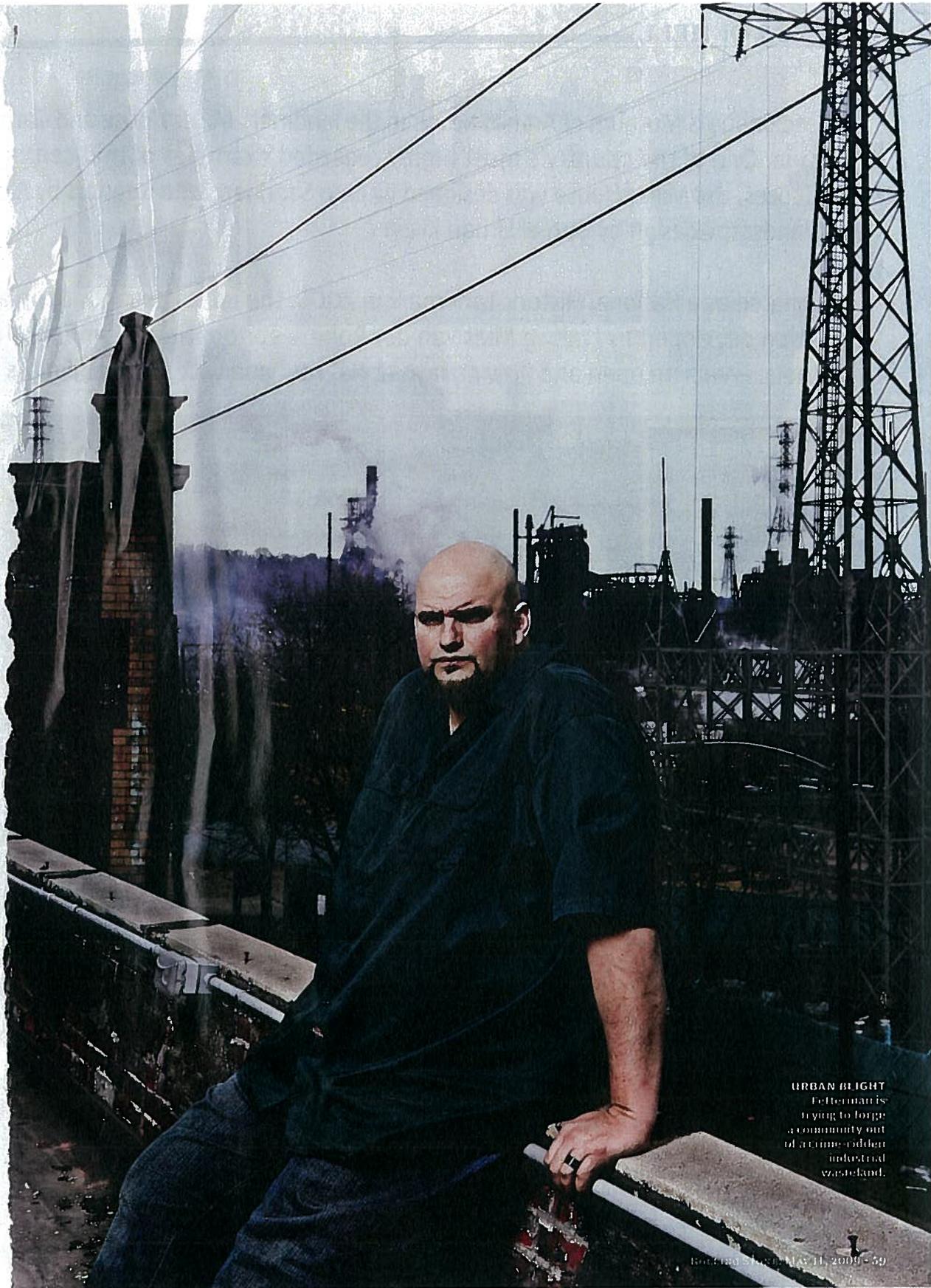
OF

**MOST SEE BRADDOCK,
PENNSYLVANIA, AS JUST A
DYING STEEL TOWN – BUT FOR
JOHN FETTERMAN IT'S THE
NEW AMERICAN FRONTIER**
BY JANET REITMAN

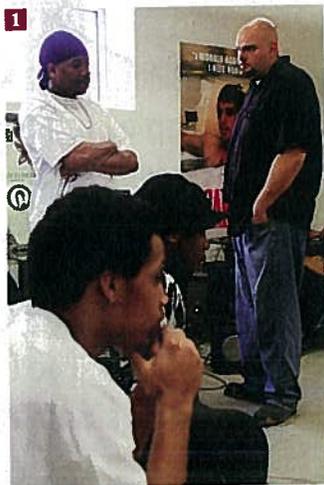
HELL

JOHN FETTERMAN LOOKS A LOT LIKE A CONVICT. FOR starters, he's six feet eight, weighs 320 pounds, and has a shaved head and a bushy chin beard. He dresses most of the time in modified prison garb: Dickies work shirt, baggy jeans, black steel-toe Dr. Martens. His arms are the size of small trees. He also sports some impressively large tattoos. In 2005, around the time he was elected mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, Fetterman inked the town's ZIP code, 15104, on his left forearm. Since then, he has tattooed the dates of every murder committed in the town on the underside of his right arm. On the top of his forearm, in bold black letters, he inscribed

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE LEVITT



URBAN BLIGHT
Fellerman is
trying to forge
a community out
of a crime-ridden
industrial
wasteland.



The Rust Belt Pioneers

Braddock, once a prosperous steel town, has fallen on such hard times that there isn't even a restaurant in which to buy lunch. (1) As mayor, Fetterman has reached out to the black community by promoting job-training programs. (2) Derelict houses marked for demolition line the city's streets. (3) Fetterman lives with his wife and newborn in a renovated loft. He encouraged the creation of an urban farm (4) in the shadow of a U.S. Steel plant.



the words **I WILL MAKE YOU HURT**. "That's what it does to me," he says. "It's very personal." In four years, there have been six killings here - which doesn't sound like many until you consider that Braddock, a blighted steel town eight miles southeast of Pittsburgh, is home to only 2,900 people.

On a drizzly winter day, Fetterman, 39, sits behind the wheel of a Dodge Durango and eats a cheeseburger as he surveys the ruins of his town. Once a model of American industrial might, Braddock now resembles a spooky, miniaturized version of the South Bronx, circa 1975: a half-mile strip of boarded-up storefronts and crumbling homes, weed lots serving as garbage dumps, abandoned factories and dilapidated warehouses, and, at the far end of town, the very first steel mill founded by Andrew Carnegie, a plant - now owned by U.S. Steel - whose smokestacks continue to blanket the area in a thin, gritty mist. There is neither a gas station in Braddock nor a supermarket. Aside from a local bar, there isn't even a place to buy lunch.

Contributing editor JANET REITMAN wrote "Inside Scientology" in RS 995, which earned a National Magazine Award nomination for Reporting.

Though roughly 700 workers are employed at the mill, turning out up to 3 million tons of steel each year - 15 percent of U.S. Steel's domestic output - almost none live in Braddock. Instead, most drive across a bridge whose sole purpose, it seems, is to take anyone who wanders into this forlorn place swiftly out.

The demise of Braddock speaks to the long, slow death of manufacturing in the United States. For a little more than a century, western Pennsylvania's Monongahela Valley was home to the great, grinding factories that literally built America, girder by girder. It was also the site of one of the American labor movement's most dramatic battles, the Homestead Strike of 1892, which was waged just across the Monongahela River. Today, however, the valley is home to some of the most bankrupt communities in Pennsylvania, and poverty in Braddock is four times higher than all of Allegheny County and nearly three times the national average. More than half of the town's families are on public assistance. Its homicide rate hovers between six and 12 times the national average, depending on the year. Fetterman likes to point out that Detroit, the poster child of urban blight, is better off than Braddock. "Detroit's aver-

age housing price now is \$19,000," he says. "Ours is around \$6,000" - provided, that is, that anyone is willing to buy.

"Let's take a tour of what happens when there isn't anybody to take care of or buy homes," the mayor says as he turns onto Braddock Avenue, the community's former shopping district. With the exception of a butcher shop, a poultry market, a florist, an optometrist, a pawn shop, a Family Dollar store and a few rank-looking bars, everything else is boarded up. Fetterman turns left onto what appears to be an alley but is in fact a through street, overgrown with weeds and littered with broken glass. More than a quarter of Braddock's homes are vacant, many of them slated for demolition. Fetterman points out row after row of derelict houses, most stripped to their foundations, and marked with the tell-tale painted numbers indicating their appointment with the wrecking ball. "You want to talk about a house of horrors?" he says, pointing to a small brick home with no front door, surrounded by a foot-high pile of garbage. "Somebody was actually living in that." A chair sits ominously in the branches of a leafless tree, and a toilet stands upside down on what was once the lawn. Braddock was used as a backdrop for

the upcoming film version of Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. It's not hard to see why.

And yet, Fetterman doesn't see it – or more pointedly, he sees it, and thinks it's kind of cool. Where some view Braddock as a grim reminder of America's industrial decline, Fetterman, a graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, sees potential, a place that in its very desolation offers that most American of vistas: a clean slate. "Realistically, the town has a lot of issues," he concedes, slowing his SUV to ponder the grime-encrusted landscape. "But where some people see blight, I think it's malignant beauty." The vague scowl that Fetterman has been wearing for the past half-hour softens. "I mean, it's fabulous," he says.

MAYOR JOHN, AS MOST people around here call him, would like to create his own town – a DIY community of sorts, using what's left of Braddock as a foundation. He's going about it with the help of some local nonprofits, including one he founded himself, which are supporting projects to create an urban farm, reclaim abandoned homes, produce public art and plant a community orchard. Using money from his family and his 401(k), Fetterman has purchased a handful of properties and encourages others to do the same. The town has a website, which bears the slogan "Destruction Breeds Creation" and features grainy photos of local "ruins." Braddock, it maintains, is "an unparalleled opportunity for the urban pioneer, artist or misfit to become part of a new experimental effort." It's also, in these dire economic times, a great place to find a cheap house.

Fetterman himself lives and works in a cavernous former furniture warehouse that is as tricked out as any Williamsburg loft. He bought the place for \$2,000 five years ago and spent \$45,000 turning it into a "metaphor" for Braddock – a derelict property remade with all the trappings of urban hipsterdom: polished-wood floors, walls covered with graffiti by local kids, a stainless-steel countertop, artsy black-and-white photographs of buildings in town that have been torn down, a giant flatscreen TV. On the roof are two shipping containers, a distinctive architectural touch that serves as both a testament to 21st-century throw-away culture and as extra living space. And there's a really nice deck.

"The downstairs was a gallery for a while, with an intense and cool installation," Fetterman tells me one rainy Friday afternoon. Slumped in a leather armchair in the corner of his living room, he is brooding rather magnificently. It's been a busy week for the mayor, who has just returned from New York, where he appeared on *The Colbert Report*, followed the next morning

by Fox News. On both shows, he delivered what by now is his standard rap: that Braddock is a bankrupt town whose lack of assets is, in a sense, its greatest asset. It's a note he has hit over and over again in the national media, from CNN to *The New York Times*, while also gamely showing off his tattoos. The routine has brought him significant attention – how many small-town mayors look like a skinhead but claim to be a warrior for social justice? – yet Fetterman insists he hates the spotlight. "I never invited any of this," he grumbles, as his Brazilian wife, Gisèle, a former model, pads around in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms.

The two met after Gisèle read a profile of Fetterman in *ReadyMade*, a magazine for do-it-yourselfers, and sent him a letter. Last year they eloped, and in February she gave birth to Karl, their first child. "She is amazing," Fetterman says, interrupting his fugue to stare adoringly at his wife, who, a week after giving birth, looks as if she's never been pregnant. "The baby was born downstairs – it was a home water birth." Fetterman makes \$150 a month as mayor. "Neither my wife nor I have health insurance," he says. He seems almost proud of the fact.

As mayor of Braddock, Fetterman is at the forefront of a growing movement one could call "urban salvage," a push to over-

haul the way we think about cities. There are many Braddocks or near-Braddocks around the country, the thinking goes, and with foreclosures at an all-time high, there will no doubt be many more. "A hundred or more years ago, we were pushing across the wilderness to open it up for the citizenry to make a new life there," says Bob Falk, vice president of the Building Materials Reuse Association, a national organization that champions the "reuse" of materials to rebuild communities from the inside out. "Today, the inner cities are offering that same opportunity. There's a growing awareness that simply demolishing vast areas of these neighborhoods is not a good way to rebuild a community. We have a basket of resources in these inner cities, and it's the edgier and more adventuresome people who are going back in to establish a foothold and settle those areas."

artist named Swoon has purchased an old church that she hopes to turn into a community arts center.

It would be the area's second gallery, actually: Jeb Feldman, a 35-year-old newcomer who is one of Fetterman's chief allies, already runs a place called UnSmoke Systems, which, located in a former Catholic school near U.S. Steel, serves as an exhibition space and artists' studios. Feldman sees Braddock as virgin territory. "You don't have to be afraid of going into a place and trying something new and maybe invading someone's life by doing that," he says. The town, he says, is attracting a particular kind of pioneer, "a set of people who are intrepid and handy and willing to invest in something." But by "invest" he doesn't mean make money. "I can't think of a place that's got less of a value proposition," Feldman says. "You can't flip a building here. Braddock is a place where you have to want to be. It is a social-conscience thing."

JOHAN FETTERMAN GREW UP IN the Pennsylvania town of York, the son of an insurance executive. Following a traditional path, he graduated from college, earned an MBA from the University of Connecticut and spent 15 months as a

FETTERMAN HAS GIVEN THE CITY OF BRADDOCK A NEW SLOGAN: DESTRUCTION BREEDS CREATION.

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In Braddock, Fetterman has been joined so far by 20 other urban experimentalists, including a homesteader from Montana, a quintet of artists and urban gardeners from Brooklyn, a potter who makes special water-filtration systems for use in developing countries and the owners of a company called Fossil Free Fuel, which retrofits diesel cars to run on vegetable oil. A street

risk-management underwriter for Chubb, an insurance company. Then, when he was 25, he had what he calls his "quarter-life crisis," and quit. "You could have knocked me over with a feather," says his father, Karl. "He said he was going to live in filth in Pittsburgh to do social work."

Fetterman has lived in that filth ever since, with a short respite to attend Harvard. "He was a big, tall, no-bullshit guy," says one of his professors, former Wyoming senator Alan Simpson. "But that, I think, is really the charm of the man." Fetterman joined AmeriCorps, then a relatively new program created by the Clinton administration, working to help homeless people in Pittsburgh find jobs. The city, he says, was "probably the best place in the country for social entrepreneurship" – the perfect blend of history, need and opportunity. And Braddock is Pittsburgh times 100.

Fetterman got to know the town in 2001, while working for a youth program. Moved by its history and stark industrial aesthetic, as well as its even starker social and economic need, he decided to make it his home. In 2003, he bought a former Presbyterian church, just across the street from where Andrew Carnegie built the first of his famous free libraries, and [Cont. on 79]

MAYOR OF HELL

[Cont. from 61] moved into its dank, unheated basement. At the same time, he began rallying local kids around the idea of a new town - one they called "Braddock," a spelling used by the Crips, who were a presence in the town during the 1990s.

Some of the kids were skeptical. "I couldn't see why a white, educated man wanted to come here and live here," says Jeremy Cannon, an aspiring rapper who was one of the first people Fetterman met when he arrived in Braddock. "I never in my life thought that people would move here that didn't have a crack habit. Just take a walk around here at night. It smells like sulfur. The water tastes different. You see three-eyed fish and shit."

So Cannon, a tatted-out former gang-banger, was deeply moved when Fetterman tattooed Braddock's ZIP code on his arm. "I've got Braddock on my hand, and I don't want to be here," Cannon, 23, says. "I live this shit. But it obviously meant something to John that I couldn't see."

In 2005, many Braddock youths registered to vote for the first time, giving Fetterman a one-vote victory in a three-way race. He has rewarded them by promoting a summer-jobs program where kids help design their own projects, be it painting a city mural or planting an urban garden. When needed, Fetterman also makes himself available to take kids to get their driver's license - and pays for it himself. "If it wasn't for Mayor John, nobody around here would be playing fucking basketball," says Cannon, watching a group of teenage boys shoot hoops on a new court in a former weed lot next to Fetterman's house. "He's the only person who gives us hope."

NOT EVERYONE IN BRADDOCK is thrilled with the mayor, or his vision for transforming the town. His push to attract urban homesteaders has made some lifelong residents wary, opening up something of a class and racial divide. "My opinion is that John came to a community that is 80 percent black and believes that he can amass control," says Ella Jones, manager of the town's borough council, who dismisses Fetterman as the Great White Hope. "Once people get close to John they begin to sense that's he full of shit. He has no understanding of how this borough operates - how the streets are maintained, how the sewers are maintained, why the streetlights are on, who pays for them. I think John views this community as a steppingstone. When he can move in enough of his artistic friends to become registered voters, he can take over. And then Braddock can become Fettermanville."

Fetterman shrugs off such criticism as the griping of "a couple of angry members

on the council who never have anything constructive to say." He also insists that Braddock is "gentrification-proof," though it is hard to understand that logic. The kind of artists he is attracting, as urban theorists point out, usually represents only the first wave of revitalization: a "creative class" that invests in blighted areas, raising property values and replacing low-income residents. The county, in fact, has a sweeping plan to revitalize not only Braddock but other former mill towns and industrial sites - turning old factories into museums and residential complexes, preserving green spaces, even expanding the mass-transit system. "The arts community has been very proactive in seeing the opportunity before anybody else does," says Dan Onorato, the county executive. "John doesn't want it to look like he's not helping the people who are there. But gentrification and revitalization will happen."

"If it wasn't for John, nobody could play ball here," says one former Crip. "He's the only person who gives us hope."

Just before sunset one evening, in a small brick home adjacent to Feldman's gallery, some of Braddock's newest citizens are gathered for a "seed buy," a get-together intended to help decide what to plant in their gardens this spring. (The town's urban farm, run by a Pittsburgh-area nonprofit, employs local kids as farmhands to raise organic crops and is a big part of Fetterman's transformative strategy.) Around 10 homesteaders - whom some locals refer to simply as "the artists" - sip wine and eat hummus and grapes as they sort through tiny baggies of vegetable seeds, looking more bohemian than Braddock. All of them are white - though, as a young community organizer named Ruthie is quick to explain, they did invite several African-American members of the community, none of whom showed up.

Afterward, the group heads to a vacant lot, where someone has built a communal bread oven made from recycled materials. There, in the shadow of the belching smoke from the U.S. Steel plant, guys in beat-up work boots and girls in oversize sweaters gather to eat thin-crust pizza with goat cheese and red peppers. The pies are cooked to perfection, though a thin film of grit seems to coat just about everything. No one notices.

Feldman is there, sipping a beer. "There's something really tremendously beautiful about Braddock," he says. "Some people

might be put off by a mean giant steel mill that steams and smokes and flames and has these giant molten metal ladles that drive around on automobiles. But there just aren't many communities that have that as their skyline." He pauses. "I know it's not pumping out the cleanest air I could be breathing," he admits. "On the flip side, though, I look at it and say, 'Wow, I have these views and this backdrop that nobody else has.'" Feldman stares at the mill for a bit. "Looks like another planet, like a space station," he says. "I love that."

It's hard to know, looking around the muddy lot filled with pizza-munching artists, exactly what the scene represents. Is this the future of small-town America, as more and more communities find themselves crippled by foreclosed homes and bankrupt businesses? Can urban salvagers and idealistic do-it-yourselfers forge a new beginning out of the global economic meltdown? And if they do, what will become of the homeowners and shopkeepers who find themselves strangers in their own hometowns?

So far, at least, no one has been forced out of Braddock. And in May, Fetterman will run for re-election. His platform is pretty simple, really: serving the existing community, while encouraging outsiders to get involved. Right now, he's pushing for a Subway franchise. "I get some groans from the people who think raw vegan bistro food is so much more 'authentic,'" the mayor says. "But that completely misses the point. Not too many people out here can rock \$17.99 a pound for Cajun swordfish. But Subway would thrive here. A place deserves somewhere to eat lunch."

Like any politician, however, Fetterman is light on the details of his long-term plan. "Who can say what this place will look like five or 10 years from now?" he says. "It's evolving organically." But whatever happens, he insists, the movement he has launched in Braddock is more than a social experiment.

"This is the only community I've ever called home, and I hope it is the only community I will ever call home," he says. "What we're doing here appeals to a very small group of people. Those who are going to be involved are hypercommitted, because they want to be a part of building a community. I have all the respect in the world for anybody who's taking this on. Hipsters aren't going to make it in Braddock. We're irony-free out here." 

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