

CONNECTICUT CHESS JOURNAL

An Organizer's Autobiography: Christopher Potts and the Norwalk Library Chess Club 1992-2019

Submitted by Christopher Potts

Edited by CSCA Staff



Christopher Potts at the Norwalk Library Chess Club, awarding the 2009 Yazgoor-Musicant Trophy to Aman Karunakaran.

I played my first USCF tournament as a boy of 13 years way back in 1975 in Norman, Oklahoma.

My very first opponent was a law student at the University of Oklahoma, named Robert Musicant. He had a dark beard and a full head of thick hair. I had Black. We played a French Defense, the only time in my

tournament career that I played the French. Musicant missed a win, and we ended up drawing.

In subsequent years I went to high school, came to Connecticut to attend Yale, left Yale due to poor academics, spent six years as a Naval submariner, got married, went back and finished Yale, and got a job in New York City.

In the summer of 1991, my new wife and I decided to settle in Norwalk. By early 1992, I felt settled into my job and our new home enough to try a chess tournament. I played on and off in the intervening years but not regularly since high school. This 1992 tournament was in Danbury, run by Leonard Robinson, who many old timers may still remember fondly. I

looked at the results chart and noticed a familiar name – Robert Musicant. But this Robert Musicant was bald and clean shaven. Surely, it couldn't be the same person! But I worked up the courage to ask, and it was. I probably looked even less recognizable to him than he did to me, but he not only remembered the result of our game, he re-played it for me from memory.

That day we discovered that we both came from Norwalk. Right then and there Bob told me about a chess program at the Norwalk Library, which had been thrust upon him, and asked if I would help him run it?

Apparently, the prior library director, Donald Yazgoor, and a local chess player, whose name escapes me, started the program some time earlier. However, tragedy struck, and within a few months of that time, Donald was killed in a mugging at the Norwalk train station. Thereafter, the chess player running the program proved unreliable. So, the library asked Bob to take on the program, and

Bob made short work of wrangling me in to help.

I was an able assistant, but Bob was the heart of the organization. He was so patient and understanding with the kids. We always had a lesson before free play, so that the kids could not help but improve. By the end of the academic year we decided to hold the first Donald Yazgoor Memorial Tournament, later and now the Yazgoor-Musicant Memorial Tournament. We got away with only one bloody nose.

Eventually, after we both became USCF tournament directors, we added Saturday afternoon USCF rated tournaments to the mix. We had many local players come through those tournaments and the scholastic program. Among our local notables are NM Ian Harris, local master and three-time Connecticut Champion, GM Robert Hungaski, who was just a young boy in his second tournament, NM Zachary Tanenbaum, two-time High School Champion, and NM Dennis Li, former Connecticut Elementary School Champion,

Jasmine Su, Elementary Champion and 2021 Connecticut Female Player of the Year, and so many others. One of our first students went on to become an assistant Presidential Press Secretary.

In 2008, before his 60th birthday, Bob passed away, and I took over the program. In true Bob fashion, I managed to convince Melvin Patrick to assist, but we parted ways after a year or two, so that Melvin could concentrate on the Fairfield County Chess Center. I carried on mostly on my own from then until 2019.

Norwalk is a diverse town with a sizable immigrant population. Each new wave seems to relate chess to a path to a better life for their kids. We had waves of various populations – first African-Americans, then Latin Americans, then South Asians, and then East Asians. I am sure there will be others, but they will be for someone else to teach. After nearly 30 years of teaching others to play, it's time for me to pass the baton.

...

In 2019, Chris retired as organizer of the Norwalk Library Chess Club.

At the Connecticut State Championship on December 4, 2021, the CSCA honored Christopher Potts for his committed service to the game and the Connecticut chess community with the Award for Exemplary Contribution to Connecticut Chess. At the same event, in her acceptance speech for 2021 Connecticut Female Player of the Year, Jasmine Su expressed a special thank you to Chris, as one of her first chess coaches.

In honor of its founders, organizers and many players, the CSCA plans to continue the Norwalk Library program and Yazgoor-Musicant Tournament. Interested volunteers can contact the CSCA at chess.CSCA@gmail.com.