

The Concordian

THE BEST OF CONCORD

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We Remember
Jill Ann Bedecarré
1950-2007

Her spirit is our muse

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Dan Ashley

what really matters

For teens, summer jobs are about more than just quick cash

Two scoops of cookies and cream on a sugar cone was the key to my success.

Maybe that is a bit of an overstatement, but it is essentially true.

There were two big objectives to be achieved as soon as I turned 16. The first is obvious: Get my driver's license. The second seemed far more out of reach and was filled with anticipation, excitement and mystique.

After being sanctioned by the powers that be in my home state of North Carolina to operate a motor vehicle, unsupervised, on public thoroughfares, the next notch on my teenage belt (which held up a sharp-looking pair of light blue corduroys that were all the rage in those days, by the way) was a job at the coolest, most prestigious place for a kid to work in town – Swensen's Ice Cream Factory.

Quintessential teen experiences

I had done my time in the trenches of teen employment: the paper route, the lawn mowing circuit, even a few babysitting gigs. After being forged in the fires of the mundane, I had finally earned a shot at the big time.

Any high school kid who wanted to make a statement about upward mobility could do so at Swensen's. It was to my hometown what Arnold's meant on "Happy Days" or what Wonka meant to chocolate factories.

Elbow deep in a bucket of butter pecan, covered in whipped cream and smeared with hot fudge, that's where a young man could discover his true self.

I started there as a busboy in high school and stayed for six years, ending my career in the ice cream game as a shift supervisor as a senior in college. By the time I left, I had mastered every job the restaurant offered – from waiter, to soda jerk to short order cook. That included my favorite position of them all, making every single flavor of ice cream we sold ranging from almond crunch to rum raisin.

Jobs in short supply this season

My experience during those years came to mind because of something we reported on ABC-7 News recently. The poor economy is going to make it unusually difficult this year for teenagers to get summertime work.

The jobs that kids would normally jockey for are now in desperate demand by adults who are willing to take what they can to make ends meet.

Engineers and teachers are applying to be counselors at summer camps. Mark Shapiro, the CEO of Six Flags amusement parks, is stunned by what he's seeing. "We have almost 'American Idol' lines at our job fairs. It's moms looking for jobs, teachers in the off-season looking for jobs. It's grandparents looking to do something in the summer. It's fathers that are potentially looking for second jobs," Shapiro says.

One expert calls this the toughest job market for teens since World War II. That is profoundly disappointing news for a number of reasons, not the least of which is what it says about the struggle that so many individuals and families are enduring to survive this recession. But it is also a great shame for the young people who will be displaced from part-time jobs this summer.

The opportunity to earn a little bit of money while gaining a lot of experience is a rite of passage for American boys and girls everywhere. I remember when my oldest son called us thrilled with something that happened while working at the neighborhood Christmas tree stand one winter. His job was to make sales and bundle and load trees for customers. One day, the boss had to leave early so he told my son to close out the register and lock

the gate at the end of the day.

Our son was filled with pride when he called to tell us the news. "I smell trust," he gushed. "I smell promotion!"

It was a pivotal moment for a young man taking on responsibility and enjoying the sense of accomplishment and the self-esteem that comes with it.

Lessons to remember

Think back to your summer jobs as a teenager and you will probably recall lessons learned about being on time, earning your own money, and dealing with co-workers and customers. Those days were profoundly important in shaping my future. Long days and late nights in the restaurant business taught me to work hard, to be confident and courteous when dealing with people, and to appreciate entrepreneurialism and the willingness to take risks for success.

The two people I learned much of that from 30 years ago, Mr. and Mrs. Todd, are still alive and well and we are in touch from time to time. In fact, they just invited me to come back East for their birthday bash later this month; they will be 85 and 80, respectively.

They both invested a lot of time and trust in me when I was a kid and their influence has stayed with me all of these years. Other young people the Todds' employed and befriended way back then, including my two younger brothers, would tell you the same thing.

What Really Matters is to give young people a chance early on to develop a sense of self-worth that comes from learning job skills, following instructions and meeting the expectations of an employer. If the experts are right, our weakened economy will rob a lot of teenagers of those valuable opportunities this summer and, as a result, cost them an important life experience.

After all, what kid can possibly hope to make it in life without knowing how to blend the perfect chocolate malt?

Dan Ashley is an anchor at ABC-7 News and can be seen weeknights at 5, 6 and 11 p.m. on ABC-7 and at 9 p.m. on KOFY-TV20.

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