



## COMMENTARY

# The real value of menial summer jobs

Two stories about parents and their unemployed college-age children.

A woman called seeking my help. Her son is home from college for the summer.

"He can't find a job," she said.

Nothing? I asked.

"He's looked everywhere," she said.

Apparently, her son is unaware that the private sector is doing fine.

I said: Has he asked anyone for a job?

She said she wasn't sure. She didn't think so.

Well, why hasn't he?

She didn't know.

Ask and you shall receive, I said. I mean, I used to ask bosses and managers all the time for work, even when they weren't hiring. One of the best gigs I got was tending bar in a South Philly Italian ristorante. It put me through two years at Temple University.

Her son was not so aggressive.

Well, I said, there are help-wanted signs at a couple of fast-food places, and also at a convenience store. He could look there.

"Oh, Mr. Mullane," she said, "he isn't interested."

Not interested?

"Those jobs don't interest him," she said.

What is his college major?

"He hasn't decided."

How old is he?

"Twenty-five," she said.

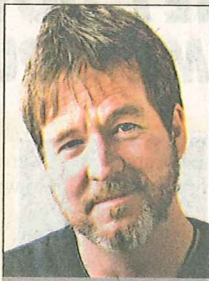
I said: Your son is doomed.

"How can you say that?" she asked.

A lot of reasons, but mostly because he didn't call me, you did.

Second story.

When I was a beat reporter, I was assigned to cover an affluent community. One evening after the township meeting wrapped, a knot of us gathered in the lobby of the municipal building. It was June, and the conversation turned to the summer jobs we had as kids. One man drove an ice cream truck. Another worked a ride on a boardwalk at the Jersey shore. Another worked as a ranch hand in Montana.



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One of the women said she and her husband had many summer jobs, but discouraged their children from taking any. Oh, they would make an exception if the job was, say, an internship that had a bearing on their child's future profession. And if it paid well. And if it did not interfere with the family's August vacation.

"We want their summer to be carefree," she said.

I grew up in Levittown in the 1970s, so naturally, her remarks made me want to throw up.

These parents were encouraging behavior that — as fathers back then might have put it — was no better than a "@#\$\$!@#\$\$ lazy bum."

My dad had his own name for this deadly sin of acedia — "ass-itis" — which he defined as, "When your ass sees work, it faints."

This is the affliction of able-bodied college men who see menial summer jobs as beneath them.

Parents who enable long summers of sloth have no business complaining when their sons never leave home, constantly play video games, and have only Internet girlfriends.

I am familiar with menial jobs, since I held many as a kid. Fry cook. Cleaner of U.S. mail trailers. Convenience store register. Pizza delivery guy.

I had more than 20 of these inglorious jobs. About half were obtained by asking the boss to give me work. I had a compelling reason: college tuition.

The jobs were often dirty and hot, and always low status and low paying. Cobbling two or three together over a summer gave me enough dough to pay half my tuition, room and board.

Although I did not know it then, I have realized how important these jobs were, because of what each one taught.

I learned to show up on time, every time, no matter how late I was out the night before.

I know what backbreaking labor is, and I instinctively know a slacker.

I learned how most people work, which is at jobs they don't necessarily like, but which they keep because other people, such as their children, depend on them.

Mostly, menial jobs taught me what kind of work I didn't want to do after graduation.

That lesson is far more valuable than whatever I learned in Western Civ, English Lit or Poli-Sci classes.

In a lot of ways, hustling to pay for college was the better education.