ALL THOSE JOBS

As far back as I can remember, I always worked. Even today, at age 66, if I see a penny lying on the ground, I will stop and pick it up. As a boy growing up on the South Side of Chicago, I had the usual chores: feeding and cleaning up after the family pets, cleaning my room, emptying the garbage, running errands, watering the lawn during dry spells, and raking autumn leaves. As I grew older, other duties were required: mowing the lawn with a push-mower, shoveling snow, scraping old paint and applying new paint to our front and back wooden porch stairs, and seasonally replacing summer window and door screens with heavy glass winter storm windows. I was never paid for any of this work. Getting a weekly or monthly allowance was just a fantasy. To acquire a few coins -- or even a dollar or two -- I would pick through neighborhood public garbage cans looking for empty glass soda pop bottles. When returned to the local supermarket, that paid two cents for every regular bottle and five cents for every quart bottle. I would also collect bundles of old newspapers and metal cans -- set out in the alleys behind our neighborhood houses -- using my red American Flyer wagon. When fully loaded, I would pull the wagon about a mile to the junkyard on 84th and Commercial Avenue, where it would be weighed, first full, then empty. The difference was then calculated to determine my earnings. I next learned to use an old window screen as a ‘sifter’ for the tan sands at Rainbow Beach, about six blocks from my house. Lost coins were my occasional found treasure. Finally, I never passed by a vending machine or a pay telephone without first poking my finger into its coin return. With any money I earned from these various endeavors, I purchased candy, ice cream, popsicles, comic books, trading cards, and plastic models (for a dollar) of airplanes, cars, ships, and tanks.

At age 8, I earned my first official pay of 25 cents an hour afterschool for cleaning up and sweeping floors at David L. Nolton’s Furriers, where my older sister Jan also worked after her high school classes. (She helped cut and sew furs into coats, and also helped clean them chemically and put them in cold storage.) Part of my duties was also to take care of a large cage of guinea pigs in the shop's basement -- feeding the cute, noisy critters and cleaning their pen, replacing their soiled wood shavings with fresh shavings.

At age 10, I had a better paying job at the furrier. Mr. Nolton had ordered dozens of large, one pound boxes of plastic wallet calendars with his business address and telephone number on them, as a form of advertisement. I and a handful of other local boys were to put these tiny calendars in people’s mailboxes, one each. This job paid $1/hr. It required a lot of walking afterschool, and we were to work until our ‘daily quota’ box was empty, going from house to house on different assigned streets. The ‘jackpot’ was when we hit on one of the many area apartment blocks, for there one could deliver through the lobby mailbox slots over thirty calendars without walking to thirty individual houses!

It was doing this job that I got my first lesson in workplace honesty. After a few weeks, I noticed that my colleagues were finishing their work before I did, seeing as I was usually the last one finished, despite working quickly and diligently. When I questioned them later in private, they confessed in confidence that they simply dumped most of their calendar cards into the garbage can, then sat and relaxed until they felt it was reasonable to return back to base. I was shocked, but never told Mr. Nolton. Meanwhile, I continued doing my routes honestly. Well, one day, he called all of us boys together, and told us that someone had discovered hundreds of his advertising calendars in the trash! Who did this? he angrily demanded. The guilty gradually confessed with shame, and they got fired on the spot. When Mr. Nolton realized I was innocent, he asked me to suggest any new, honest boys to replace those who had ripped him off. I asked some school buddies the following day after class and they were happy to start work. For my efforts and my honesty, my pay was upped to $1.25/hr.

When was 12, I went around my neighborhood during the summer and mowed lawns for a dollar or two, mostly for the elderly. In the winter, it was shoveling snow. If I did a huge, corner apartment complex with a lot of sidewalk, I sometimes got a whopping $5 if the snow was deep and heavy! I also shoveled snow for street parking spaces in front of people’s houses, a Chicago tradition before the snowplows could get through. Folks would put folding chairs in the cleared space to save it for themselves and them alone. And woe to anyone who broke the unwritten covenant and parked in someone else's cleared spot!

By age 13, I got an afterschool job as a cashier and stock clerk at Rosenblum’s Drugstore on 79th Street near Colfax Avenue. I got to wear a white smock with a name tag, a big deal for me and for my friends to ogle! It was here, however, that early teen ‘peer pressure’ first reared its ugly head. My schoolmates, both boy and girl, would wander in, and secretly ask for a ‘free’ pack of chewing gum or a free candy bar when Mr. Rosenblum was busy in the back of the store (and hence out of sight) or filling a pharmacy order. “Nobody will know,” they pleaded. “Aren’t you my friend?” But I was too afraid to comply, seeing as I needed the job and didn’t want to get fired. Yet after a few months working behind the counter, I myself succumbed to a terrible double sin.

There was a new cigarette brand called “Spring” which to me had the most peaceful and alluring commercials on TV. I loved watching them because they were so escapist from the gritty urban reality and dysfunctional family that I was stuck in. The ad had breezy, upbeat music, and featured young carefree couples in sunny country settings. “Spring” promised to taste like a fresh, happy Spring day! Although both my parents smoked and I hated the harsh, choking smell, I was convinced that “Spring” would be a completely different experience, and I had to try it. Obviously, buying a pack was illegal for someone my age. So I stole a pack off the shelf at Rosenblum’s Drugstore during one of my shifts. I was so nervous before and during the theft, but was then relieved when nobody saw my evil deed. I hid the pack until I could try my first smoke in a remote area the next day, a Saturday. I snuck a pack of matches from our kitchen and headed out. When I was all alone, I carefully opened the pack of “Spring” and slowly took out a cigarette. I lit it like I had seen most adults do it my entire life. I took a little puff, just in my mouth, not inhaled into my lungs. It tasted absolutely awful! What a rip-off! I was outraged. I quickly put the cigarette out and crushed the rest of the pack into shreds and threw it all away. I went back home disgusted, having learned a bitter lesson about advertising. But the guilt of my theft never left me. I was never caught, and I continued working afterschool at the drugstore for several more months, with scrupulous honesty. (Years later, I actually went back to Mr. Rosenblum and confessed my crime and paid him back for my hated contraband, and begged forgiveness with maximum embarrassment. He nodded and accepted my apology and knowingly remarked, “Lesson learned the hard way.”)

The summer of 1967 found me lying about my age to get a job as a junior camp counselor at Camp Henry Horner in Round Lake, Illinois. (I said I was 16 years old, whereas I would not be 16 until the end of summer on August 28.) This was a Jewish Youth camp that accommodated South Shore neighborhood boys from Chicago for a week, thus for ten weeks we had new campers every week. I was a live-in cabin counselor responsible for a dozen boys, ages 9-11. My former experience as a Cub Scout and Boy Scout sure came in handy! I also worked at the large waterfront -- teaching swimming, lifesaving, diving, rowing, canoeing, and sailing. I learned that kosher Jews never mixed meat and milk during meals, and I also picked up some Hebrew phrases and prayers. Usually, I had one handicapped boy in my cabin every week – in a wheelchair, or hearing- or speech- or vision-impaired. The goal was to give those with special needs a fun and positive week by including them in all possible activities. They really taught both me and the other boys the meaning of courage and determination! Lots of great memories that summer -- not the least being during the first week in August, when teenage girl junior counselors came up with their younger girl campers. I seriously fell in love for the first time then, to a wonderful girl my age named Vivian, who thankfully lived near my own Chicago neighborhood. (Our relationship lasted four years, and we even attended the same college until she moved away to NYC.)

My next job was as a stock clerk and grocery bagger at High-Low Foods for two years during my junior and senior years in high school. (The full details are found earlier in this volume of my collected short stories.)

By now I was 18 and off to college, specifically Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL, where I lived on the 7th floor in an all-male dorm, Stevenson South. After exhausting my savings and a small scholarship the first year (1969-70), I found myself broke and living back at home for a year, my education temporarily put on hold. That summer, I took a road trip to Seattle with my two best college friends, Joe and Rick. To earn some extra cash while we were there, we got a quick day job soliciting signatures to ensure a ballot measure legalizing dog track racing. Seeing as it paid us 25 cents for each valid signature, we decided to go to the nearest horse race track, figuring that the gamblers there would be most willing to sign. Our ‘bet’ paid off, so to speak, for we did indeed do a banner business!

Although I had earned my driver’s license at age 16, I could not afford my own car, so while back home I bought a used, red Suzuki 80cc motorcycle for $150. My family lived two blocks from an Illinois Central commuter train station, so I easily took the train downtown for several job interviews. Luckily, I landed a job in The Loop as an assistant manager in the Technical-Business-Scientific Department at Kroch’s and Brentano’s, a massive flagship bookstore on Wabash Avenue, under the “L” tracks. (K & B was at that time the largest bookstore chain in Chicago.) During favorable weather, I rode my motorcycle to work on Lake Shore Drive. When the weather was rainy or too cold or snowy, though, I naturally took the train.

I had grown out my beard for the first time by now, and I recall mostly wearing cheap Army/Navy surplus clothing, as was the trend for young people in those days. I had two guys my age working under me, and two managers working above me. The job of my crew was to fill book orders (called up by the managers on the sales floor) from our huge, third floor stock area, where titles were arranged on tall shelves much like a library. When we retrieved a title, we put it on an electric dumbwaiter and sent it downstairs. We also used metal carts and a freight elevator to load, then set up, large book displays on the sales floor. I enjoyed the job, and was soon invited up to the executive suites, where it was made clear that I was being specially groomed for higher management. But when I told the bosses that I wanted instead to return to college after a year, they were disappointed that I hadn’t chosen their book business as a career.

For my lunch hour every day, I ate at Stouffer’s restaurant on the nearby corner of Randolph and Wabash. There I saw prosperous downtown shoppers, smartly dressed businessmen, and attractive female office workers, and that sparked my desire to somehow become successful and respected like them -- whereas many of my generation at this time were involved in anti-war and political activism, drugs, talks of societal revolution, and counter-culturalism. After lunch, if I still had time, I also enjoyed visiting the city’s nearby iconic department store, its massive cathedral of consumerism: Marshall Field’s & Company. It offered simply the finest products from across the globe. My favorite departments were Antiques, Rare Books, Artworks, Imported Foods, and imported Men’s Clothing. Being personally rather impoverished, it was amazing just to look at these fine wares, but it was also sad to realize that I was in no position to actually buy anything.

I returned to NIU in the summer of 1971, being now able to afford another two years of education. In the summer of 1973, I was temporarily living in an ashram in Phoenix, AZ. (See my short story in this collection, “DLM Days,” for more details.) To earn money for myself and the commune, I joined the temporary employment service called Manpower, and worked in construction and clean-up in new or remodeled area shopping malls. I also worked for Arizona Highways Magazine, boxing up and loading their upcoming 1974 calendars. (Manpower routinely took 25% of your pay, however, so that was the downside.) By the autumn of 1973, however, I was broke again and back at home, but I got a job once again downtown, this time at The House of Vision, an optical company located on familiar Wabash Avenue. My job was delivering and retrieving eyeglasses and crafted optical lenses from various workshops located in skyscrapers scattered around The Loop downtown. I had to do a lot of walking, in all weather. It was a simple job, so not very intellectually challenging. I spent my down time at work reading Hermann Hesse and Ray Bradbury books, and writing poetry, and basically keeping to myself. None of my co-workers or my supervisor had any education past high school.

My father then died in September, 1974 (my mother had earlier passed away in 1966) and we were forced to sell our house -- with everything in it -- for $8500. After paying debts, the remainder was divided between myself and my two sisters. I was given the poorly maintained family car, a 1969 blue Chevy Nova, which limped along for a few more years before also giving up the ghost.

Back again at NIU, money was still a constant concern. There was always rent, tuition, books, and food to afford and other bills to pay. Hence, during the last three years of my education -- before I earned my teaching credential and graduated in 1975 -- I worked many different part-time jobs. Some were on campus, some were in the town of DeKalb, and some were in the neighboring town of Sycamore, IL. I vividly recall one day looking at my checking account balance and seeing the shocking numbers $2.37, my entire net worth! Most of my fellow students were also very poor, so I was not an exception. Some even resorted to secretly stealing food from the local National supermarket, hiding items like steak or cheese under their clothing. To save money for a while, I and my friends would eat one massive meal a day. There was a buffet restaurant on the main drag of Lincoln Highway called The Sweden House. It had an all-you-could-eat lunch buffet for $2.25, running from noon to three o’clock, then the price would rise for dinner to $3.00. We would pile in at 2:45 p.m. so as to beat the price increase and to eat as close as possible to the middle of the day. We gorged ourselves! The manager was chagrined but helpless. We also stuffed bread rolls and crackers in our pockets -- when his back was turned -- for later munching.

I first worked as a MOBIL gas station attendant, pumping gas, checking oil and tire pressure, washing windshields, and filling radiators. The manager, Lee Smith, gave me the station keys, so I worked alone and was in charge of everything. At day’s end, I put the day’s cash receipts in a slotted money vault in the office floor, and noted the total number of gallons of gas sold that day. Because I lived next door in a rented house with several male and female friends (dubbed “The Glidden Gang” because it was off Glidden Road near campus), it took all of 15 seconds to walk to work. I got scalded once when an old car pulled in and the driver asked me to check his radiator water level. When I removed the pressure cap, steam jets exploded over my hand, blasting the rag I clutched clean off. Luckily, I turned my head away at the crucial moment, or could have been blinded too. The man weakly apologized, saying, “Oh, I forgot to tell you it was real hot. I just drove over 200 miles, you know.” Occasionally, the station gave away ceramic plates, cups and saucers as bonus gifts with a fill-up, or stainless steel cutlery sets. One freezing winter’s day, I dropped the gas cap of a car I had just filled up. It was occupied by two very attractive women my age. They got out in the blizzard and blinding wind and drifting snow and helped me find the missing cap. Months later, the Glidden Gang lost its residence, and I moved to University Heights Apartments with my friend, Jim. By coincidence, the two women I remembered from the MOBIL happened to live right below us! Well, soon we were double-dating and more, I with Joan and Jim with Suzie. In fact, Jim and Suzie eventually got married, and still are happy together!

I next got a job as a night door guard at Neptune, an all-girls dorm. My duties consisted of staying awake all night from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. a few nights a week, checking women’s photo identification cards before admitting them inside the building, and especially making sure that no men snuck in. The latter was a challenge, particularly on the drunken weekends! Boyfriends would even dress up as women in the winter, covering their faces in scarves and heads in knit caps, crouching down to hide their height, and fabricating stories and excuses when caught. Then there was the temptation when single women who were either lonely or depressed or sleepless came down to the lobby area where I worked alone at perhaps 3 a.m., wearing flimsy nightgowns, some even still drunk, wanting to either talk or just be comforted. But I was honorable (and also afraid of losing my badly needed job if caught), so I gently dispatched them without any further complications!

The Pheasant Room was a fancy restaurant in the center of campus, on the ground floor of NIU’s tallest building. It was rather pricey, so students worked there but rarely ate there, unless their parents came up to visit and treated them. I worked there as a busboy, a ‘chef’, and a dishwasher. As busboy, I helped clear and set-up the tables. This was an easy job, except when it got really busy. Sometimes, a small tip was left under a plate, which we collected and shared in the kitchen after our shift. Once, some jerk had stuck a quarter directly in an uneaten pile of mashed potatoes, just to be degrading to us student ‘peons.’ That callous act still makes me angry, even today! I was also appalled at the sheer waste of food at buffets, seeing as us students were always poor and hungry. I even admit to secretly rising off untouched slabs of good roast beef with water, then wrapping it in a napkin to eat later. (We were warned we would get fired if we ever ate any food while on duty.) As for being a ‘chef’, my task was merely to reheat and carefully arrange and display platters of food, rather than cook anything from scratch. As dishwasher, you scraped the debris food off with a rubber spatula, then loaded the plates, cups, and cutlery into a giant dishwashing unit. The wash water was scalding hot – so hot that the dripping clean dishes would self-dry in mere seconds from evaporation. The downside was that unloading the dishwasher somewhat burned your fingers, seeing as we (always two of us) were not provided any protective rubber gloves.

Then there were jobs at local factories. One was at a Coleman Lantern facility, assembling the small propane cylinders and their burner caps. Totally mind-numbing. The other was at a wooden toy factory, my job being the sanding or beveling of the sides of pieces of pine wood which would later be made into a toy box or wagon. So boring that I actually fell asleep for a few moments once standing at the tall vertical sanding belt, sanding my fingertips and fingernails off a bit – which startled me awake! But both of these opportunities taught me many valuable lessons – how to do any kind of work without complaint, how to deal with various bosses and supervisors, and how unsuited I was for any unstimulating kind of factory or assembly line work.

The absolute worst part-time job I had in college, however, was at a large junkyard in nearby Sycamore. I was desperate and needed money quickly, so I went to the County Unemployment Office in downtown DeKalb. They had a job, they told me, that other students refused to do. It paid $4.25/hr., almost double the average hourly salary rate of other more typical college part-time jobs. However, I was warned up front that the job itself was brutal. I had no real choice but to agree, plus I soon talked my friend Jim into doing it too. He owned an old yellow VW Carmen Ghia, so we could ride together to work and back.

We started our job in the frigid winter wasteland that was Northern Illinois in January. Jim and I met our boss, Elmer, a 6' 3", 300 lb. German in blue bib-overalls who admitted that he shot and later ate any pigeons unlucky enough to be hanging around the junkyard! Our job was mostly outdoors, busting apart old electric motors with heavy sledgehammers to acquire the coils of copper wire inside. The wire was then unwoven, and later piled into container bundles to sell to other recyclers. It was back-breaking and cold work, the motor metal casings actually cracking rapidly in the sub-zero temperatures. No matter how many layers of clothing we wore, Jim and I were still always cold. We got to come inside the warehouse structure for a few minutes to warm up every hour, but the building itself was unheated, so relief was largely just from the biting winter wind gusts. Sometimes we would work inside all day, using pliers to remove recyclable metal parts from defunct electrical circuit boards. Week after week we toiled, month after freezing month, even in snowstorms. Would spring ever arrive? By necessity, we ate enormous 3000+ calorie early morning breakfasts at a local diner before heading to work. Eggs, bacon, sausage, oatmeal, pancakes, biscuits and gravy, grits or hash browns, grapefruit, bananas, orange juice, and milk. Yet by 10 a.m., we were already starving for lunch! We toiled like lumberjacks, our muscles sore and exhausted after every shift. Fortunately, going to classes every other day broke up the monotonous physical routine. When warmer weather finally arrived in rainy late April, Jim had had enough, and quit. I stayed on for several more weeks, taking the bus to work. The money I earned kept ‘the wolf from the door’ until I finished my schooling.

After graduation in 1975 (without any kind of student loan debt burden, I might proudly add), I snared my first teaching job – a ‘one-year only’ contract, however -- at Glen Crest Junior High School in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, rotationally teaching social studies, language arts, science, and math. The following summer in 1976, I worked as a Boy Scout camp director for the DuPage Area Council in Oxford, Wisconsin for ten weeks. My friend, Joe, then told me of a fifth-grade teacher opening at Sunnydale School in Streamwood, IL, which was part of the large Elgin U-46 District. After successfully interviewing, I was hired for $9999/yr. My professional career track was finally assured!

After retiring from thirty years of teaching (13 years in IL and 17 years in CA) in 2005, I immediately started a 'second career' as a part-time reference librarian at different local area public libraries, where I hope to keep working until I am someday unable. Along with my regular librarian duties, I also run a library book club and teach various computer classes at one of my libraries. Never one to waste time, I also enjoy doing four volunteer jobs: Historic Tours Docent at the California State Capitol in Sacramento; Information Help Desk at the Sacramento International Airport; Amtrak Station Host in Davis; and Usher at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts in Davis. Each job is basically helping people, sharing information, or solving problems. All are fun and stress-free!

Each job I have had throughout my life has taught me a valuable lesson -- be it learning a new skill, adapting to a special challenge, or simply making me adjust to working with all kinds of people.

Work can either be a blessing or a curse, a stimulating adventure or loathed drudgery. It goes beyond the need to earn money. It is a fundamental and necessary reality in life, and hopefully it can add meaning to one’s existence – especially if you are lucky enough to be excited in what you do as a career…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

October 8, 2017