

## Johnny Needs a Job

by Emily Wilson

*You've got to be kidding me*, I thought, as my boss heaved another huge box into the backroom. She smiled a devilish smile, then rushed back out to the front of the store where I could hear customers calling out shoe sizes like it were some sort of auction. The Converse wall loomed in front of me, every inch of its shelving packed with the narrow black boxes containing this year's hot commodity. This was even worse than the Uggs wall. Despite the apparent lack of space, a whole shipment of these stupid shoes had to fit in the hairline gaps between the boxes already squeezed into the shelving that towered above me. Put simply, shipment day was hell. And it just so happened that on this particular Wednesday, I was the only other employee working. It was just me, my inhumanly malicious boss and a mountain of shoeboxes waiting patiently to be put, individually, with the rest of their kind. Sometimes I rethought my original enthusiasm for entering the workforce.

But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. The story actually begins around the time I turned sixteen and I could finally, legally, be employed part-time. This was a step up after years of babysitting neighborhood children whose idea of fun consisted of either running through the house naked and screaming at the top of their lungs or simply wreaking havoc on their younger siblings. Kids are entirely too self-consumed to realize that their level of energy far surpasses my own. However, the important thing was that I had the first aid training certificate to prove I was a big shot to all the overprotective mothers on the block and I, at one point in time, thoroughly enjoyed ruling my small suburban neighborhood with my homemade Anne Geddes business cards. I continued babysitting even at the price of those terrifying nights where I was convinced someone lurked outside the pitch-black windows. Or the other nights when the children would wake up and sneak downstairs to appear in the doorway, giving me a heart attack. That's probably when my phobia of scary movies was born. This is when I realized I was in need of a job change. But I don't deny that I learned a lot from those days of babysitting; they were sort of like a perfect springboard, launching me into the real world which required different responsibilities but the same basic need for making every action meet a standard of excellence.

The word "allowance" had never existed in my parents' vocabulary. If work needed to be done, it would get done. No questions asked—no ifs, ands or buts. I was raised to be independent and self-sufficient. I learned to cook meals for the entire five-member family before age twelve. I learned to string Cat-5 wires through the unfinished basement walls at age fourteen. I painted entire rooms of the house to a professional appearance by the time I was sixteen. Thank goodness for my parents' interest in well-rounded children, or else I would probably be sitting with the weight of a laptop I had received as a gift, in a college dorm I would never worry about spending a cent on, and contemplating which clothing line I wanted for Christmas. Although it sounds appealing, for me, it was not.

Whether teens should be allowed to work part-time during their hardest years in high school is an intense debate fit for *Oprah*. With some parents seeking to shelter their children from the nasty truths of the economy, and others simply not wanting their offspring to have a childhood congested with responsibilities, how far will parents go to let their children have perfect childhoods? What exactly fits the description of a perfect childhood? I remember, at an early age, helping to mow the lawn, riding my bike around the cul-de-sac with the neighborhood kids, planting irises for hours in the backyard, eating dinner with the family, only to start the whole cycle over again the next day—work, play and more work. Was my

childhood off the mark? I'd say the balance of chores and playtime was a bit uneven; it wasn't your typical childhood, but, now that I look back, I appreciated it more because the time I did spend playing was that much more special.

"Are you *sure* you know nothing about the missing deposit?" The woman in charge of mall security eyed me carefully. My mind went blank. I couldn't remember what had happened the night the money disappeared. It seemed like a normal night at work. The lady looked unconvinced, as she tried, and failed, to read my mind for the answers she wanted. I headed back into Journey's, the small shoe store, which was temporarily doubling as a crime scene now, and began helping customers like nothing was amiss. It wasn't until hours later when I was home again that I remembered personally watching my manager take the money and put it into his bag, saying as he did so, "It's too late to do the deposit, and the numbers aren't adding up. I don't know why, but I'll just do it in the morning so we can both go home. It's already late." I didn't see anything wrong with the idea at the time. But now it seemed more than a little sketchy. I called the sheriff lady at the number she'd given me "in case I remembered any more details" and left her a long message; I was more than a little embarrassed to have forgotten such a big, not to mention important, chunk of that night. After a few weeks of searching for that creepy, cross-eyed manager, the police eventually found him hiding out somewhere and arrested him. After that, I decided I had worked at the mall long enough and it was time to seize other opportunities; I assume most would agree that \$6.50 an hour was hardly enough to have to deal with a police investigation in addition to the normal stress of work.

Obviously, not every part-time job experience is going to be as perfect as a fairytale, where elves perform songs and dances in the dark hours of the night while finishing the work you hadn't quite gotten to. And even more importantly, part-time jobs aren't for everyone. But when will teenagers be able to get a taste of the real world, other than when they are shipped off to college? Unfortunately, for the few who have grown addicted to their parents' constant care, there is no one at college to hold their hands and make their decisions; for some, that's a dramatic change from the life they knew in high school. How will the next generation of presidents, doctors, lawyers, professors and homemakers know what they need to be prepared for if they have never met it face to face?

The two people who showed me how to do things right, my parents, have some important insights into this question. So I struck up a conversation with my mother, Melana Wilson, since she has had such an important role in my success as, first, a young entrepreneur, then as an easily promoted, hard-working teenager. Our brief interview helped me to understand some of the less obvious reasons they encouraged me to pursue a part-time job. My mother made it clear that having a part-time job in high school wasn't just about having my two older sisters and me make our own money. It was about gaining experience in the workplace, developing the ability to prioritize a busy schedule, learning to cooperate with different types of people in a work setting, realizing the value of money, and developing a strong work ethic, not to mention a sense of myself and what I was able to accomplish (Wilson). Both my parents came from large, hard-working families, and feared they would raise spoiled children if they didn't instill this value. That concern was a quickly extinguished flame.

Sitting at the dining room table, I asked my mother what some of the reasons were for her wanting my sisters and me to have part-time jobs during high school. She laughed a little as she explained that the whole process of interviews and applications was helping us to acquire the ability to "handle rejection in a positive manner" such that when the "career

interview” comes along, it’s not your “first interview” (Wilson). I was quivering like a puppy during my first interview, and it didn’t even turn out to be that bad. The lady interviewing me just wanted to know that I was reliable, trustworthy and responsible; everything else she could read in my application. That was the promising beginning of that awful job at the shoe store. But even with that small bit of practice, I’ll know what to expect when I go in to a job interview that will have a huge impact on my future.

The other side of the debate mainly comes from editorials and parenting books which question whether having a part-time job is essential even at the expense of good grades. The main concern parents seem to have is whether their teen will be able to handle the added stress of having a part-time job. I say, why not let the teenager decide? It is *her* life after all. C. D. Crowder, a regular blogger for Associated Content, a website where people can read about a wide range of current topics, speaks out against teens having jobs in the article “Arguments Against Teens Working After School Jobs.” According to Crowder, an after-school job adds more stress than necessary, takes away from the focus on school, and could result in health dangers. I would have to agree. Most part-time jobs are stressful, and working twenty to thirty hours a week like I did, certainly started taking a toll on my academic career. But that’s the beauty of it: you learn to deal with stress while realizing you have to work a little bit harder to achieve your goal. How do parents expect teens to adjust to college life if all they have ever known is school, friends, and home?

“Trashing Teens,” an interesting article featured in *Psychology Today*, examines the psychological effects of culture on shaping teenage behavior. Psychologist Robert Epstein points out that “the age at which Americans reach adulthood is increasing—30 is the new 20—and most Americans now believe a person isn’t an adult until age 26. The whole culture collaborates in artificially extending childhood, primarily through the school system and restrictions on labor” (qtd. in Marano). If society wants them to attend school and not worry about anything else, then they will consequently not be ready to live on their own until age 30. “We have completely isolated young people from adults and created a peer culture,” Epstein explains. “We stick them in school and keep them from working in any meaningful way, and if they do something wrong we put them in a pen with other ‘children’” (qtd. in Marano). I agree. We created these troublesome teens and by preventing them from working and maturing, we are only making matters worse.

My second, and current, part-time job went smoother than the first because I had already had a crash course in job experience, and I knew what to expect. I barely had to be interviewed and got the job as a hostess for the well-known restaurant Chili’s the same day I dropped off the application. After two days of work, I had memorized the table numbers, the menu, and the names of the servers. After three months, I earned a \$0.75 raise in pay, and after six months, I was promoted to Hostess Trainer and received an additional \$1.25 raise in pay along with a \$50/month bonus to be spent on food from the restaurant. I already had a better work ethic than the girl who had trained me, and she had been working there for over a year. I doubt I could have worked my way up through the ranks so fast if I had not already had experience from my previous job. Managers want to know they are getting as much as they are paying for in an employee. I was constantly working, whether it was my job to do or not, and that’s exactly what they wanted to see.

I believe the whole “work ethic” part should start at around the age where most children are screaming at their mothers to buy them candy in the grocery store. If there is no discipline from the beginning, then how do you expect they will react to being forced to work? The reason parents want to have their high school students focus on college

applications, extracurricular activities, and simply graduating is because they know their children won't be doing their best if presented with another item to juggle. Let's put this into perspective: Johnny has never had to do chores, but when his allowance runs out, his dad has always given him a generous amount of money toward fast food and gas for the car he was given on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Clair works in the neighborhood as a pet-sitter, and is well known for being reliable; she saves most of the money she earns for college, and the rest she uses to help alleviate her parents' financial strain by buying her own clothes. Which of these two will be better off, and more comfortable, in a part-time job? The sad thing is, many of America's youth are being raised like Johnny. It worries me to see so many gifted young people put their potential to waste.

What can we do about the generations that have already been raised to delay work? Not much. In fact, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 1996 and 1998, fewer than 26% of sixteen-year-olds and fewer than 39% of seventeen-year-olds worked during the months they were in school (cited in Ozturk and Debelak 3); it is very likely that those statistics are even lower in today's society. We need to put an abrupt halt to this vicious cycle and begin teaching our youth the value of hard work, through household chores, at around the same age I learned to haggle with my dad: age five. In my work experience, I learned to be self-sufficient and organized; I developed money management skills and began building a simple résumé all before the end of my senior year. I worked all four years of high school at a part-time job and still managed to earn more money in scholarships than both my sisters combined, got into an excellent school, and graduated with a high GPA.

I've come a long way since I stood before those towering shoe racks. I don't want to wake up in ten years and realize that there are more people like Johnny in our society than there are people who appreciate hard work. Maybe a part-time job isn't for everyone, but it was for me. I want to be irreplaceable.

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