

WORK

BY GEOFFREY CANADA

Editor's Note: Learning to work is a rite of passage into adulthood. In this excerpt from his book, Reaching Up for Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America, Geoffrey Canada remembers his own initiation. He talks about what it means for poor, inner-city kids, especially boys, when they fail to connect with the world of work and about what the organization of which he is president, the New York-based Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, does to help.

IT WAS report card day, and the young people knew that their grades at school would have a direct bearing on whether or not they could continue to work at Rheedlen. We had become used to the necessity for vigilance on our part on report card day after one particularly creative incident. At first, Brian, who is my assistant at Rheedlen, was delighted when he made the announcement in my office. He was talking about a group of young people who work for us.

"Geoff, we finally did it."

"Did what?" I asked.

"We got them all to pass all of their classes this marking period. The turnaround is remarkable. Two of them went from failing one class and barely passing the others to good grades in all their classes. Can you believe it?"

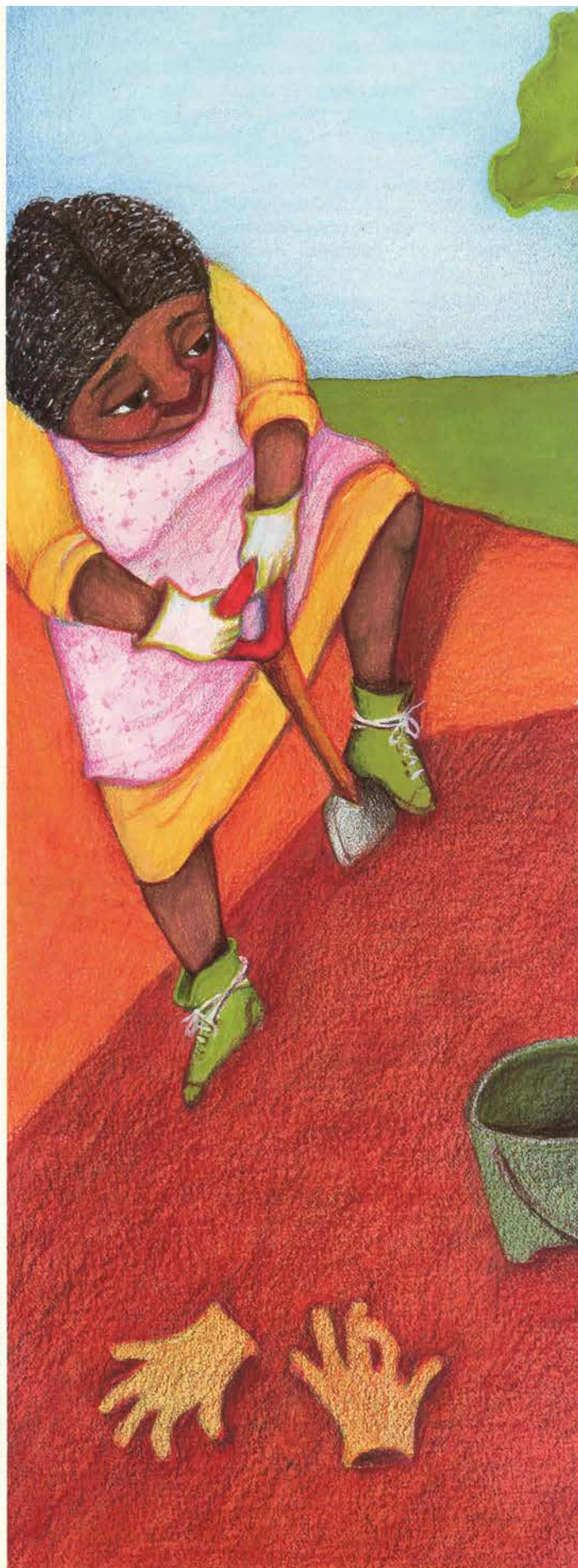
"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I checked all of the report cards myself. It's the first time everyone has passed everything."

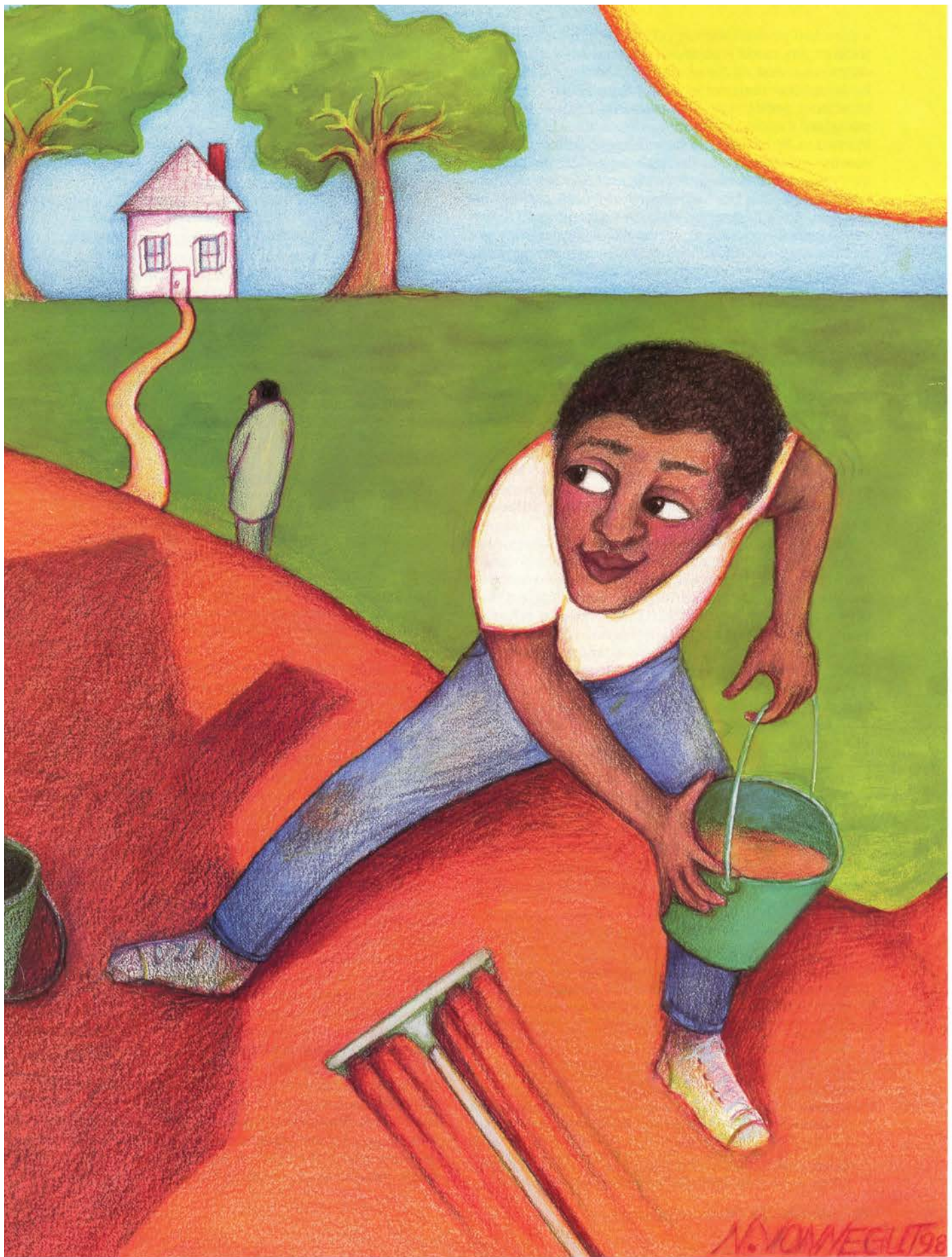
"Well, that's great," I said. "Let's make sure we let them know how proud we are of them."

We weren't proud for long. Brian's eye for detail found a coincidence too odd to be accepted at face value. It seemed that on three of the boys' report cards

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a zero had printed slightly offline. When he compared their report cards with those of other high school students who worked for us and went to the same school, he found that their zeros were printed correctly. It was an almost perfect job. The boys had created the computerized report cards using the skills that they had learned at Rheedlen and had changed failing grades to passing ones. A call to the high school confirmed our suspicions; the boys had failed several classes. They were suspended but told that they could reapply for work at Rheedlen when they brought us real report cards with all passing grades. Next semester they got passing grades the old-fashioned way, by earning them. The three have passed all of their classes ever since, and all have completed their requirements for graduation.

The academic turnaround these boys accomplished in the end is not unusual. Many of the young people who work for Rheedlen graduate from high school and go on to college because of one thing—work. We have found work to be a very effective tool in keeping boys involved in school. For millions of teenagers growing up in America, school is something that they feel only marginally connected to. To them, schoolwork seems disconnected from their lives. They complain that it's boring and find it irrelevant. But they want to work. Tying the two together has pushed many a Rheedlen boy through high school and into college.

Learning how to work early on in life is important for all children, but it is critical for poor children, especially boys. Work provides a much-needed source of money to buy the necessities of life. It teaches children how to save and budget. It teaches real responsibility. Working as a child helps teach the values and ethics surrounding employment at an early age. And, finally, it connects poor boys to a world that is unknown to many of them, a world of working adults and the normative behaviors that are associated with working for a living. So work should be part of every poor child's life experience, but there is one huge problem: In many poor communities, jobs and job opportunities have all but disappeared. And the group that finds it hardest to get a job is boys.

SOCIOLOGIST AND author William Julius Wilson in his book *When Work Disappears* (1996) explains why in some communities, especially poor African-American communities, finding work has become all but impossible.

The disappearance of work in many inner-city neighborhoods is in part related to the nationwide decline in the fortunes of low-skilled workers. Fundamental structural changes in the new global economy, including changes in the distribution of jobs and in the level of education required to obtain employment, resulted in the simultaneous occurrence of increasing joblessness and declining real wages for low-skilled workers. The decline of the mass production system, the decreasing availability of lower-skilled blue-collar jobs, and the growing importance of training and education in the higher-growth industries adversely affected the employment rates and earnings of low-skilled black workers, many of whom are concentrated in inner-city ghettos. The growing suburbanization of jobs has aggravated the employment woes of poor inner-city workers. Most ghetto residents cannot afford an automobile and therefore have to rely on public transit systems that make the connection between inner-

city neighborhoods and suburban job locations difficult and time-consuming (p. 54).

And to make matters worse, many poor minority residents face a well-developed set of negative perceptions about their skills and abilities. This is particularly true for black males. Wilson cites the Urban Poverty and Family Life Study's survey of "a representative sample of Chicago-area employers," which indicates "that many consider inner-city workers—especially young black males—to be uneducated, unstable, uncooperative, and dishonest" (p. 111).

We have in our country a very large number of youth who are growing up in communities that have failing schools, high rates of crime, and myriad other social problems. We must find real solutions for those problems, but we must also understand that the absence of the opportunity for work creates another set of problems many of us have not considered. Wilson writes,

Neighborhoods that offer few legitimate employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools lead to the disappearance of work. That is, where jobs are scarce, where people rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to help their friends and neighbors find jobs, and where there is a disruptive or degraded school life purporting to prepare youngsters for eventual participation in the workforce, many people eventually lose their feeling of connectedness to work in the formal economy; they no longer expect work to be a regular, and regulating, force in their lives. In the case of young people, they may grow up in an environment that lacks the idea of work as a central experience of adult life—they have little or no labor-force attachment. These circumstances also increase the likelihood that the residents will rely on illegitimate sources of income, thereby further weakening their attachment to the legitimate labor market (pp. 52-53).

It is paramount that we reconnect young people to the world of work. There are great models of how to do this effectively, like Youth Build, a national program that combines real on-the-job work experience with academic support for young people. There is also the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), a government program designed to provide poor youth with opportunities for summer employment. Each year SYEP faces an uphill battle to keep its funding when we ought to be figuring out how to make the program a better one and expanding it to employ youth year 'round.

But simply providing young people with jobs is not the solution to ensuring that young people learn how to work. At Rheedlen, we find that we must train teenagers right from the beginning that a job carries with it a set of expectations that the young person might not understand or even agree with. There are the usual things that most employers expect from their employees—punctuality, good attendance, reliability. But then there are other things that we find we must instruct young people in—professional appearance, having a good attitude, respect for authority. Probably the most difficult thing our young people have to learn to cope with is how to do a good job even when you don't like doing something. It seems that many of them think they ought to like what they do for work all the time. If they don't, they often feel taken advantage of, or picked on by their supervisor,

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and many times they feel perfectly justified in making sure their supervisor is acutely aware of their unhappiness.

THERE WAS one time when we had several prominent members of President Clinton's Cabinet coming to visit our Countee Cullen Beacon School. They were coming with David N. Dinkins, then mayor of New York. A host of news reporters were waiting and television cameras were everywhere. In the midst of making sure everything was prepared, we realized we needed someone to help set up the tables where a light snack would be served to the hundred or so dignitaries attending. I spotted two of our teen employees standing around and asked them to help carry the food and paper plates into the gymnasium where the event was being held.

"Excuse me, I want you two to help set up the snacks in the gym and then help serve our guests. Make sure you bring the paper plates and cups with you."

"We were told we were to do security," one answered.

"Well, that's okay because we have enough security. I need you to help with the food prep," I said.

"Nobody told us that we would be setting up and serving food. I'll be honest, I don't want to serve people food. That's not my job," said the other.

"Your job is to work for Rheedlen and do whatever we need you to do. Now I don't plan to have a big debate in the hallway. I have people who are grown men and women, who have degrees from college, helping with the food. You two help out like everybody else. That's the end of discussion," I replied.

As the president of Rheedlen, I am not used to having employees balk at lending a helping hand to aid the company. Everyone at Rheedlen knows that I will roll up my sleeves as quick as the next person when something needs to be done. My directors all sweep floors, move tables, or set up food when the need arises. I have a reputation for being fair with employees, but I demand that they work hard and give us a good day's work for their pay. And when it comes to work, I don't make exceptions for young people; they also must work hard. I assumed that after hearing the tone in my voice, the two teenagers would put their reservations aside and do what was asked of them.

The complaints came rapidly one after another. It was not only adult staff who came to me, the other young people who worked for us noticed as well. These two particular boys had a terrible attitude and

didn't care who knew it. I rushed into the gym. It was packed with some of the most influential people in New York City. People seemed excited about the visit and the question-and-answer session that was about to begin. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, everyone except two teenagers standing sullenly behind a table filled with juices, soft drinks, snacks, and paper products. When people asked for soda it was poured and handed to them with open hostility. I found two of my adult staff and quickly replaced the two teens.

The next day I brought the two into my office. I asked them why on such an important day they refused to be supportive. I reminded them that they knew Rheedlen well and knew we had high standards for all our employees. Why, I asked, when they were asked to do something, even if they didn't like it, had they responded in such an angry way? Their answer: They didn't know how other people felt about serving people, but they didn't like it. I realized that they thought they were too good to be serving people cups of juice. Now these were not teens who had money or who came from homes that had money. They had no high school or college degrees, no professional training that would ensure that they could support themselves. Yet they were so proud that they felt serving juice was beneath them. They were unrepentant. They were fired.

THE THING that struck me about this incident when it happened was that these two boys knew they were risking their jobs by their behavior. (After several months they came back to us with a new attitude toward work and have been excellent employees ever since.) They felt they were standing up for some principle that had to do with their being exploited. They were proud that, unlike the other teens, they had stood up for themselves. They were not the first teens that Rheedlen has fired because they refused to do hard work or did it with such anger that the children or adults they were working with felt unwelcome.

I have talked with many young people who have gotten fired from their jobs, and when I've questioned why they were fired they say, "They didn't like me because I'm black," or Latino, or whatever. Or they say, "They were prejudiced there. They gave me all the dirty jobs, and the other people had the easy jobs." Boys with no previous work experience seem to find it hardest to adjust to the world of employment. Boys often confuse their status as males with how they are treated on the job. They often feel disrespected and humiliated when a supervisor chastises them or orders them around. I'm not trying to suggest for a second that many teens don't face discrimination and racism, but they also fall victim to their own unrealistic expectations about work. They don't know that everybody starts at the bottom, that the lower the level of the skills that are needed to perform your job, the more likely you are to have to take orders, to be bossed, to do the dirty work.

I have found that many boys come to their first job with no real understanding of what hard work means. This is a tremendous handicap. Girls are often expected to take responsibility around the house, cooking, or cleaning, or doing the laundry. There is often a

set of responsibilities and expectations placed on girls at home that helps prepare them for other work experiences. But much too often nothing of the sort is expected of boys. We know that much of being able to understand and excel in the workplace has to do with the attitudes, habits, and experiences we have had before we ever arrive at that first paying job. Many boys face real hard work for the first time when they get their first job—and they are totally unprepared for this new experience. And that is our fault. Parents and other adults don't begin preparing children early enough for the real world of work. When once children played an important part in the economy of many families, working in the fields or factories next to their parents, today many adults do everything possible to make sure their children don't have to do hard work. This, in my opinion, is a mistake. I learned how to work hard before I ever earned a penny for it. Again, it was a lesson learned from my grandmother.

MY GRANDPARENTS' house in Wyandanch was set on about three-quarters of an acre of land. When they moved in, the house was completed, but the yard had to be landscaped by us. We had no money to hire a professional landscaper. The front yard was a mess. It had been graded only slightly after the workers finished the house, and grass and weeds sprouted willy-nilly. Grandma explained what we had to do to the yard before we could plant grass.

"First we have to pull up all the grass and weeds, then pick up all the big pieces of wood and rocks and stuff like that. Then, when we finish that, we have to rake the ground even and pick up the smaller pieces of debris that we find."

I couldn't wait to get started. The quicker we began, the quicker we could plant the grass, and then I would have my own lush lawn to play on. Grandma gave me a pair of work gloves, and I felt like a real grownup. I attacked the yard with gusto. Grandma warned me to slow down because the day was young yet. I looked at my grandmother and realized for the first time that she was getting old. She had forgotten how young people had a lot of energy and could outwork older people. At thirteen I was already feeling the coming of manhood. I even had the proof—three whiskers protruding from my chin, which I took to stroking when I was deep in thought. I surveyed the yard and thought that maybe it might take a couple of hours of hard work to complete it. I figured we would be done before lunchtime.

With Grandma working next to me, I attacked the dirt with vigor and determination.

"Whoa, slow down there, Geoffrey. You won't last at that rate."

"It's okay, Grandma. I'm all right. It won't take me long. Watch."

In no time I was tired, sweating and grunting, as I fought the rake through the soil. I looked at Grandma. She looked as cool and refreshed as when she'd first come outside. She had raked a slightly smaller section than I, but it seemed as if she could rake all day.

"Ready to take a break?" she asked when she saw me looking at her.

She could tell I was exhausted. I'm sure she smiled

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inwardly at my feigning otherwise. I dropped the rake and stumbled to the back of the house, afraid my arms would never stop hurting. My grandmother brought me a glass of lemonade and words of wisdom at the same time.

"Geoffrey, you know work is a very important thing. And I know a lot of people who don't know how to pace themselves. So they start out real good. I mean they just are going and going. But after a while they start to peter out. And in the end you find out that they wasn't worth two hoots. You have to learn how to size up a job. Remember each job has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You keep worrying about the end. You're trying to get to the end so quick you think you can skip the beginning and the middle—you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

"Yes, Grandma," I said. But that wasn't exactly the truth. I didn't really understand.

"Let me tell you about work. The first thing you have to do is to size up the job. How long will it take? Then, in the beginning, try to figure out the easiest way to get the job done as quickly as possible. You spend five minutes pulling on an old root when if you chopped it with the hoe you'd be done in five seconds. You see?"

"Yes, Grandma, I see that."

"Good. In the beginning ask yourself, 'How can I do it quicker using less energy?' You experiment a lot until you come up with a system. Then in the middle, which is usually the longest part of the job, you learn to enjoy it. You set a pace and a rhythm and you set your mind to work. Did you know that you can enjoy even hard labor?"

"No, Grandma, I didn't. I don't think I could ever enjoy raking. It's so hard and boring."

"Raking is hard, but sometimes you make a job harder than it is by hating it or fighting it. Work is work. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's easy. Let me tell you a secret. When you're doing hard work like this with your body, you can be doing other wonderful things with your mind. That's how you make the pain and boredom go away."

"Grandma, what about the end of the job? You haven't talked about that."

"You have to finish a job with enough energy to make sure the end is done just as well as the beginning. People are often exhausted by the time they reach the end of the job. They start taking short cuts, and they can sometimes ruin the whole thing just be-

cause they didn't know that the end is as crucial as the beginning. When you take pride in your work, once you've finished a job you can look back at it and know that you've done the best you could. And when that's the case, sometimes you can come back years, even decades later and see that your work has remained intact because you did it right from beginning to end."

Raking the yard and removing the debris was only the beginning. Our next task was even more grueling. We had to even out the side of the property line that sloped downward. And with that effort I began to learn my second lesson about working that summer.

The task was simple but would demand great effort. We had to carry dirt from the back of the property to the front and build up the boundary line between my grandparents' land and the adjacent lot. The problem was that the ground was too soft for the wheelbarrow when it was loaded with dirt. So we resorted to carrying the dirt in buckets. We formed a simple assembly line. My grandmother shoveled the dirt with one of my brothers, the others of us carried the dirt in the buckets. I tried to remember what grandma had told me about working because it became apparent real fast that this was not going to be a quick job. Each time we emptied a bucket of dirt we looked to see if we could see any difference in the front yard. We couldn't. In fact, after a whole day of moving dirt, outside of some aching arms and shoulders, some calluses on the hands, we could see no signs of our work at all.

That night we all ate a nice big dinner, and I wondered how long it would take to finish the yard. I was more tired physically than I had ever been before, but sitting at the table with my brothers and grandparents talking about the work we had done, and the work we still had to do, made me feel proud. I had never been treated as an equal by adults. I felt now that I was really contributing something. More important, my grandparents treated me as if I had earned their respect. It wasn't anything big, it was the little things they said that made me feel as if I had just gone through a rite of passage.

"Now, Geoffrey, have some more cornbread. You know you have to replace all that energy you used up today," Grandma said.

"Thanks, Grandma. Don't mind if I do."

"Let me look at those hands. Didn't you say your hands were hurting?" Grandpa asked.

"Yes, Grandpa. Right here," I said, showing him my palms up.

"Well now, let me see. You know, it looks like you just growing a few calluses on those hands. That's what hard work will do for a man. They might be sore for a couple of days. It happens to all men who work hard like we do. How do they feel now?" Grandpa asked.

"They don't feel so bad. It's nothing really," I said, feeling that I'd earned the pain that flashed through my sore hands whenever I closed them. I was proud of that pain because I was a working man now.

My brothers and I carried pails of dirt for weeks. It was hard, hot, back-breaking work. We thought we would never finish, but we did. We had a celebration to signal the end—Grandpa cut a watermelon and we took big slices and walked the front yard admiring our

work. The ground was now smooth and even all the way to the end of the property line. I wasn't all that happy to see the end of the job. We had become quite a team. Grandma was right. Hard work could be fun if you had the right attitude. I was disappointed to know we couldn't plant grass that summer; it was too late. But the next spring we seeded and watched as a lush, green, even lawn sprouted up.

I HAVE HAD many jobs, many of them menial, since my grandparents taught me how to work. None of those jobs was ever as hard as the work I did for free with my grandparents. This is not the case for too many children today. Boys who think that they are ready for the world, ready to drop out of school at fifteen or sixteen, or at least get it over with, need to learn first about hard work. They need to understand that unless they excel in school, their options will be very limited. They will face fierce competition for the relatively few unskilled jobs that still exist. And many of them will not be properly prepared even for those. They don't have experience with the world of work. They haven't developed good work habits, a positive attitude, or an understanding of what will realistically be required of them.

While we must have high standards when it comes to young people working, we must in the first place create opportunities for them. Simply complaining about youth crime and people on welfare will not solve the problem of how we produce employable adults. Many young people are totally alienated from the world of work because of where they live or because of the color of their skin. We must level the playing field when it comes to opportunity in this country by making sure that we remove the barriers that so many of our youth face in finding and keeping jobs.

To begin with, it is imperative that we increase the number of jobs available for our youth. And in particular we must focus on creating jobs for the young people who are the most discriminated against—black boys. This responsibility must be borne not only by government, by increasing the job programs that already exist, but also by the corporate, not-for-profit, and small business sectors in America as well. We must find creative ways to draw huge numbers of boys who presently can't find jobs into the world of work. We might try a tax credit for businesses that hire young people from poor communities or asking corporations to partner with certain communities in this effort.

Our strategies with young people at Rheedlen are based on the simple idea that work is a key ingredient in keeping young people engaged in school and community. We always have a group of young people around who are employed by us to deliver messages, do maintenance work, and answer the phones. All of the teenagers who work for us have to be enrolled in school and passing their classes, as I said earlier. Failure to do so means a warning first, then termination from the Rheedlen job. We have found this to be a very effective mechanism for making sure young people graduate from high school and develop job skills or go on to college. Many of our young people don't have clear career goals as teenagers, but then again,

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