

Star-Telegram

An American Dream

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Lately a serious financial doubt has surfaced in the news: Can anyone still achieve the American Dream? Much of the debate has centered on the battle over the minimum wage, but that seems disingenuous; such jobs alone will never move one into the middle class. True, to a teenager, flipping burgers is a valuable lesson in developing workplace skills. But, if you're still doing the same thing at 30 years old, your odds of becoming a solid middle class citizen have probably slipped away. And no improvement in the minimum wage is going to better those odds.

No, the last great equal-opportunity jobs engine — it takes in anyone of desire, integrity and intelligence and gives them the opportunity to go anywhere they want in life — may be the automobile industry. Just last month new car dealers in America topped the 1 million mark for employment. Put another way, one out of every 145 working Americans now makes his or her living inside a dealership.

The Last Level Playing Field

Forty years ago I was a 20-year-old kid, just transferred to Houston with an insurance company and terminated two weeks later. I don't remember if I had five bucks in my checking account or was overdrawn that much, but it was somewhere right in that neighborhood.

Attention deficit disorder made me a mediocre student in school, and in the real world it made focusing on the mundane and repetitive chores most jobs require all but impossible. Oh, and just as all the bad news arrived right after that move to Houston, I found out my wife was pregnant. A week later I found myself selling Oldsmobiles — and I haven't looked back since.

As it turns out, for all of youth's known handicaps, everyone also has talents if they refuse to let life get the best of them; and the car business is well known for finding one's real talent and putting it to good use.

Starting out in auto sales is certainly tougher now than it was back in the 1970s, but in reality it's still the one last great engine of commerce that offers everyone — everyone who's truly determined to improve his or her station in life — an equal opportunity to succeed. Most would be amazed at how many general managers, or even how many extremely successful car dealers, have no more than a high school education. One of our most successful and respected car dealers in Fort Worth was a high school dropout. In the car business MBAs don't count for much.

A week ago I was visiting with Charlie Gilchrist out at Southwest Nissan and met his finance manager, Justin Rogers, for the first time. As I always do, I asked this young man how he managed to find his way into the auto industry. Rogers, it turns out, spent eight years in the Marine Corps (three tours in Iraq), believing that the service would be his permanent career. But he was assigned to recruiting duty — and this Marine proudly saw himself on the front lines, not hanging out in a strip mall selling others on joining the Corps. He came home to Parker County

instead and got into the car industry. To say he is well on his way to making a successful civilian career would be an understatement.

The Middle Class

And when it comes to our veterans, I always think of Carl Sewell. When his son and daughter came into the family business, Sewell's first lesson was to remind them to always take great care of those who worked in their service departments. As Sewell pointed out, these are our employees who always go off to fight our wars; they never ask for much, they put in a hard day's work, and all they want is to be able to afford a nice home for their family and maybe a bass boat to go fishing on the weekends.

For those who work with their hands fixing the nation's automobiles, most car dealers feel respect as deep and strong as Carl Sewell's. Today being a top-flight mechanic at a well run dealership is certainly the ticket to a solidly middle-class lifestyle — and it's work that can never be outsourced to a country with a cheaper workforce.

More important, much has been made of the fact that Wal-Mart hired 40,000 veterans in the past year. That's admirable, but those jobs don't pay all that well. Meanwhile, in most years new car dealers need 50 – 80,000 more mechanics; and those careers *do* pay well. Wouldn't we be smart to help more veterans or young people with basic mechanical skills enter the auto industry and solidify their future? Our car dealers would love to have them; they welcome those who are serious about the career challenge.

My first week in the car business I sold seven cars. Not because of any deep talent or any inborn grasp of what I was doing; it was because Milt Faigan, the sales manager at Sam White Olds, took such pity on my condition that he made sure that those whom I showed cars to went ahead and bought them. Thanks to his sympathy and taking the time to show me how to properly sell automobiles, within a week I had solved my most pressing financial worries. Two years later I was running a finance department; and eight months after that I had my dealer's license from GMI and owned my first Mercedes.

By sheer luck I had stumbled into the one career choice that contained no built-in limits to where my basic drive to succeed could take me. Of course, there would be bumps along the way (mostly of my own making), but by and large my time in the auto industry gave me what no formal education could: It allowed me to do whatever I wanted to in life. And my story pales in comparison to some of my friends'. One started selling cars in 1984, and 15 years later he was the general manager of the largest Honda dealership in America and owned his own jet. And he's only done better since then.

Keeping the Dream Alive

Not everyone makes it in the car business, nor does everyone who makes a good living in the industry make it to the top. But I still can't think of any other business in America whose owners hire such a diverse workforce and then take incredible pride when their best employees succeed beyond anyone's imagination. I've been with dealers in tough times, when they openly agonized that their people weren't making enough money; and I've been with them in great times, when they proudly told me how much their best employees were earning. The best dealers share their wealth with those they think are deserving because of their work ethic and accomplishments. At America's new car dealerships, there is no such thing as income inequality.

New car dealers today are the ultimate melting pot. No one is refused the chance based on race, politics or personal beliefs. It doesn't matter whether one is a blue-collar worker or never wanted to get one's hands greasy. And, while some corporations require a college degree to do work so insignificant that one wonders why it couldn't be performed by someone with a GED, car manufacturers don't ask for proof of a degree when assigning new dealerships, if your car career accomplishments make you the best candidate.

The car business is tough, and it's long hours, but that's also part of why it's so great. But in a day where story after story claims that the American Dream of becoming middle class might be slipping out of reach, our nearly 18,000 new car dealers, employing one out of every 145 working Americans, offer people with intelligence, desire and integrity the same opportunities to go wherever they want to go in life, if they'll just put in the effort.

And my column today proves just that point. Because I was once that 20-year-old kid, broke and with no future, when Milt Faigan told me, "Sure, kid, I'll give you a chance to sell cars."

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