

Raising Future Tradespeople

For the next generation trade pros, family is the bedrock of it all.



An installer completes a multi-zone hydronic system in Massachusetts that combines variable speed pumping with Zone Sentry zone valves. Photo Credit: Taco Comfort Systems

BY JOHN VASTYAN

This column looks at the foundation for generosity of thought, word and deed, and solid accomplishment at work — all of which are strengthened when observed and learned early, at home.

Long ago, the crucible of learning was the family. A mother and father grew up in a home with a mother and father, who then taught and guided their own offspring.

As we developed as members of a community, we learned — first, through our parents — the value and blessing of helping others. These behaviors were shared and encouraged, and there was no one better positioned to offer this instruction than one's parents.

Today, the family has changed, and there many different versions of what constitutes a family in the U.S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 69 percent of children today grow up in two-parent homes, down substantially from 88 percent in the 70s and 80s. Single-parent homes are a reality for 23 percent of youngsters today. New forms of family are also on the rise.

In whatever form it takes, the family remains the bedrock of learning — good and bad. The stats reveal only a 30,000-foot view.

So, let's get personal. I'll bet that any reader — especially those of you who own a contracting firm, manage young people today, or have had some experience lately in attempting to recruit young people into the

trade professions — would agree that the task of acquiring and retaining millennials into the trades is an enormous challenge.

There simply aren't enough good, young trade professionals to meet the load of work that contracting firms could acquire. That is, if they could fill the positions to meet the needs of work already in the schedules.

Looking locally

Hydronic, HVAC plumbing and radiant heat pro, Rick Groff, is president of his own 30-some person shop, Neffsville Plumbing & Heating in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He's been in the industry for 43 years (46, if you consider the two or three years he worked during high school under his father's tutelage, part time).

Groff confirms that he's seen a steady change in the employee landscape. And, yes, a lot of the change, he says, stems from what's happening — or not happening — in the home.

With Groff's piloting, the firm has deliberately chosen a niche that's tougher than most. Much of the firm's income comes from residential service work. It also does equipment replacements and maintenance; of course, new installations too, though never new construction, commercial or residential.

"Service work, especially, requires the talents of well-trained, experienced technicians, and we

never have enough of them," Groff says.

Groff shares that fewer and fewer candidates have come from the community's many suburbs, "Many of those kids have been brain-washed to think that — through a college degree, or even, magically, somehow without it — the future looks easy, quickly achievable, involves high tech, and loads of cash for the things they want."

"I know and have seen differently," he adds. "The candidates of promise that enter our firm today have a sparkle in their eye and a genuine desire to prove themselves worthy. This is planted by parents, or a parent; it rarely comes from influences they've received in school, because teachers and administrators seem so enamored with what a high-cost college education delivers."

"That's not to say college has no merit," continues Groff. "Sure, it does, but the education a college offers is right for some, and not for others. Somehow, we've been reluctant to explain that. There are loads of young people today who'd be great for the trades, but they've been misdirected, led astray."

"So, yes, the labor pool has shrunk, but it's improved the outlook for some young people whose parents have instilled good bearing, good character, a solid work ethic and an appetite for opportunity," Groff adds. "In essence, good life lessons. They've learned things of real value

— and can then apply them at work.”

So, parents, take note. Those tough, time-consuming, sometimes heart-wrenching lessons tend to have lasting impact; employers are seeing the difference.

Instant information

One aspect of trade work today that wasn't a factor at all a decade or two ago, is the influence of “smartphone” technology. Initially, I had the impression that the source of distraction there in the palm of an employee's hands was sure to erode an employee's performance.

“Not necessarily,” states Groff. Whenever a quick online tutorial is needed, or parts and component numbers from a catalog are required — there they are.

Surprisingly, another facet of portable communication devices is that employees are steadily connected to their peers at other firms, even competitors.

“They seem to know everything that's going on at most of the other firms in the areas, which owners and managers are hard to get along with,

who's good to work for, and who pays well,” Groff says. “So, in that respect, I've had to be a better ‘parent’ here among employees — and that includes seeing to it that they get the training they need, boosts in responsibility that they desire, and to be more attentive to rewards on merit that they deserve.”

World's their oyster

Unfortunately, due to unrealistic expectations of parents — “especially those that think their children are bound for glory in whatever well-paying job they choose,” says Groff — and also through school systems determined to send young people into the college system, whether they're predisposed for it, or not, “we've completely ignored the value of solid, blue collar careers,” he adds.

Sadly, we've misplaced a large number of young people who would be much happier working with their hands, cognitively, physically fulfilling their genetic predisposition for trade work.

Trade positions can be very rewarding, personally, professionally

and financially for young people, eager to learn. The world is their oyster, but maybe they've been told they have an aversion to shellfish!

And this brings us back to the family, where the path to personal and professional happiness begins.

So, parents, mentors, aunts, uncles and grandparents — this message is for you. Tune in to the early likes and dislikes of those young people you know and care for. Watch for and be attentive to the telltale signs for where their interests lie.

Somewhere, here, is the foundation for a life of satisfaction — whether a person's best suited for a suit and tie, behind the wheel of an excavator, or with wrench in hand.

School guidance counselors and teachers: these responsibilities then pass on to you. Please make the best of it. There's a new generation of joyful trade professionals out there, just waiting to be found.

Open the oyster! ●

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