



Did I Fail My Kids?

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I didn't mean to fail my kids, but I think I did. I had the best of intentions. I taught them the lessons I learned from my parents, and from my peers. So, maybe it's their fault! What did I do? Nothing, that's the problem. It's what I didn't do that's important. I didn't fully inform them of their career choices. But I'm not alone. Across the country we are suffering the ills of misplaced intentions, just like mine. The result? Compounding debt, a depleted workforce, and a frustrated educational system.

My paternal grandfather quit school somewhere around the fifth grade. My grandmother slightly later. They both went on to work in their families' businesses. My grandfather would continue his trade of stone masonry. My grandmother would drive trucks, perform bookkeeping at the family quarry, and get an administration degree from the Goldey School. Their lives from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. were tough. Hoping it was an easier path for their kids, they sent them to college preparatory schools to compensate. My father went to the University of Delaware to become a first-generation graduate and civil engineer. He, like his parents, encouraged me to go to college, sending me off to James Madison University. And like father like son, I did the same with my kids. All the while (maybe ironically for a construction family) not one mention of the vocational trades. That's where I went wrong. And I'm sorry.

From my vantage point now, as a dad, a CEO, and president of the Delaware Contractors Association, I can see clearly that I contributed to the problem facing our industry and educational system as a whole. There is a terrible shortage of skilled labor in the industry. At the same time, student loans have become the largest portion of personal debt facing families. Yet the norm is still pushing to get every child ready and tested for college. What's the one thing missing? The discussion of choices and the elevation of the image of our construction craft. Well intentioned parents, who may be unfamiliar with the dignity of our profession and the financial stability that goes with it, are ignoring this pathway. The result? A financial and workforce crisis. Worse is that kids, who excel when learning with the "hands on" modality of vocational education, are struggling in traditional classrooms. The good news? A quick correction could send kids into our industry without building mountains of debt.

So, let's encourage younger parents to consider the dignity of skilled craftspeople who'll have the lifelong memories of creating buildings. Let's encourage them to use our superintendents and carpenters as role models. They are our future. They are building what matters.

