

Life is Dessert

BY MIKE SUTTON

Recently, I attended a staffing conference on Professional Employment Organizations (PEO) in San Francisco. My wife Carol went with me, and on the way to California we stopped in Steamboat Springs, Colo., to visit and ski with our daughter, Erin, for a few days.

Erin graduated from Dickinson College last year and decided to take a year off before throwing herself into the corporate cauldron. She works at two jobs — as a waitress and in a grocery store — to support her addiction to skiing.

Now in all honesty, Erin probably works harder and longer hours than most of us. But, when she's not working, she has some of the finest skiing conditions and scenery in the world to enjoy.

One of the things I've found interesting is the way other parents react when the subject of Erin's snow-sabbatical comes up. Many of them get this "I'm so sorry for your loss" look in their eyes as if a distant relative or our cat just died. Some have actually offered condolences just before telling us how their son or daughter is off to business, law, medical school or just landed a plum position with International Widgets.

Carol and I are about as far from disappointment in Erin as Congress is from campaign funding reform. Here is a young woman who knows that once she enters her professional life she'll have little if any opportunity to do what she's done this past winter. The fact that she didn't feel pressured to get into the career race as soon as she turned in her cap and gown may be a very good sign.

Many of us, myself included, are driven by various professional factors such as earning more than we did last year or snagging that promotion that puts us higher on the corporate ladder. We often never learn two things that Erin has already grasp at the tender age of 22:

1. As one Japanese auto manufacturer's slogan says: "Life is a journey. Enjoy the ride."
2. Employment should be a means to an end, not the end.

I don't know of a single case of anyone lying on their death bed and saying: "If I could have just put in a few more days at work!"

Now, having said that, let me say that there are no absolutes. As long as I'm on the topic of kids, let me mention my son Brian, who is a lot smarter than I was at his age. He has decided that there's no reason why you can't play while you work. Brian is graduating from high school this year and plans to study outdoor recreation management in college. He's a natural at virtually everything outdoors including skiing, mountain biking, canoeing, rock climbing and camping, and he plans to turn those things he truly loves to do into a career.

He's not driven to a career that will guarantee him a six-figure income in five to 10 years. Brian has his sights set on something that many of us may never find — an enjoyable life inside the workplace.

Finally, let me tell you about someone who is not related to me. After my PEO conference, Carol and I went to visit her cousin in Mill Valley, Calif. The first night we were there, we asked the manager at the hotel for a suggestion for dinner. He recommended a seafood restaurant — the Pacific Café — in nearby Kentfield.

When we got to the restaurant there were several people waiting in the reception area. Another legacy of my Army days is that I hate waiting in line or otherwise. However, the owner, William Booth, approached us almost immediately and said that there was only one party of two ahead of us. He also offered us a glass of complimentary wine while we waited. I must say I found that

surprising, since most restaurateurs shuffle patrons off to the bar to wait and generate revenue at the same time.

Anyway, true to his word, Mr. Booth seated us in short order at a table that allowed me to see the front door of the restaurant. As the evening progressed, I watched him greet new arrivals and say good-bye to those who were departing. I was awed by two things:

1. That Mr. Booth was genuinely enjoying dealing with the people as they came and went.
2. That almost all of them called him "Bill" and seemed to really enjoy seeing him.

Here was a man who was running an obviously successful business and having a ball doing it. Who says you can't play while you work?

What's the point of all this? Simple. So many of us get into careers because of the money, prestige or any number of other factors. Then "golden handcuffs," kids in school or maybe our families hold us captive in that environment.

A friend of mine in Fort Worth has a saying that I like: "Life is short. Eat dessert first!" Erin subscribes to that philosophy. Brian and Bill Booth have taken it one step further: Life is dessert! 

NaSPA member Mike Sutton's Vietnam novel, *No Survivors* (ISBN 0-8338-0226-7) is available from Marshall Jones Co. at (800) 258-1505. Mike is donating 33 percent of the royalties from his book to the Center for Homeless Veterans.

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