

It was a good place to work

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the book: **Not Your Mother's Book on Working for a Living**

"Time and distance tend to cloud our dusty memory files. I can fondly look back and reaffirm the assessment once uttered by my younger self...It was a good place to work."

Like so many different aspects of our lives, too often we fail to consider what we have until it's gone, or the places we've been until we're no longer there. I recently revisited memories of my very first job. In retrospect, I can truly say that for the five years I was there, it was a good place to work.

The building where I was soon to be employed that summer before my high school senior year was still under construction and would become a nursing home when completed. It was a 20-minute walk from where I lived and less by bicycle—both important factors for a kid who'd recently earned his driver's license and longed to be behind the wheel of any type of vehicular transportation, but especially my dream vehicle: an older but very awesome Jeep-like pickup truck.

A job could go a long way in making truck ownership a reality, so I applied for employment in the kitchen at the nursing home. As I saw it, if I had to work anywhere, my employer might as well feed me, too. And besides, the idea of working in a commercial kitchen sounded very cool to me. I was hired on the spot—just not for the kitchen job.

With the home's opening still two months away, there was little need for kitchen help just yet, but there were many other things for me to do instead. For the rest of the summer, I worked five days a week on various assignments throughout the building and grounds in preparation for September's grand opening. And early on, my initial paycheck—coupled with the thoughts of sitting behind the wheel of my dream truck—would provide all the motivation necessary for me to happily report for work each day. That is, until the morning when I discovered an even better reason to take that daily bicycle ride.

I'd been moving furniture into the empty rooms one morning when I looked out the window and noticed something odd in the parking lot below. Gone were all of the trucks and vans belonging to the contractors, and in their places were cars—lots of cars—filling almost every available parking space. Before I could consider what might be happening, I received a page over the PA system instructing me to report to the main office and to my boss. The parking lot mystery was about to be solved.

As I walked into the lobby just outside the main offices, I quickly learned two things: first, I'd discovered where all of the occupants from those parked cars had gone—the lobby was packed. And second, I noted that the vast majority of those crowding the lobby were female. Actually, there was one more thing that I was about to learn as well—something that should have been obvious, but just then I was totally oblivious to the obvious.

When I mentioned to my boss what I'd just witnessed, he simply smiled, but when I asked why so many people were all there, his smile immediately morphed into an are-you-really-that-stupid expression. Silly as this may sound, it hadn't occurred to me that the home still needed to be

staffed.

My boss informed me that everyone in the lobby had responded to a newspaper ad and was applying for work. He also said, much to my absolute delight, that the vast majority of applicants applying would, in fact, be female. After all, females traditionally applied for the majority of available jobs such as nurses and nurses' aides, office help, housekeepers, kitchen staff and part-time weekend staff—which, by the way, I would eventually learn consisted primarily of high school and college-aged girls.

Of course, none of this had occurred to me when I'd first applied for work. But now, I had duly processed the information. Since learning that the ratio of female to male employees was about to put this 17-year-old boy squarely into a very happy minority, it would no longer be images of me sitting behind the wheel of some silly truck that would serve as the driving force bringing me to work each day. Yeah, I intended the driving pun.

This newfound information simply reaffirmed my original belief about being employed at this nursing home—it was a good place to work. And I'd soon be adding an obvious addendum—and it was a good place to meet girls. Before I'd leave the home's employment five years later, I would fall for three in particular.

We opened for business that September, and as foretold, the ratio of female to male employees that I'd heard about had come to pass. And for a guy whose previous dating experiences had been few and far between, my social life improved considerably. Almost immediately, I came to understand the meaning of the expression, "a beggar at a banquet," and to be honest, I was happy to be that beggar because no longer was I sitting home on Saturday nights for the want of a date. And for a little while, I was perfectly content to sample the banquet's available offerings—unaware that someone was about to cause me to vacate my seat at this table.

I had seen her there before, and I liked what I saw—a pretty girl, with blue eyes and long, wavy, dark hair. She had a Southern accent, but all I knew was I loved the way everything that she said sounded, especially when she was saying it to me. And still, I kept my distance because even as both my social life and my confidence were growing, whenever I was near Caroline, my confidence levels would plummet. But as I kept my distance, I made it a point to be somewhere on the same floor where she happened to be assigned as an aid, hoping that she might notice me, hoping that maybe, somehow, we'd exchange a few words, some small talk. But whenever I had the opportunity to do so, I didn't. That confidence thing was really starting to bother me.

One afternoon, I found myself alone with her in the pantry, about to serve dinner. I wanted to ask her out on a date, and I knew just what I'd say because I'd already said it to her a million times before, or at least in my dreams—but I just couldn't bring myself to say the words that I'd been planning to say.

And so the small talk between us continued for a while longer during which time I learned that she liked high school football games, drive in movies, picnics, cherry soda, cinnamon gum, the scent of strawberries, and best of all, she liked me. We went out on a date, and then another, and another. One day it occurred to me: I had a girlfriend.

We dated for the last months of my senior year and all the next as I commuted to the local college, but after two proms, picnics in the park, kisses on a summer's day and all those nights

when found it impossible to say goodbye, we did.

She left for college, started a new life, and made new friends. And soon enough, I, too, would be making a new friend and her name was Marcella.

She was working her usual assignment—escorting patients from their rooms to the dining room for dinner. And what I noticed was her smile, something she did often, something I found irresistible. That smile and her bubbly personality immediately put me on notice that there was something about this girl that I needed to learn more about, and to this end I set out to do just that.

It didn't take me long to learn everything that I needed to know about her. Besides the fact that I thought she was cute, she loved the outdoors—especially activities like hiking, skiing, bicycle rides and trips to the shore—just like I did. She was down to earth, honest and straightforward, and when she told me that she liked me, I wasn't surprised by her boldness. I drove her home that night by way of a local ice cream shop where we shared a sundae—our first date.

While it didn't happen overnight, it still happened. While I occasionally still went out on dates with other girls, Marcella went out with other guys—and this was fine with me, for a while. I was carrying a full course load at our local college and studying criminal justice while working almost full time to pay for school. And somewhere in this mix, as our relationship was becoming more and more serious, I began taking entrance exams to become a police officer.

The relevance of my relationship with Marcella and my attempts to land a career in law enforcement, for a while anyway, went hand in hand. We were both convinced that one day I'd have my career, and while I spent much of my time considering how to accomplish this, she was considering things too—like marriage.

We'd been happy for some time, or so I thought. After a couple of years together, Marcella made no secret of the fact that she'd like us to marry. This wasn't really news to me, but with school and work and always another police exam somewhere on the horizon, I never thought all that much about marriage. Besides, my first concern was to get a job, specifically, a job in law enforcement, a job that would provide my future family and me with the security of steady employment and a good income. Marcella wanted us to become engaged anyway. In fact, I refused to even consider such thoughts without first securing a good job—specifically some good cop job. She said that she understood, and I believed that she did too. We broke up not long afterward.

There's an old saying that goes "When one door closes another door opens." The astute reader may recall that I previously mentioned that while employed at the home, I'd fallen for three of my fellow employees—which, to be perfectly honest, may not be an entirely accurate statement. While I did in fact meet the third while still employed at the home, in truth, our relationship took off after I'd left. And if I were to write of my relationship with Karen, the verbiage necessary to approach the subject would surely require more allotted words than are afforded me now. In short, however, I can report that she became my partner, closest friend and eventually, she became the wife of a cop—oh yeah, I finally landed my dream job—from which, after a long and rewarding career, I recently retired. And as for Karen and me, she's still my wife and best friend, and after 37 years together, she remains the greatest part of my life.

Time and distance tend to cloud our dusty memory files, and as I happily approach my sixth decade, I can fondly look back and reaffirm the assessment once uttered by my younger self about that nursing home job I held so many years ago: "It was a good place to work." And you know what? It was.

the backstory:

I can't imagine how my life might have turned out had I not applied for that job at the nursing home all those years ago. After all, it's where I met some very special people—most especially, it's where I'd meet the girl I'd one day marry—the girl who first encouraged me to try my hand at writing (read *But you were just a cop* from **Chicken Soup for the Soul Time to Thrive** for more on this) and the girl who became the mother of our children. The stories I'd go on to write about them would eventually find a worldwide audience after publication in several book anthologies.



History buffs like me will tell you that to know where we're going you need to know where we've been. Not so long ago I revisited memories of my very first job. The five or so years that I spent working at the nursing home—as well as everything else in my life that followed as a result was a blessing.

It still is.

My younger self once noted: "It was a good place to work." Oh, if he only knew the things that I now know.....



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