

As Plants Close, Teenagers Focus More on College

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June 25, 2009

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/business/26grads.html>

WEST CARROLLTON, Ohio

In the tight-knit, middle-class communities surrounding Dayton, many members of the class of '09 knew exactly what they would do when they grew up.

They would get a good-paying job at the General Motors factory or at one of the Delphi auto parts plants, get married and start families.

But the deep recession and the downsizing of American manufacturing have bulldozed those plans, leaving many of these young people confused and rudderless, with some contemplating a path that might be new to their families: college.



“It used to be kids would say, ‘I don’t need to go to college. I can go to work with my dad at G.M. and have a good life,’ ” said Carol Romie, the chief guidance counselor at West Carrollton High School in this blue-collar Dayton suburb. “With G.M. closed, that’s not an option nowadays.”

Brandon Abney, a newly minted high school graduate, would have loved to work at the G.M. truck plant in Moraine, a neighboring suburb, but it closed last December.

So he is enrolling in an 18-month college program to become a firefighter. “After what happened at G.M., you have to go to college to find a job,” he said.

Dezaraé Austin, of the class of '09, moved in with a friend after her father lost his job at G.M. and left the state in search of employment. With the job market offering high school grads little beyond \$7.50-an-hour fast-food and supermarket jobs, she is enrolling in community college to become a physician assistant.

Nick Salyers would like to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, whose 36-year career at a Delco auto parts plant (before it became Delphi) enabled him to buy a spacious house and raise five children. But with that factory closed and his mother and father laid off in recent plant closings, he has chosen a career in the military.

“I needed something secure,” he said. “No matter what happens, I’ll always have a job in the Army. I don’t have to worry about getting laid off. I don’t have to experience what my parents experienced.”

Call them Generation R — Generation Recession — the millions of teenagers and twenty-somethings struggling to carve out a future for themselves when the nation’s economy is in its worst shape in decades. Many are settling for second choices or pursuing low-cost detours because the recession has wiped out hoped-for jobs.

Far beyond Dayton — where the huge, shuttered G.M. plant not long ago employed 4,000 people — millions of young Americans are facing the reality that manufacturing will no longer serve as a conveyor belt to the middle class.

Dayton is a vortex of that economic and social change. The area's job total has fallen 12 percent since 2000, while about half of its factory jobs — 38,000 out of 79,000 — have disappeared this decade. Not only have large G.M. and Delphi plants closed, but NCR, long the city's corporate jewel, recently announced that it would move its headquarters to the Atlanta area.

These are body blows to a can-do city long known for innovation. (Dayton was the Wright Brothers' hometown and a G.M. boomtown because of Charles Kettering, who invented the electric starter and founded Delco — originally the Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company — before G.M. acquired it.)

"In the '60s and '70s you could get a good job at Delco, NCR, Frigidaire, Inland, Dayton Press, the Standard Register, Chrysler," said David Hicks, Moraine's city manager. "They came with good benefits and good pay."

Fred Gehron, the principal of West Carrollton High School, remembers what happened when he graduated from high school in 1966 and told his parents he wanted to go to college. "I remember them rolling their eyes," he said. "My father asked, 'Are you sure that's necessary? Why not get a job at the steel mill where your brother works?' "

Rob Alsept, financial secretary for the G.M. union local here, says he took a job at the plant in 1989 at age 19, and bought a house and had a family the next year.

The G.M. plant's basic wage was \$28 an hour when it closed. "For the laid-off guys, the highest-paying job I've heard anyone find was \$13 an hour," Mr. Alsept said.

The brightest spot in Dayton's economy is Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, which planned to add 1,000 jobs, one-third of them requiring Ph.D.'s.

"I would adamantly say the days of finding good-paying jobs that will support an individual or family with just a high-school education are gone," said Matt Massie, director of career services at Sinclair Community College in Dayton.

Since the recession began, enrollment at Sinclair has jumped 14 percent, largely because many laid-off workers have returned to school and because the uninviting job market has pushed many high school grads into college.

Adam Smith, who is studying linguistics at Sinclair, went for another reason: it's cheap. Mr. Smith, who hopes to become translator, could have gone to a four-year college, but knew he could save money by spending his first two years at Sinclair, where courses cost \$43 a credit.

To pay for his courses and car, he is busing tables 30 hours a week at a Smokey Bones, a barbecue restaurant. Because many students work such long hours, community college degrees often take them three years to attain.

Thomas Kokenge, the guidance counselor for West Carrollton High's graduating seniors, advised them not to let the hard times change their goals. "I tell them, 'Do something that you have a passion for,' " he said. "I don't see them lowering their horizons. But maybe they have to take a longer way to get there."

Guidance counselors say that the nearly 40 percent of Dayton-area graduates who attend four-year colleges should do fine once the economy rebounds.

Todd Salyers, who lost his job when the Delphi plant closed, is proud, but a bit worried that his son, Nick, is joining the Army.

Said Todd Salyers, "My father always told us, 'As long as you put in an honest day's pay and are an honest person, you'd be O.K.' That's not even close to being right anymore."

Erik Newton, who just graduated from West Carrollton High, will be going to Sinclair to study firefighting with Brandon Abney. His mother, a laid-off G.M. worker, will also be there, studying to become a social worker.

In Mr. Newton's view, the dream of landing a good factory job has definitely not died.

"I'm sure if any big factory had openings, there'd be a line all the way into Dayton," he said.