

Back Row Kids: Dignity, Work, and the Vision of Williamson College

On July 1, 1997, a massive rockslide closed I-40 between the Tennessee and North Carolina line. Boulders the size of school buses crashed across the highway and fell into the nearby Pigeon River. It took more than two months for work crews and government officials to clear away the debris – rocks, mud, trees – and make sure the shifting mountainside was again safe.

A friend of mine, Bill, was at that time the manager of a busy truck stop on the North Carolina side of the slide. That catastrophe brought his business to a dead stop, as he was reduced to serving meals to a few locals and selling them various supplies.

Once at church I asked him how he was doing. “I’m working at McDonald’s,” he said. “I’ve got a job sweeping and mopping the floors, and just cleaning up in general until the highway opens again.”

Bill was a 40-something father of four, one who knew the dignity of work.

In his extended photo-essay, [*Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*](#), Chris Arnade gives his readers insights into human beings from all backgrounds who live in poverty, make their homes on the streets, and take drugs to treat the pain of existence. Both the photographs and Arnade’s writing reveal the pain of these people, and as Arnade says at the end of his book, “We have said that education is the way out of the pain and the way to success, implying that those who don’t make it out are dumb, or lazy, or stupid.”

Many of us look at such people without really seeing them, yet they are all around. They can be found in McDonald's joints across the land. They beg money on the streets of New York, they hang around a soup kitchen in the Smoky Mountains, they die with a needle in their arms in San Francisco. As Arnade writes, "...all those at the bottom, educationally and economically – black, white, gay, straight, men, and women – are guaranteed to feel excluded, rejected, and most of all, humiliated. We have denied many their dignity, leaving a vacuum easily filled by drugs, anger, and resentment."

So what can we do?

In the autumn edition of *City Journal*, writer Kay Hymowitz gives us a look at [Williamson College of the Trades](#), a school just west of Philadelphia. Outside of our military academies, Williamson is unlike any school in existence today.

Founded in 1888 by Isaiah Williamson, a self-made entrepreneur and philanthropist, as a school to teach the trades to orphan boys, Williamson no longer caters primarily to orphans, but has kept to the principles and vision of its founder. Open only to males ages 19-22 from lower middle-class families, Williamson teaches various trades, while demanding that its students also learn skills such as basic accounting and composition for use in the business world. Thanks to benefactors, students pay no tuition, and 98 percent of them find employment immediately after graduation.

Williamson teaches more than trades. Its core values of "faith, integrity, diligence, excellence, and service" are prominently displayed in the school's chapel, where inspirational speakers of all backgrounds share their stories and visions with these young men. Moreover, as Hymowitz reports, other traditions of the school continue to mold these boys into men:

With its old-timey rituals, rigorous scheduling, and

immersive culture, Williamson has a military-school feel. Indeed, the school's president for the past six years, Michael Rounds, is a West Point graduate and veteran of the 101st Airborne who served in Iraq. Students line up every morning at 7:15 to the sound of reveille as a crew of four students raises both the American and Williamson flags. At 10 P.M., students are back in their dorm rooms. ... Freshmen must do kitchen patrol once a week, cleaning the dishes of staff and fellow students. If students break rules, even relatively minor ones like walking on the grass instead of the campus pathways, they find themselves working 'hours' on the grounds crew on a Saturday.

Yet Williamson is far from a boot camp, and Rounds is no 'Yessir! No sir!' sort of leader. He knows that his school's character is radically out of sync with the twenty-first-century American culture that these boys are used to. But his lively face and hearty laugh reflect the school's unexpected warmth, which leavens its occasional soldierly feel. 'You gotta put your arm around these guys,' he says. All the staff, teachers as well as administrators, are keenly aware that society at large, so sure that academic achievement is the mark of individual merit, doesn't think much of these back-row kids. A big part of the school's mission is to undo years of degrading messages and replace them with a sense of competence and self-worth. 'In school, they were always the dumb kids,' Arlene Snyder, the spirited vice president for institutional advancement, told me. 'Voc ed kids are put down, but Williamson gives them confidence.'

One last point: few sons of the college's alumni attend Williamson College. Why? Because the graduates earn too much money to meet the income cut-off point.

Isn't that the American Dream?

Suppose we duplicated Williamson College, putting such schools in our inner cities, opening doors of opportunity to “back row kids?” Suppose government and private donors copied the example of this trade school?

Might we not then begin to give those in the underclass the dignity they deserve?

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[Image Credit: flickr-US Embassy South Africa, [US government work](#)]