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TEENAGE UNEMPLOYMENT

Teenage and young-adult unemployment is one of our nation's most critical problems today. In the large cities, thousands of young people, just out of high school, are job-hunting without success.

Although the national unemployment rate is about 9 percent, the unemployment of young people, especially among blacks in the cities, sometimes runs as high as 30 percent. Even that figure may be understated because many teenagers have just given up looking for a job.

When plenty of adults with work experience are looking for jobs, who will hire a teenager with no work experience, especially when minimum wage laws require a wage payment higher than what the teenager is worth to the employer? And how can a teenager get work experience to put on his job application when no one will give him his first job?

Last summer, my high-school daughter wanted a summer job, but none was to be found. She wanted to be a newspaper reporter (having worked on her high school newspaper), but no job was available. The large newspaper in our area hired only college students already enrolled in journalism courses.

Then, she applied to a small newspaper, but was told, "We'd like to hire you, but we don't have the money to pay you." My daughter gulped hard, and then said, "I'll work for you without pay."

That non-paid summer job was a tremendous experience for my daughter. By having her news articles critically edited by an experienced newspaperman, she developed her writing skills faster and better than she could have done in several college courses.

But the experience of learning how to behave on a job was far more valuable than the particular skill of the job. She learned how to get up early and report on time to her boss every morning.

She learned how to be dependable on a job and how to take correction from her

employer. She learned how to get along with fellow workers, and how to meet deadlines and take responsibility. She developed good job habits that will prepare her for a permanent job after she finishes school.

Most important of all, she now has a valuable asset that most teenagers seeking employment lack. She now has a job reference from a satisfied employer to put on her next employment application. To any teenager looking for work, that's the next best thing to cash.

Ronald Reagan's appeal for volunteerism has been cheered in some circles, but it has had little impact among teenagers. Volunteerism is not very high on the list of activity goals of today's youth; most seem more interested in cash. Perhaps the girls have been influenced by the women's liberation movement, which has belittled and scorned volunteer work by women.

For example, a policy statement published some years ago by the National Organization for Women called "Revolution: Tomorrow is NOW," summarized NOW's positon as follows: "Volunteering for women is yet another form of activity which serves to reinforce the second-class status of women; which is one more instance of the ongoing exploitation of women; which buttresses the structures which are keeping women in a subordinate role; which is antithetical to the goals of the feminist movement and thus detrimental to the liberation of women."

Shortly before her summer work experience, my daughter's high school class had a day of career counseling. When asked about interest in volunteer jobs, the response was practically zero. My daughter wasn't any more turned on by the idea than her classmates.

Even now, as she looks back on her summer of unpaid work, she doesn't look upon it as volunteering. "I got more out of it than my employer did," she says. And her parents agree with that observation.

Teenagers should realize that work is a good in itself, not something to be avoided unless you are paid like an adult. The work ethic was what built America, and it needs to be revived today.