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# OPINION

## First Job Brings More than a Paycheck

### Summer jobs for youth pay future dividends

BY MARC H. MORIAL

I can still remember my very first job—and the valuable lessons I learned from it that continue to inform my career to this day.



I got my first taste of entrepreneurship as one-third of a three-man janitorial company I started with two childhood friends. We mowed lawns, washed cars and cleaned windows. If it needed fixing or cleaning, we were the ones to call.

At the age of 15, I earned my first steady paycheck as a copy boy for a local newspaper. Like so many millions of teens before and after me, I had the chance to be exposed to the world of work at an early age. And I earned more than money from the experience. With work came important lessons

about responsibility, effective communication, time management, interpersonal skills and more.

Today, as our nation continues to recover from the crippling impact of the Great Recession on our economy and job market, the ability of teens to jump-start their future careers, as they were once able to, remains in jeopardy.

Not only did jobs disappear during our nation's economic downturn, summer jobs—widely acknowledged as the traditional means of entry into our nation's workforce for teens and young adults—became scarce. Competition from older workers for those entry-level jobs once reserved for teens increased as the labor market weakened, and with states slashing budgets to make ends meet, state and federally funded summer jobs placement programs were either underfunded or cut.

But teen employment matters for their future and for our nation's. It not only gives young people something productive to do during

the summer months, that job in the retail store, library or the local newspaper is money in their pocket and money being spent within the community. Studies have also shown that those who work when they are young are more likely to be employed in the future and will earn higher salaries.

After a high of 27.2 percent teen unemployment in 2010, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment for workers ages 16-19 is now down to 17.9 percent. As is the case with adult workers, teens are beginning to find jobs as the market recovers, but unemployment remains high for young people—disproportionately affecting low-income youth and blacks and Hispanics.

The national unemployment rate stands at a staggering 30.1 percent for black teens and 19.2 percent for Hispanic teens. The groups of teens who need the work most in order to help themselves, and very often make a significant contribution to their family's budget, are not finding the jobs.

Our nation's answer to this dilemma has been a fractured portrait of private and public initiatives and success. Cities and states have cobbled together money—when it's in the budget—and have funneled it to local groups or agencies that connect youths to jobs or job training.

In 2012, the White House launched Summer Jobs+ as part of the "We Can't Wait" initiative. The project brought together the federal government and the private sector to create 180,000 employment opportunities for low-income youth. At the National Urban League, we work with at-risk youth to introduce them into the workforce through a comprehensive set of services through the Urban Youth Empowerment Program.

While all of these efforts are laudable and have changed many lives and communities for the better, it is not enough. Our nation needs to expand summer job programs and create year-round employment for our young people. We need a commitment that says

yes to teens and to their future. Our nation needs a comprehensive jobs solution for young people, because piecemeal solutions will only deliver far-flung pockets of success.

Investing in our young people is an investment in the continued strength of this great nation and its workforce. Young people need the formative workplace skills they can get in those entry-level jobs to move on to greater career success and higher salaries in the future. Our nation, and its local economies, benefit when teens spend their disposable income. Surely there are tax loopholes, corporate or otherwise, that can be closed, bringing additional dollars to the table to invest in our young people.

The financial cost of not investing in teens, not creating opportunities for future success, is what will cost this country, and our future in the fast-paced global economy, the most.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

## Being Black; Rachel Dolezal; and Charleston

### Painful reminders on issues of race

BY JAGGER BLAEC

A man on Twitter once said, 'I have a dream... that I will live in a world where white people care about black people before Jon Stewart tells them to.' That man was Clint Smith, poet, activist, and PhD candidate at Harvard University.

This is my current situation. The white people in my life just don't care. My fiancé is white and he doesn't want to hear it anymore. He told me he's tired and asked me if we have to discuss race every single day. My best friends are all white and they have been radio silent for the past year for every single shooting of an unarmed black man, for every utterance of #BlackLivesMatter, and even recently within the last two weeks where racial identity and relations in America have seemed to boil over.

But what exactly do I expect? These are the same people I spent my adolescence pretending not to be black. Hiding my natural hair under weaves and braids not to protect my coif, but to protect me from what I assumed would be ridicule and rejection in opposition to the European beauty standards my friends all replicated.

I grew up in a predominantly white suburb and at times as the only "Black Girl In Suburbia" I wore my



"token black girl" status as a badge of honor. People in my small town of Monroe, Conn. were used to me and despite being visibly black I was often referred to as an "Oreo" and told I "sounded white."

For 20 plus years I was comfortable with this position. Until just recently I left my comfort zone to move to a place that, unbeknownst to me prior to living here, is often referred to as "Whitelandia" or "Whitopia."

I came to the Pacific Northwest, Portland, Oregon. When I moved to southwest Portland it was nearly three weeks before I had seen, let alone encountered another African-American. I began to fear whether I would ever see anyone who looked like me again. Although I grew up around white people this was something totally different. Because I had always been able to assimilate with my white friends I never imagined the way I looked would be a factor in how people interacted with me. People I met were never overtly racist but they seemed strangely uncomfortable and I honestly couldn't figure out why. Never before in my life had I been so hyper aware of my blackness. Before moving here I was familiar with several local cities that had beautifully diverse populations outside of my own hometown. I had never seen a metro area be so overwhelmingly white.

So here I am. In a place where I

had never really specifically defined my racial identity and it felt as though I was having it defined for me. Despite my previous experiences, I find myself faced with just how difficult it is to adjust to being black within a white space all over again.

In the Pacific Northwest, I am merely a few hours away from Spokane, where the now infamous Rachel Dolezal was able to fool the world into thinking she had what it takes to easily be a black woman.

Just one look at any comments section on Facebook will tell you that white people were both fascinated and intrigued while being simultaneously baffled and flummoxed as to why on earth a white person in this country would possibly want to be black. Some even went as far as accusing her of mental illness.

Talk show hosts, professionals, and twitter spent four days straight examining exactly what it takes to be black in America based on the observations of one single white woman. For what seemed like the first time ever the main stream media was spending their 24 hour news coverage debating the complexities of life in the US as a black woman who just happened to be white.

Many, including myself, felt outrage and offense that this lady from the most privileged demographic in today's world would attempt to adapt our struggle. Not because this struggle is coveted but because her definition

of blackness was limited to a blotchy spray tan, crooked weaves and some African studies classes. Others, even black people, didn't see what the big deal was and thought what she was doing was harmless.

For me it was painful to watch as this woman ran around presenting herself in a costume of what she interpreted as being black costume which she could slip on and off like a nice pair of Jordan's. She not only infiltrated safe spaces for African Americans, but prevented already marginalized black women from gaining opportunities like a full scholarship to Howard University.

This was all under the guise of an oppression she has never and will never endure. Dolezal stole countless hours of precious time from platforms created to give a voice to legitimate black women with real experiences who will now continue to go unheard.

Dolezal appeared a week after we watched an officer manhandle a 14 year old girl in McKinney, Texas and 4 days before the atrocity that the world is witnessing right now in Charleston, S.C.

Two days ago a white male walked into a black church on a self-proclaimed mission to kill black people. Rachel Dolezal will never know what this feels like. Innocent black people are being murdered and brutalized while black people are being forced to relive these events

repeatedly through our insatiable consumption of news coverage and social media.

I am so exhausted from seeing these non-stop images of lifeless black bodies. I am so tired of seeing black girls and women being pushed around by those expected to protect and serve. I am sick of making RIP hashtags. All of these things are a painful reminder of the consistent dehumanization we face as a people in this country.

I myself was guilty for many years of a kind of "don't ask don't tell" mentality when it came to my culture and a regular subscription to white supremacy. However, when I moved to the Pacific Northwest and my race began to define who I was to other people I embraced letting it define who I am to myself.

Being black is a beautiful burden. It is not something you can just wash off. So when my fiancé says he is tired of talking about race I must remind him that so are we.

Jagger Blaec is a professional freelance journalist. She has a *Bachelors of Science in Journalism* and her work has been published at *XO Jane* and *Scallywag and Vagabond*. She is currently helping to develop a blog for the Portland-based documentary film "Black Girl in Suburbia" which focuses on what it is like to grow up black in a white space. You can follow her tweets at @basicblaecgirl.