

Punching in



By Nate Smelle

It's fair to assume that almost everyone reading this has had several jobs throughout their lifetime. For many of us, especially those who began their working life as a child labourer at a family business, we have spent more time developing our work ethic than doing anything else.

I was eight-years-old when I first punched in at my family's sporting goods business in St. Catharines. Looking back on my entrance into the working world, I realize now that I was not hired for my expertise in pricing hockey tape or restocking the stick rack. Although at the time I thought I was working hard, the reality was that I was hardly working. As I recall, often, once I was finished with my in-store duties of pricing and restocking items, my father or grandfather would ask me to test out the merchandise. For a boy between the ages of eight and 12, this was a pretty sweet gig. Twenty dollars a week to carry a few dozen hockey stick bundles, price hockey equipment, and test drive recently restored used bicycles; really, does it get any better at that age?

While some might rightfully scream nepotism, the reason I was brought onboard the Niagara Cycle and Sports team at such a young age was for the important life lessons the experience would give me. Over the years on the job, more tasks were added to my list of duties. By the time I started high school, I had learned how to: sharpen skates; true a wheel; assemble a bike; put an illegal curve on a hockey stick with a propane torch; work the cash register, conduct inventory, and count the day's earnings.

In one way or another, each of these skills have served me well throughout my life. Still, as useful as this technical knowledge has been, the most important lesson I took away from the experience came from observing how everybody approaches work differently.

Hark back to the moment this lesson first began to sink in; my Dad was teaching me how to run brake cables and set up the gears on a mountain bike. Noticing through the spokes of the wheel that I was paying attention to what he was doing, he tightened the nut on the front axle and asked if I understood why he was tightening each side a little bit at a time.

?To balance it?? I responded with a question.

Nodding in agreement, he went on to explain to me why it is important to pay attention at work, and in life in general. He then told me a story of how one of his staff ? a 16-year-old aspiring part-time bike mechanic ? had recently taught him a trick to remove the tires from a new type of high-end racing bike without scratching the rims.

Although he had been repairing many different kinds of bikes for more than 20 years, and this kid had just started a few weeks

earlier, my father explained how by watching his young apprentice's technique, he discovered a simple trick that helped prevent any damage to the bicycles during assembly. Hammering the teaching home, he told me that whether someone had been doing a job all their life, or whether it was their first day on the job, I could learn something from them.

?Watch how they do what they do,? I remember him saying. ?Ask questions. You might not learn anything new about what they are trying to teach you, but if you pay close enough attention, you will learn something valuable.?

From one job to another this teaching continues to serve me until this day.

For about two years in my early twenties I drove a truck; usually hauling auto parts, paper, or diamonds from St. Catharines to Lockport, New York to Newmarket and all places in between. Often spending 12 to 14 hours each day, observing industrial landscapes and those who earn a living from such places, I started asking questions when I noticed the smell of sulphur and a variety of unknown chemicals hovering in a haze over the factories I frequented. Speaking with the workers as I waited for the forklift to unload my cargo, I soon discovered that although most of the people I met were aware of the danger the lingering toxins posed to their health, they did not know the basic rights in place to protect themselves as a worker in Ontario.

Though I am writing this column on May 1, by the time this page hits the press International Workers' Day 2022 will be a distant and vague memory for many employers. However, for the working class, it is critical for us to celebrate May Day every day by demanding healthy, safe, and fair working conditions. Every time we punch in, for the sake of our health and happiness, we must remember that in Ontario, workers have the right to: know about health and safety matters; participate in decisions that could affect their health and safety; and, refuse work that could affect their health and safety, and that of others.

When we take the time understand our rights and why they exist, we earn the opportunity to pay attention to when they are not being upheld. With this opportunity in hand, it then becomes our responsibility to insist that we, as workers, are being respected. Without such mutual respect between employers and workers, true progress is impossible.