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Treasure Coast residents have front-row seats for

Living Space





Grant prepares for some hands-on learning experiences with his dad during the school closure brought about by COVID-19.

On-the-Job Training

LESSONS FROM A RELUCTANT LOCKDOWN KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

One of the best decisions I made during the early days of the pandemic in 2020 was to buy a Trek pedal trailer to pull behind the custom fat-tire beach cruiser I had recently purchased from Malcolm Allen, owner of Orchid Island Bikes and Kayaks. A pedal trailer is essentially a third wheel seat-and-handlebar combination that

attaches to the seat post of an adult's bike to let a child tag along on rides and practice balancing while pedaling.

In my case, this "murdered-out," matte black "Frankenbike" with ape-hanger handlebars and silver-skull-with-red-eye reflectors was the difference between my youngest son passing and failing COVID-19 kindergarten. I owe it

all to the volunteers of Bike Walk Indian River County and the budding young bike mechanics that assembled it just in the nick of time.

For 30 days in April 2020, my wife, Stephanie, had deftly managed the first month of lockdown homeschooling of our kindergartener, Grant. By May, however, when the school announced that campus would remain closed



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

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for the remainder of the school year, Stephanie understandably hit her limit. Reinforcements were called in, and by “reinforcements” I mean me. So, I did what I thought was best. I bought the coolest bike in town, strapped my youngest son to the back, and hit the road in what I believe will go down in history as the best month of “hooky” ever played.

Each day began with a ride from our home in Central Beach to the Seaside Grill in Jaycee Park for a takeout breakfast. Next, we would cruise Ocean Drive toward the Riomar Country Club, where we would sneak onto the sand and bodysurf as the founding members of the “Riomar Waveriding and Storytelling Club.”

After drying off in the sun, we pedaled up and down the neighboring oak-shaded sandy lanes

toward home, where we would spend the afternoon doing homework, reading books, playing games, and watching favorite summertime movies that ranged from *Some Like it Hot* to *The Endless Summer*. It was sublime, yet not entirely on par with the amazing kindergarten instruction Grant had previously received from his mom or Mrs. Given.

During my almost half-century on this planet, I have held many jobs. Kindergarten teacher, however, has not been one of them. I was terribly underqualified. Like many of my first jobs as a teenager, however, in which I was equally underqualified, I simply had to throw myself in.

Beginning in eighth grade, I was the temporary dishwasher for Margot Purtz at her East India Ice Cream Parlor in my hometown during

the Winter Park Arts Festival. I had never worked in a restaurant, but my love for chocolate ice cream, combined with the secret crush I had on the proprietor’s daughter, helped me to get over my initial fears. The memory of riding my bike home at the end of the weekend with a pocket full of cash still reminds me of the economic opportunities that come with a little hustle.

In ninth grade, I went to work busing tables for successful entrepreneur and Burger King franchise owner Manny Garcia at his new restaurant, Pebbles. These were the early days of the fast-casual restaurant concept, and this Cuban-influenced version of the better-known Olive Garden served black bean soup and Asiago flatbread in place of endless salad

and garlic breadsticks. Pebbles eventually went under, while Olive Garden remains one of the most successful restaurant chains in American history. Hindsight has helped me understand just how important it is, even for the most successful businesspeople, to know your customers and your market.

From tenth through twelfth grades, I worked weekends and summers as a mechanic’s assistant for Midas muffler. My father was the general manager of several Orlando-area stores owned by a family office out of Miami. In addition to learning how to do oil changes, tire rotations, and basic tune-ups, I stocked parts and maintained the landscaping. This last chore included the endless collection of cigarette butts and nuts and bolts from the grass medians that lined the

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Kenya Cochrane and Melissa Jefferson are both graduates of the Practical Nursing program at TCTC.

parking lots. If I was not thorough enough, these wayward pieces of metal became shrapnel underneath the lawnmower. I still have scars on my shins and forearms that remind me of the importance of paying attention to details and delivering completed work.

Each of these early employment opportunities gave me the kind of valuable exposure to vocations and technical careers that was not otherwise included in my middle or high school education, as they are today through the School District of Indian River County.

Without the opportunities provided by institutions such as Treasure Coast Technical College, it is likely that most of the 40 percent of Indian

River County residents with just a high school diploma or less would be resigned to minimum-wage employment, earning \$20,800 per year. Under the leadership of Principal Christi Shields, TCTC operates career programs in various allied health professions, welding technology, and culinary arts that can put students on an immediate path toward prosperity.

Each of my first few jobs also helped me, as I was often reminded by my father, to build character. Today, many local charities incorporate these character-building opportunities into their programs serving Indian River County students. Gifford Youth Achievement Center does it through its “Boys 2 Men 2 Greatness”

program. Vero Beach Rowing and the Youth Sailing Foundation do it through their own eponymous activities. Youth Guidance Mentoring Academy delivers these opportunities through its pre-apprenticeship programs in welding, carpentry, HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and, most important for my son and me after a month of biking down sandy lanes, bicycle maintenance and repair.

It’s been more than two years since the world was turned on its head and I unwittingly became my son’s kindergarten teacher. I am grateful for the opportunity it gave me to teach my son new skills, like how to pedal a bike and how to ride a wave. I am also proud of Grant (along with his

two older siblings, Colin and Olivia) for taking all the character-building sacrifices like social distancing, masking, interrupted schedules, and canceled events with patience and grace beyond their years.

I do not take it for granted that, as friends and family in New York City, Chicago, and Southern California were forced to endure great hardship, we got to play “hooky.” This old former dish-washing, table-busing, oil-changing, recently retired kindergarten-teaching dad knows that we live a charmed life here in paradise. Not everyone does, however.

Knowing that is a lesson I hope never to forget. Doing something about it is perhaps the most important job of all. ☘