

The Worth of a College Degree

Community Comment
March 2, 2012
Sam Pennisi

I never thought I would live to hear the words.

When my grandparents immigrated from Italy in the few years after the turn of the last century, they were among the most courageous people I can imagine. They left all that they knew. They left their family. They left their friends. They left their homes. They left their culture and their language. Think about that for a moment and put it into the context of never being able to return. They took an honest to goodness leap of faith. In my grandfather's case, he didn't leave much in the way of material worth. He described his house as one or two rooms with a dirt floor and no plumbing. Mostly, he said, he didn't leave much of a future. He would have been a subsistence farmer with no chance of improving his lot in life.

The whole family helped him save enough money for passage to America. At fifteen, he had a brief introduction to shoe making. He knew once in America, he might find work in New York, St. Louis, Missouri, or Omaha, Nebraska. All were a far cry from a tiny ancient village in Sicily. He went to Omaha. He knew of other people from his area that settled there. He found work and he found a wife. He had kids and opened his own business; a shoe repair shop.

His first two children were girls. In the 20's, in his culture, the girls got the best education they could get through high school. Their first child died at thirteen. My mother was smart and did well in school. She wanted to go to college but at that point, college was for the boys in the family. Education, as far as your talents would take you, was an expectation for the boys in the family. My two uncles were told that often, as were my brother and me; his first grandchildren.

Education was seen as a way up. My grandfather knew hard work ^{and} good skills could make you a living in his adopted country. He lived that. But he also understood that to become your own person and maximize your opportunities and your security and have some control over your life, more education was the key. He also saw education as the final act of assimilating into the new culture; the American culture. This dream of real assimilation was realized when my brother and I graduated from college. My great uncle had tears in his eyes when he learned I had been elected to the Arcata City Council. He said to me "now our family is American".

I find it hard to believe what I heard coming out of Rick Santorum's mouth the other day. His response to President Obama's statement that he would like to see everyone go to college or get advanced training was "What a snob".

This man is running for the highest office in the land. We live in a global economy and now compete with all other nations on Earth. Americans must continue to be or want to be the best educated people in the world. Second place doesn't cut it. My immigrant grandfather knew better. Mr. Santorum should be ashamed of himself.

A college degree is the new high school diploma.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.