

## FROM THE FIELD

## Where have all the tradesmen gone?

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Back in September, I received a phone call from longtime friend John Barba, director of training for Taco. Our friendship goes way back to John's days as radiant trainer at Wirsbo (now Uponor). He asked if I could visit Providence, Rhode Island, to screen a documentary about tradesmen and to participate in a panel discussion afterward. He would moderate the discussion.

"Sure," I answered. "Who else will be on the panel?"

"John White Jr. (CEO of Taco), Dan Holohan and Richard Yeagley (director of the documentary)," John replied.

I thought to myself, "I would *pay* for this opportunity," as John and I discussed the logistics of the meeting. I was looking forward to finally meeting John White Jr., whose pumps and hydronic specialties I have used for years.

I didn't know Richard Yeagley, but I had heard of his documentary, *The Tradesmen: Making Art of Work*, through the trade press. (A link to the movie can be found at [www.TheTradesmenDocumentary.com](http://www.TheTradesmenDocumentary.com).)

The film follows the daily lives of several tradesmen as they go about their routines. It includes plumbers, framers, carpenters and stone masons. We watched a truncated version that focused on these trades. The full version includes other vocations such as auto mechanics, painters and artists.

Yeagley explains the purpose of his documentary like this:

*I was raised in a place called "Charm City;" most know it as Baltimore. Growing up, I vividly remember the blue collar nature of the individuals and of the city itself. At this point in my life, I no longer have a daily connection to the blue collar worker, and I have lost touch with the very essence of my upbringing and the people who occupy my childhood and adolescent memories.*

*After graduating from college, moving away from my hometown and entering the workforce, I began to notice a pervasive bias against work that required any form of manual labor and described as blue collar. In principle, this sentiment, without any firsthand experience, was unfair and disparaging towards tradesmen and their work.*

*Why are such attitudes ubiquitous within our current cultural landscape? Where does the current cultural bias come from? Is it influenced by technological advances and novel opportunities in other occupations? Or by the opinion that there is limited financial prosperity in trade work and the potential for higher wages in other fields? Is it inherent in the current educational curriculum and paradigm?*

*I wanted to produce a documentary that sets out to explore these questions.*

After viewing the movie, each of us on the panel had an opportunity to discuss our thoughts. I discussed my own experience, graduating from college and then going into the HVAC trade. I had the good fortune to work with a skilled technician, Doug Ashwood, whom I remain in contact with to this day. Doug was a craftsman and perfectionist, and I used my intellect as much, if not more,

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over that first summer assisting him as I ever did in four years of college.

I quickly realized that this work was not all muscle and brawn. You needed that too, but this was a thinking man's trade that required focus. I quickly came to appreciate the skill level and intelligence of my co-workers. They may not have gone to college, but there was no shortage of mental acumen.

A generation ago, skilled tradesmen were generally admired, and the trades were considered a noble profession. Plumbers, electricians, pipe fitters, sheet metal workers and carpenters formed the bedrock of middle-class America and created the built environment of this country. Somewhere along the way, this admiration was lost. Parents steered their children into white collar professions and away from blue collar work. Yeagley sought to explain this culture shift.

When I went to high school in Fairfax County, Virginia, back in the early 80s, we still had wood shop, metal shop, and vocational education. Now it's hard to find school systems that even offer these programs. Schools are closing down vocational labs. Career and guidance counselors are judged by their successes in college placement.

Several years ago, I participated in a career day at a local high school. We offered an impressive display, with a broad selection of piping, sheet metal and diagnostic tools. We even had a pipe threader set up for those who wanted to give it a try. I noticed that interested students stopped by our table to chat, but, if they were with their parents, the parents steered them away from our table.

Why is this? When did society start looking down on blue collar workers? When did the trades become a path of last resort for problem students? The film does a great job exploring these questions but, like me, cannot provide



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answers, only observations.

Newspaper headlines report record numbers of college graduates loaded with school loans who cannot find jobs. Just last week, *USA Today* predicted that student loan debt will be the next bubble crisis. It would be wise for some of this money to be directed towards the trades, helping to create a pool of skilled, employable talent. The work will never go away. Our society will always need those who can

build, create and fix things we cannot do without. Clean water, heat, cooling, sanitary plumbing, hot water, etc. are not simply modern conveniences but absolute necessities.

I'm sure one of the reasons for this preference of steering youth into white collar jobs is that college graduates make more money; obvious, right? Certainly not, if you are unemployed. In my market, top technicians can easily make a six-figure income, with full benefits including sick leave,

vacation and medical insurance. In my own company, with the recession still lingering, right now we could employ four more skilled workers with the work we have on the books. It's somewhat easy to find unskilled labor and helpers. But finding skilled technicians is a different story.

Maybe it's because the work is not easy. We're outside on construction sites, not sitting at a desk in a comfortable office. Even when we are inside, it's usually cold (or hot) because something is not working. We've had prospective employees show up for the first day of work and never return, not even to pick up their paycheck for the eight hours they worked. Was it too much like hard work for them?

I love this trade, and I love what I do. I enjoy the satisfaction of flipping the switch after a long day of piping a boiler and watching our creation come to life. At the end of the day, my team can point to what we worked on and say, "We did that."

I would love to hear your thoughts and experiences on this topic. ●

*Dan Foley is president and owner of Foley Mechanical Inc., based in Lorton, Va. FMI specializes in radiant, hydronic and steam systems, as well as in mechanical systems for large custom homes. He can be reached at 703/339-8030 or at dfoley50@verizon.net.*

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