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Spare Parts and the Fallacy of the American Dream

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1st Place

Spare Parts and the Fallacy of the American Dream

Anything can be achieved through hard work and determination – at least, so we are taught. It is the unofficial motto of America, the “American Dream,” that anyone can become the next Vanderbilt or Carnegie of industry should he apply himself. But this dogma relies upon the belief that life is a fair game, and that everyone is given the same chances. This is simply not true. One only needs to look at the lives of the four members of the Carl Hayden Robotics Team to understand this point. Their success at the Marine Advanced Technology Education Remotely Operated Vehicle Competition (MATE) in 2004, beating out bankrolled teams, only serves as irony to their ultimate fates. The team received financial and technical help from privileged individuals, giving them a fairer shot at success and allowing their grit and talent to shine. Without these benefits in their young adult lives, however, the boys struggled. They prove that the American Dream is more difficult to attain when socio-economic and legal statuses block opportunities available to other people.

Following their heroic win at MATE, the boys’ lives returned to normal. After high school, Cristian began his studies at Arizona State University (ASU), relying on his in-state tuition and scholarship to cover the cost. His future seemed bright until his sophomore year in 2006 when Arizona passed Proposition 300, which denied in-state tuition to illegal residents. As a result, Cristian’s costs quadrupled, forcing him to withdraw from university. Now he works at Home Depot helping people buy flooring and inventing things from the “spare parts” lying around the store. His lost potential is not due to a lack of drive, but a lack of compassion. Had the government given him the same opportunity as a legal resident, he could’ve finished college and landed a career doing work that truly engaged him.

Meanwhile, although Luis had a green card, he still faced major obstacles that made success difficult. Lacking resources, Luis put culinary school on hold in order to work two minimum wage jobs to acquire the funds. Davis writes, “It seemed unrealistic to expect that his life would change that much. He assumed that Santa Barbara had been nothing more than a blip, a brief glimpse into the opportunities that other people had” (p. 186). Even after he finished culinary school, he continued to work two jobs – nights emptying trash cans in the local courthouse, and weekends catering with Lorenzo, who was also working a second job as a line cook. Luis couldn’t pursue his culinary passion full time because he needed to make money, and he didn’t have the resources to be able to take the risk to achieve his dreams. Clearly, life isn’t as fair for the people who have the highest to climb.

Even the biggest “success” story of the four – Oscar – proves that hard work alone cannot overcome unequal access. His illegal status deferred his enlistment. He thought that being the best in the JROTC company would be enough to achieve his goal, but he was wrong; no matter how much work he put in, he was held back. So, using scholarship money and savings from construction, he pushed himself through ASU, earning top honors. However, he could not obtain an appropriate job with his degree, again because of his status. After deporting himself to the country he hardly knew, away from his wife and child, he was barred from entering the United States for ten years, again because he didn’t receive the help that more privileged people are accustomed to. Working in a factory, he got a green card the next year because of the intervention of politicians – NOT exclusively through his own hard work. While his grit helped him achieve some things, it ultimately could not get him citizenship – he needed more help to level the playing field.

For some, no amount of perseverance or talent will deliver them from poverty and into the land of opportunity that you and I occupy. Therefore, it is up to us to recognize our own privilege and employ that advantage to advocate for a more equal playing field for others. Write to your representatives, donate to legal funds for immigrants, and, most importantly, treat everyone with dignity. You never know if your busboy or janitor holds the next great innovation but just can't afford to dream.