

Part-time working gives youngsters more than money



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PRESSURE on students to get good exam grades is bringing about the death of the Saturday job, according to a recent report by the government-funded UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). "The number of teenagers taking on part-time work has halved in less than two decades as they concentrate on their studies instead. Just 18% of 16 and 17-year-olds had Saturday jobs in 2014, compared to more than two fifths (42%) in 1997."

From the age of 15 I had taken Saturday and holiday jobs. I was a van boy for Fenwick's, worked in market gardens and also sat in a dark and dingy cellar beneath Finney's Seed Show on Grainger Street in central Newcastle. Every Saturday, and for many holidays, I would pack dried blood, fish manure and John Innes Compound in brown paper bags, which I made from single sheets of brown paper.

After a couple of years, I rose to work on the shop floor. Every morning I would wax the floors and the wooden counter before serving customers. Occasionally, I would take a trip with the Finney's buyer, Alan, who would go out to farms in Northumberland to sell equipment.

He would often give me "important life lessons". He revealed that in the boot of his car was a box of mini pork pies. Before meeting customers in the pub at lunch time he would scoff a few pies. "This is the secret of selling," he whispered to me. Eat a pile of pies and you will never get drunk. The lining on your stomach will be protected by the pies and, while the customers would get quietly sozzled, you will be able to keep sober and sell them anything.

I also earned a little money playing the piano at a "go-as-you-please" every Saturday and Sunday night in the Bay Horse, Whickham. I absolutely loved it. The compere, Dave, was brilliant. His favourite phrase was "It's nice to be nice". Most Saturday nights were full of fun, song and laughter - each "turn" producing their favourite song, repeated every Saturday.

The skill to playing piano for go as you please entertainers is to know how to slow down, speed up and even change key with the singer. My two favourites were Billy, who sang "If you were the Only Girl in the World", and George, who would give



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a masterly rendition of the German tenor Richard Tauber's "Only a Simple Little Melody" in, of course, a German accent.

Every New Year's Eve, just before closing time, Billy would grab the mike and sing his "London Medley" while, at the same time, George would stand on a chair and sing German Army songs from the back of the room. In the meantime, I would try to accompany both singers, in different keys, while Dave pleaded: "It's nice to be nice".

My experience of playing in bands in various clubs and pubs certainly expanded my understanding of the world outside school and college. Many years later, I took a party of German teachers to a working men's club in the East End of Newcastle, hoping the visit would widen their horizons. Having negotiated the doorman, who announced to them that he forgave them for bombing us and that they mustn't resent us beating them in the war and the World Cup, I managed to get them seated at the back of the concert room.

Then came the acts.

The first on was a woman, who sang Tom Jones songs, with all the hip and leg movements: Then

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"Marvo the Mystic" entered the stage and did card tricks. Unfortunately, the cards were normal sized so, when he revealed the magic card, we couldn't see it. He was immediately followed by a man in a wheelchair who moved the foot rests from the chair and preceded to tap dance. The final act eventually killed off the German contingent. It was a man, who was introduced as the Ronnie Ronalde of Byker. Ronnie Ronalde was a famous act on radio. He would impersonate different bird songs. The "Byker Ronnie" didn't quite have his skill and would whistle the same whistle for all the different birds he revealed. "Imagine", he would say, "yea are waalking through Wallsend graveyard and ye heard this spuggy". Out of his mouth came the same whistle, whether it was an eagle, parrot or sparrow.

The Germans left. The prospects for a united Europe would have suffered a setback that night I expect!

I consider that the variety of part-time jobs students can take as part-time work provides an invaluable access to "the outside world".

What did I learn as a dried blood packer or pub pianist? I simply learned that context is everything when you are working with others.

Having an O-level in music or English does not necessarily impress people in cellars or pubs. The ability to empathise and relate to others was an important experience that helped me in my future career.

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