

Good Work Ethic

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Good Work Ethic

I used to be driven. Driven for money, driven to be the absolute best I could be. I felt I had to prove myself to everyone – that I was just as good as the smart ones, the pretty ones, the hardest workers. Then came the day when that all came crashing down.

I was the youngest press helper on the Akiyama 426, an ancient printing press from the mid 70's. The '4' represented a four color press and the '26' represented the number of maximum width in inches the press could handle. Steckel Printing was my employer, back in the day when Henry still ran the plant in his soft handed way before that other terrible day that will lead to another terrible story.

I was twenty years old, having dropped out of college the year before after a single semester, realizing that it wasn't for me. I entered the work force bundling Monopoly money as a temp, moving up into the press helper position to actually make the money.

I trained with Kevin, a tall Nordic type who wasn't the 'quickest' in certain areas but was so damn adaptable that he rose through the ranks as Steckel. At the time, he was the youngest pressman in the place at twenty-two. Together, we worked second shift, slamming out nine thousand sheets of paper an hour of Monopoly money on average. If it were real, I'd be sitting on an island in Borneo sipping fruity drinks with umbrellas in them.

The summer of 1993 passed by and press helpers came and went. In time, I also grew proficient at keeping the press running – becoming a sort of 'assistant' pressman. It wasn't a title change - to get that title officially meant a pay hike, which wasn't going to happen even if the company was making money hand over fist.

Second shift presented opportunities - you could stay late, run a few hundred thousand extra sheets and make some healthy change in overtime.

My confidence grew and management recognized it. I arrived to work to realize that I was scheduled to run the 426 on a 250,000 sheet run. Kevin had been pulled off the 426 and onto the 440 for the night, helping to repair a broken crankshaft. He had spoken to management and they decided I couldn't fuck the job up, considering it was only a two color Monopoly run.

I was giddy with excitement. I looked over the schedule to find that my helper for the night was Mike.

It could have been worse.

Mike was an aging man with a salt and pepper hair and beard, heavysset with a tired look about him. He had been hired a few months before, having lost his job in a downsizing or bankruptcy of a competitor. That's how we got our best workers. He was a good worker and his usual press was the 440. But he was mine for the evening. And I was determined to impress.

I fired the press up around 5 pm, running several sheets to determine the register and get the color up to proper levels. I called the shift super over to sign off on my work and he spent the next half hour tweaking the color before signing off on it.

While this was going on, I had Mike deliver several skids of paper to the back of the press, ordering him to stack it up. I knew that once we were going, he would be hard pressed to keep up. Each ream of paper was individually wrapped, so I had him start opening them.

Most printer paper is boxed this way for offset printers. Mike was used to super thin, super big sheets – roughly 28 inches by 40 inches. On the 440 where he was from, he might go through two feeders worth of paper in eight hours. On the 426, with special monopoly paper, we'd go through roughly twenty times that. Every five minutes, he'd have to fill the feeder, transfer it over and restock the spare feeder. Once going, we wouldn't stop. Maybe we would once to clean the rollers and maybe to eat.

We started out slow as we always did, running out around five thousand sheets an hour. Then as the press settled in, we'd up it steadily to around nine to ten thousand,

topping out at eleven. Theoretically. I'd seen Kevin beat out thirteen thousand sheets an hour on some late night runs. The man could move paper. And now it was my turn.

Mike found that keeping the feeder filled was a full time job. Constantly. I knew what it was like. Cut the box open, rip the paper wrapper off each ream, stack the paper, toss the box away. Repeat. Repeatedly. My focus was on the inks and rollers and the product I was producing. I looked over a few times, seeing Mike's pile of cut boxes and wrappers getting larger and larger. His face reddened as he was put through the paces. I cranked it up to eleven thousand, not wanting to top out the machine like Kevin.

The night went smoothly, passing by in the blink of an eye.

Mike never complained. Not once. And he didn't let me down. He cut and stacked, transferred, stacked some more. We didn't stop for lunch, we ate on the press. We covered for each other to take piss breaks.

At midnight, we shut down, washing up the press. We had done our 75 thousand sheets for the night. In the morning, the dayshift would pick up where we left off. Mike looked tired and said so. I had put him through a typical night on the 426. I would have been exhausted too.

As we walked out into the cool air of darkness, I walked to my 86 Escort and drove the forty-five minutes home to my apartment. I showered, crashed and slept the rest of the night and day away.

I walked into work the next day and tossed my keys and wallet on my workstation at the end of the 426 where Mike had toiled so hard the previous night.

Kevin walked up. "Meeting in the lunchroom." His face looked concerned.

Usually when Kevin got like that, it means I fucked something up. Rolling my eyes behind him, I wondered what I had done and followed him into the lunchroom. Management was there, as were every other second shifter.

I was bolstered by that fact, I wasn't being singled out.

Then the other foot fell.

As management began to tell the tale, I felt that imaginary foot in my gut, slamming hard into my ribs, leaving me gasping for breath in shock.

Mike was dead.

Dead.

Walked out last night.

Drove home.

Sat down on his recliner.

Beer in hand.

Remote in the other.

Television on.

Massive coronary.

Dead.

His two teenage kids found him in the morning. No struggle for life. No gasping for breath. Just immediate death.

I'd killed him.

Indirectly of course, I had no part in a weak heart brought on by heavy smoking and decades of fast food, but I still provided the incentive for all those factors to come into play. I ran that press hard, proving to myself and management that I wasn't the cross eyed loser that everyone saw. I wasn't the loser who had dropped out of college. I wasn't the failed artist who burned out his ability to draw even simple things. That I wasn't the smallest, the weakest...

To deal with it, the others jokingly called me the Murderer for the next several weeks. I bore it with stoic flippancy and every time a newbie showed up for work and they were saddled with me on a print job, the story was told to them as a joking warning. Not by me, but by my coworkers.

I try to find black humor in the absurdity of it all. How many people can say they killed a man through hard work? But there is no humor in his death once you think about the two children he left behind, even if they weren't babies.

I've tried to accept my faults and lackings due to this event. I am who I am, be it good or bad. Nothing I say or do will make others look at me any differently because I did an over the top job. There are downsides to a good work ethic.

I'm a murderer as a result of it.