

Training Column

TEARS OF A GOOD MAN

Recently I served as a judge in a national apprenticeship contest. It was quite a privilege to participate. I had the rare opportunity to sit with some of the finest young union craft workers in North America and the experience left me more optimistic than ever about the future of our industry. There was one experience though that left a much deeper impression than the others and it is this that I wish to share with all of you.

Within the competition were those that had won regional competitions all around North America. From age 21 to almost 40, they were the cream of the crop. As I interviewed each one I found many compelling similarities; driven, proud, focused and competitive as hell. But one candidate who arrived, despite have every one of these personal qualities, was extremely upset and at first nearly unable to talk.

This young man, upon regaining his composure, seemed ready to respond to the competition questions but I could not let it go. I asked him if there was some personal challenge or perhaps even tragedy that had befallen him, as I did not want to press him on business and industry issues in a tough personal time. His response, one born of true honesty, frustration and emotion both surprised and inspired me.

He proceeded to tell me that over the multi-day course of the competition he was being totally humiliated. His pride hurt, his self image or esteem gut-punched for sure. He simply told me he “wasn’t even in the same league” as the other guys and wondered if he belonged there. We discarded the interview and had a good talk about his best efforts, his response in the face of adversity and how he could use this in life as a motivator rather than a painful grind. He was articulate, smart, committed and a guy any contractor would love to have on a crew or in a company. When I shook his hand as he left I knew this young man was going to be O.K.

But the deep impression he left on me was for something we are so sadly lacking in this industry. This apprentice really cared. He really wants to be someone remarkable; as a craftsman and person. He has great ambitions of a strong career and good life. And that he could be brought to the brink of tears showed me a man with a passion for excellence, self-pride and a commitment to his best effort.

I thought of the tens of thousands of new young apprentices we are trying to reach; so different from trying to teach. Who have yet to see in themselves their true potential or life’s possibilities. Perhaps a young generation handicapped by too much parental support or not high enough personal expectations. A huge number of people entering our industry who have not yet found their “reason why”. Could we tap the emotion, pride and passion of this young man; perhaps the least skilled of those in his contest, but an example of the kind of young men and women we need. Those who care deeply and will act in accordance now and in the future.

For the nearly 100,000 people I try each year to engage and inspire, it is this one good man I will think of often. For it is upon him and others who care we will build this industry and our future.

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author specializing in labor-management challenges. He is the author of *Survival of the Fittest*, *Organize or Die* and coming in 2008 *Alpha Dog*. He addresses more than 50,000 labor and business leaders each year in North America. Coming soon a new Breslin Book for apprentice instruction : **Million Dollar Blue Collar: Managing Your Earnings for Life and Work Success.** More on his work and profile is available at www.breslin.biz.