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No Degree, and No Way Back to the Middle

By TIMOTHY EGAN

SPOKANE, Wash. - Over the course of his adult life, Jeff Martinelli has married three women and buried one of them, a cancer victim. He had a son and has watched him raise a child of his own. Through it all, one thing was constant: a factory job that was his ticket to the middle class.

It was not until that job disappeared, and he tried to find something - anything - to keep him close to the security of his former life that Mr. Martinelli came to an abrupt realization about the fate of a working man with no college degree in 21st-century America.

He has skills developed operating heavy machinery, laboring over a stew of molten bauxite at Kaiser Aluminum, once one of the best jobs in this city of 200,000. His health is fine. He has no shortage of ambition. But the world has changed for people like Mr. Martinelli.

"For a guy like me, with no college, it's become pretty bleak out there," said Mr. Martinelli, who is 50 and deals with life's curves with a resigned shrug.

His son, Caleb, already knows what it is like out there. Since high school, Caleb has had six jobs, none very promising. Now 28, he may never reach the middle class, he said. But for his father and others of a generation that could count on a comfortable life without a degree, the fall out of the middle class has come as a shock. They had been frozen in another age, a time when Kaiser factory workers could buy new cars, take decent vacations and enjoy full health care benefits.

They have seen factory gates close and not reopen. They have taken retraining classes for jobs that pay half their old wages. And as they hustle around for work, they have been constantly reminded of the one thing that stands out on their résumés: the education that ended with a high school diploma.

It is not just that the American economy has shed six million manufacturing jobs over the last three decades; it is that the market value of those put out of work, people like Jeff Martinelli, has declined considerably over their lifetimes, opening a gap that has left millions of blue-collar workers at the margins of the middle class.

And the changes go beyond the factory floor. Mark McClellan worked his way up from the Kaiser furnaces to management. He did it by taking extra shifts and learning everything he could about the aluminum business.
Still, in 2001, when Kaiser closed, Mr. McClellan discovered that the job market did not value his factory skills nearly as much as it did four years of college. He had the experience, built over a lifetime, but no degree. And for that, he said, he was marked.

He still lives in a grand house in one of the nicest parts of town, and he drives a big white Jeep. But they are a facade.

"I may look middle class," said Mr. McClellan, who is 45, with a square, honest face and a barrel chest. "But I'm not. My boat is sinking fast."

By the time these two Kaiser men were forced out of work, a man in his 50's with a college degree could expect to earn 81 percent more than a man of the same age with just a high school diploma. When they had started work, the gap was only 52 percent. Other studies show different numbers, but the same trend - a big disparity that opened over their lifetimes.

Mr. Martinelli refuses to feel sorry for himself. He has a job in pest control now, killing ants and spiders at people's homes, making barely half the money he made at the Kaiser smelter, where a worker with his experience would make about $60,000 a year in wages and benefits.

"At least I have a job," he said. "Some of the guys I worked with have still not found anything. A couple of guys lost their houses."

Mr. Martinelli and other former factory workers say that, over time, they have come to fear that the fall out of the middle class could be permanent. Their new lives - the frustrating job interviews, the bills that arrive with red warning letters on the outside - are consequences of a decision made at age 18.

The management veteran, Mr. McClellan, was a doctor's son, just out of high school, when he decided he did not need to go much farther than the big factory at the edge of town. He thought about going to college. But when he got on at Kaiser, he felt he had arrived.

His father, a general practitioner now dead, gave him his blessing, even encouraged him in the choice, Mr. McClellan said.

At the time, the decision to skip college was not that unusual, even for a child of the middle class. Despite Mr. McClellan's lack of skills or education beyond the 12th grade, there was good reason to believe that the aluminum factory could get him into middle-class security quicker than a bachelor's degree could, he said.

By 22, he was a group foreman. By 28, a supervisor. By 32, he was in management. Before his 40th birthday, Mr. McClellan hit his earnings peak, making $100,000 with bonuses.
Friends of his, people with college degrees, were not earning close to that, Mr. McClellan said.

"I had a house with a swimming pool, new cars," he said. "My wife never had to work. I was right in the middle of middle-class America and I knew it and I loved it."

If anything, the union man, Mr. Martinelli, appreciated the middle-class life even more, because of the distance he had traveled to get there. He remembers his stomach growling at night as a child, the humiliation of welfare, hauling groceries home through the snow on a little cart because the family had no car.

"I was ashamed," he said.

He was a C student without much of a future, just out of high school, when he got his break: the job on the Kaiser factory floor. Inside, it was long shifts around hot furnaces. Outside, he was a prince of Spokane.

College students worked inside the factory in the summer, and some never went back to school.

"You knew people leaving here for college would sometimes get better jobs, but you had a good job, so it was fine," said Mike Lacy, a close friend of Mr. Martinelli and a co-worker at Kaiser.

The job lasted just short of 30 years. Kaiser, debt-ridden after a series of failed management initiatives and a long strike, closed the plant in 2001 and sold the factory carcass for salvage.

Mr. McClellan has yet to find work, living off his dwindling savings and investments from his years at Kaiser, though he continues with plans to open his own car wash. He pays $900 a month for a basic health insurance policy - vital to keep his wife, Vicky, who has a rare brain disease, alive. He pays an additional $500 a month for her medications. He is both husband and nurse.

"Am I scared just a little bit?" he said. "Yeah, I am."

He has vowed that his son David will never do the kind of second-guessing that he is. Even at 16, David knows what he wants to do: go to college and study medicine. He said his father, whom he has seen struggle to balance the tasks of home nurse with trying to pay the bills, had grown heroic in his eyes.

He said he would not make the same choice his father did 27 years earlier. "There's nothing like the Kaiser plant around here anymore," he said.

Mr. McClellan agrees. He is firm in one conclusion, having risen from the factory floor only to be knocked down: "There is no working up anymore."