

Community Comment
July 19, 2013
Sam Pennisi

Independence Day

Another Independence Day has come and gone. We had been in Michigan for my wife's high school reunion. She asked me to go and who am I to say no. She comes from a small farming community in the lower peninsula of the state about two hours north of Detroit. While the modern world has certainly arrived in this little village, many things, perhaps the important things, have not changed. Few people have moved away. Many children and grandchildren and great grandchildren have stayed and made lives for themselves. The factory jobs have changed dramatically. Mostly gone are the days when a high school graduate could find a job at one of the big three car makers that would pay a livable wage. With hard work and some smarts, mostly boys but some girls too, could move up the employment ladder, make enough to provide for a modest home, help two or three kids go to college, maybe even have a small cabin on a lake up north, and retire with a pension that allowed the last years of your life to be lived in dignity and without the fear of being a burden on your children. My observation is that unions were mostly responsible for the quality of life that could be lived in a factory environment. These same unions are under attack today as being to blame for all of the company's woes. Thirty, forty, fifty years ago, a CEO made about five times the amount the average worker made. Now that number is 4 to 500 times the amount. We have seen since 2008 that the banking system and wall street also have had a tremendous impact on the opportunities that are available for the average working family. Wages have been stagnate and more and more education or training is needed just to keep up.

When I started college, my parents expected that my ability to get a bachelor's or a master's degree would help me realize a better life than they had. This was their dream. They helped me as they could and I worked through college. I finished with no debt; neither credit card or student loans. This is difficult to do today and there is not the assumption that your life will be better.

The reunion was interesting in many ways. We noticed that many of her classmates went to college. You might expect that in a State like Michigan that has a really good higher education system. Many of the young men went into business and worked at the various auto makers. But some farmed like their father's before them. Some became shop owners and ~~undertakers~~ often taking over the family business. One or two went to law school and ~~had long and successful careers as courtroom lawyers.~~ One woman became a top level stock broker way ahead of her time. My wife went into higher education administration and was one of the first women deans in the California State University System.

This small class in this little farming village did quite well for themselves. ~~Their hard work and solid family values paid off for them.~~ One amazing story is of a Japanese-American boy who was born here in Northern California. But he was born in an

internment camp at Tule Lake. The family lost everything they had including property and had to find a sponser to get out. This young man, whose parents were born in the United States, graduated from college, served in the navy, got a law degree and still practices law to this day. So does his daughter.

Independence Day is more than a National birthday. We need to remember that we are responsible for making and keeping our own independence day.

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Happy Fourth of July

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.