

CAREER TECH TALK, DECEMBER 2008

Posted in Career Tech Talk 2008 by careertechtalk on January 2nd, 2009

Interview with Mike Rowe, host of the Discovery Channel series "Dirty Jobs". Each week, Rowe serves as an apprentice to hardworking men and women who do difficult, dangerous and dirty jobs. His experiences on the show led him to start mikeroweWORKS (MRW)—a campaign to celebrate skilled labor and hard work. Mike discusses MRW and its accompanying Web site, describes the need for skilled labor in the United States as well as this nation's negative perception of the skilled trades, and candidly shares what he learned about education and hard work from his family.

(This podcast was recorded prior to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, so some of the news items discussed during the interview are no longer current.)

ACTE: Tell us about mikeroweWORKS and the MRW Foundation.

MR: Well, MRW is basically a PR campaign for skilled labor. In terms of a message, it's really a call to arms designed to stimulate conversation and encourage a dialogue around what I believe to be a kind of a dysfunctional relationship with hard work. I think the country has redefined what a good job looks like, and declared a kind of cold war on the traditional notions of skilled labor—at least the way we've always understood them to exist. Consequently, today we have a shortage of skilled tradesmen, along with rising unemployment, which is just a strange combination of facts to try and digest. MRW is an attempt to point out the casualties that come from waging a war on work, namely, a declining interest in the trades and a crumbling national infrastructure. And both of those things, obviously, affect everyone, so it's sort of a broad based initiative. The real goal is to wind up with some sort of resource that ultimately encourages people to rethink a career in the trades.

ACTE: Excellent and is the MRW Foundation related to that?

MR: Yeah it is. But to be honest, I just set it up because I had a suspicion it would come in handy at some point in the future. I didn't really have a specific reason to set up a non-profit, other than I wanted to have it there. What happened was, not long after I arranged it, I started looking into some other nonprofits that were out there and realized that there were many. A big part of what I want to focus on first is just creating a resource of all the organizations and associations, the non- profits, the opportunities that exist on a state-by-state basis for people who want to investigate a career in the trades. Get all of those in one place. MRW, I hope, will be the place where that can happen. We've already started and I'm really encouraged by what I've seen. But that's just a long way of saying I don't really know why I set up a non-profit right away, I just thought it seemed like the right thing to do and I'd figure out something specific to do with it as we got further into it.

ACTE: So I know MRW is just getting off the ground, but what specific resources do you hope to have. You mentioned a state by state list of resources that people could turn to?

MR: In a really general sense, you know it's hard to define what a call to arms really going to wind up doing, but I do believe that the real business of MRW is the message itself and the real message is we've got to think differently about the way we look at work. To answer your question, I know you're looking for specifics, what will people see when they come to the site and what will that experience be like. Certainly the first thing is just to heighten the awareness that if we don't change the way we look at work, nothing is going to happen because all change starts with perception I think, and we've got a fundamental disconnect in the way we look at these traditional notions of labor. Certainly a resource, what I call the missionary position, needs to be the first element of this. Lots and lots of non-profit resources currently exist and just getting them all into one place is a huge undertaking, but part of how I want to address it is in the same way that wikipedia worked. There are a lot of people that watch Dirty Jobs and a lot of people who are coming to the site who share the basic idea that we outta do something and I'm encouraging them to start with the state that their in. Look around, find some of these resources that exist, bring them into the forum on the site and we'll start organizing them. That's an obvious and somewhat straightforward thing we can do on the missionary side. On the mercenary side, there's also a mercenary position to this as well, and I have every intention of engaging a lot of big companies, the military as well, really people who have some skid in the game who would benefit from hiring skilled tradesman. It's not so much a job search site, at least I don't think it will be, I don't have the first clue as to how to really put that together, but I do know, that fundamentally we're talking about work and jobs which is money, so it just can't be all warm and fuzzy. Ultimately there needs to be a real benefit from going down this road and that benefit should be to get a job

ACTE: Going back to your mercenary position, does your collaboration with Ford and now Grainger Industrial Supply fit in with MRW?

MR: Well, it might. I can tell you that Grainger had a role in this, whether they knew it or not, about a year ago. Ford I've been in business with for a few years. I haven't brought it to Ford, specifically, yet, but I'm hopeful that we might be able to work something out. There are so many companies that have a vested interest in being heard on this, and I've been contacted by a lot of them. But since you mentioned Grainger, I can tell you that they've been great. About a year ago, I was giving a talk to their company. This is something I'd been doing for a long time. I'd go around the country and I'd talk to Fortune 500 companies. After 200 different jobs, you know on the show, there are a lot of patterns that begin to emerge from people that I worked with and spoke with. And their collective attitude about work got me thinking about the country's attitude and the difference between the two became pretty glaring; so I started giving these talks a couple of years ago about things people with dirty jobs know that the rest of us don't. I started sharing my experiences from the show, and my belief that we'd wage this war against the Puritan work ethic. The response to those talks was always amazing. So I started to get booked more and more frequently, and last year I was speaking to the employees at Grainger. Afterwards, the president, a guy named Jim Ryan, approached me about his concern that the very trades that his company served were starting to diminish. He expressed a desire to take a leadership position in reinvigorating the trades, but he wasn't sure how to do it without seeming self-serving. That's really how the idea first occurred to me. Here I am talking to the president of this billion dollar Fortune 500 company who in affect is saying it's such a crazy time we're in, no longer am I primarily worried about my competitors, I'm worried about the fact that our whole marketplace is contracting and how can that be when we've got this huge infrastructure problem in the country, how can there be fewer and fewer tradesman each year. It was a big question and it was the start of a dialog that we kept going for the better part of a year and it's really when I first started to think, what would happen if we could create this 3rd party place in cyberspace where companies like Grainger, and trade schools and unions could all support without being directly tied to an entity that shared their agenda but was separate from them where we could encourage the trades and celebrate work and all of that. It was Grainger that really first got me thinking about the mercenary element of this and of course from doing Dirty Jobs and meeting people day in and day out where the missionary element, or missionary position if you will, became pretty obvious. There's so many people right now who need work but aren't trained to do it but are perfectly willing and capable to do it. That's where the big disconnect was and that's really just a long way of saying that the site, if it plays out the way I hope it will, is going to be all encompassing

ACTE: So do you imagine it benefiting students, as well as people who are currently in the Work force, or who may be adults who are looking to retune their skills to a new field? Maybe all those groups?

MR: Well yeah, I think that work is one of the things that bring us together. Everybody's gotta work for a living. I think one element of the site that's important is a place where like-minded people can gather and chat. It's a social community in that way. I look at linked in, and I look at facebook, I look at myspace and I look at all these organizations that I'm not really sure what the fundamental thing is about those social networks. I don't see one where skilled tradesman can gather and stonemasons can pick the brains of steamfitters, welders can talk to electricians, electricians can talk to carpenters. I think it would be interesting on the one hand just to have a place where those people can come and talk with like-minded tradesman. But I also think it is really important to have a place where the notion of that type of career is celebrated so parents can come, maybe with kids who are trying to figure out what to do with their lives in the way of education. There's still this belief in the country that I see all the time, that the only real recipe to success involves some kind of college degree. And I'm the last guy in the world who's going to disparage a college degree. I think it's great; but I also think that training and education ought to go hand in hand, and they're not. There are way too many people in college, that I've seen, that are going way into debt and winding up with degrees that they're really not passionate about. And they're starting these careers that they're really not fully engaged in, and I just don't know if we need any more venture capitalists and MBAs. I'm not sure of that, but I'm positive that there are fewer welders this year than there were last year, and a whole lot fewer than there were five years ago. That means there's an opportunity for people. They just need a place where a welder is shown to be a successful, intelligent, articulate person, who's really good at what he or she does. It's like the plumber on TV. When we see a plumber on TV, you know he's going to be 300 pounds and gonna have a giant butt crack. That's how we portray plumbers. I want MRW to be a place where those vocations can be celebrated and seen in their true light as an opportunity to actually make a really good living, live a balanced life and not spend the first ten years of your career paying off a college debt.

ACTE: Could the recent economic downturn be an opportunity for promoting skilled labor, sort of, "stockbrokers are out; Joe the plumber is in?"

MR: Sure.

ACTE: You could definitely follow up with that.

MR: Well, yeah. In an election year, it's amazing how the candidates will scramble to try and associate themselves with the middle class, the working class, whatever it is they call it. And it's been a real challenge this year because...well, every year, the definition changes a little bit. You know, when you see Hillary Clinton doing shots of rye in a bar in Pennsylvania with a bunch of steel workers, it's kind of funny. These guys see right through that, but that's how eager the candidates are to align themselves with these issues. I don't know if you saw the cover of *TIME* magazine three weeks ago but both McCain and Obama are on it and portrayed as construction workers. They're dressed in steel-toed boots, and had the hard hats and they're smiling, and they're ready to go to work, and their making a case for national service, which is an interesting cast to make I think. But, again, it's like, "Where do you really stand on the trades? Where do you really stand on the infrastructure?" You know, the business with Joe the plumber is just another great example. My best friend from high school is actually a plumber. His name's not Joe, it's Jeff. He's a shining example of what these guys were trying to articulate, I think, through Joe. Jeff makes a very comfortable living, six figures or so a year; has four kids; has enough time to coach the softball team. He's active in his community and he's got this great, balanced life. He's just a regular guy, but if your toilet's backed up, he's a superhero. People love him, and he loves his life and his career. We just don't see those kinds of jobs portrayed like that. If it's a handyman, it's Schneider from *One Day At A Time*. If it's a ... look there's a long list of examples but we don't spend a lot of time showing off successful skilled tradesman in pop culture. It's just not what we do.

ACTE: To switch to the education angle, I read that your parents were both Baltimore County teachers. How did that affect your perception of education?"

MR: Well, interesting question. It was kind of a mixed message to tell you the truth. My dad was a very good teacher, but he didn't love it. He came home from school every afternoon and he worked for hours preparing the next day's lesson. He took it very seriously but he wasn't one of those, you know it wasn't Mr. Holland Opus. He was a teacher who took what he did really, really seriously, so my earliest impressions of education was look this is very serious business, you've gotta go get smart, it's going to be really hard and you better be good at it. So I kinda went into high school with this feeling of gees whiz, hope it all works out. It did work out and I have like I said before a lot of respect for education and I certainly see the importance of it. But by the same token, my next-door neighbor growing up was my grandfather and my grandfather was as dominant an influence in my life as my dad. He had a 7th grade education and he dropped out of school in the late 20s I guess, maybe, maybe before that, right after the first World War I think. He had to go to work to help the family. Over the next ten or fifteen years he became a master electrician, a plumber, a bricklayer, architect, mechanic. He was one of those guys it turns out that was just hardwired to be brilliant at all of the technical trades. He just seemed to be born with it. My real childhood memories are of my grandfather fixing anything that broke ever, I mean he didn't need the instruction manual he was just that guy. He had a stroke when he was in his 60s and my dad sorta became his apprentice. You know we had a little farm in a relatively small community where I grew up, but those two would be the guys that could fix it. They'd start their day clean, come home dirty and the problem would always be solved. Yeah both of my folks were teachers but my real experience growing up was being in this front row seat where I could watch both my dad and my grandfather go out get dirty and get things fixed, so what I was left with was an appreciation for not so much a degree but for knowledge and understanding.

ACTE: People don't always realize that knowledge doesn't just come in a four year degree package. Knowledge can come thru apprenticeships or two-year community college, training courses.

MR: Knowledge comes from keeping your ears open and learning. There are plenty of places to do it; you just have to start with the general desire to want

ACTE: So did you ever become the apprentice for your dad and grandfather

MR: I tried. My own story is more ironic than inspiring I'm afraid. I didn't get the gene the way my dad did and the way my grandfather did. I got a healthy respect for it, and I certainly grew up around it but by the time I was seventeen, eighteen years old, I realized that I could hang drywall but it just wasn't perfect and I could pour concrete but it just took me a while to get it right. I could do the things they did, it just didn't come easy and I wasn't naturally good at it. So I went another way. I got into the entertainment business, which is about as far from carpentry as you can go. I got into the Opera of all things and then I started acting, then I started performing, and then I started hosting TV shows. It was a long strange crooked road and twenty some years later, it's funny but the first real hit that I was ever associated with was *Dirty Jobs* and it was a show that I pitched based on my grandfather's earlier jobs. It wasn't supposed to be a series or really even a hit, it was just supposed to be three one-hour specials about these odd difficult dirty jobs. Go figure that's what people watched and now it's been on for four years and I don't know how to make it stop. So for me success came when I went back to do the thing that I essentially spent my life running from.

ACTE: Well I've noticed that MRW so far seems very collaborative. You have a message on the site asking people for input and I've read a lot of thoughtful ideas on the Dirty Jobs online forum, people there are really into it and have been providing a lot of facts and data. What could our members and the people listening, who are mostly career and technical education teachers and administrators, do to help MRW?

MR: Yeah, you can make it happen. Dirty Jobs is a hit because the viewers won't leave it alone. They send me thousands of letters every week suggesting jobs that I can try. I love that and I'm grateful for it, but it really taught me that in terms of making TV and I think in terms of launching a site, it doesn't make sense to go out there with this big giant vision and this huge agenda based on what you think the country wants. I don't really know, I only know what I've heard and learned from the people I've met and worked with. It's not a device that I'm using, I'm genuinely saying to anyone who hears this, if it makes sense to you, come to the site and make a suggestion and in the same way that it worked for Dirty Jobs, I think it's going to work here because I'm going to run with it if enough people want me to. I really do think it's time for a meaningful resource online. A single destination where people can go and get a top-down look at all of the options in the technical trades available to them in the state where they live. That information already exists. Just getting it together is something that anybody listening right now could absolutely help with, no doubt about it. But there might be other suggestions as well. There might be other utilities that I'm not even thinking of that the site could ultimately serve and I'd love to hear about those too. Apprenticeships, scholarships whatever the opportunities are in your particular zip code it would be good to know about them because once we get them together, we'll actually have something to brag about I think.

ACTE: Excellent, well thank you so much for talking to me today Mike.

MR: Anytime, my pleasure

ACTE: Learn more about Mike's campaign for skilled labor at www.mikeroweworks.com