

Echols: Time to reassert value of working with hands

Friday, October 26, 2012

It is a paradox. Everywhere I go, supervisors tell me they can't find enough quality workers. Yet, the unemployment numbers hover at record highs. How is this possible?

Let's start with manufacturing and construction — something we hear a lot about at the Public Service Commission. In this world, welders and other skilled labor are in high demand — but short supply. Take a tour of Plant Vogtle, where new nuclear reactors are being built, or Plant McDonough, where a coal plant is being converted to natural gas. These facilities are a sea of iron and metal, and skilled welders and pipefitters are needed.

These jobs pay good money, yet I am told that finding quality welders — who can also pass a drug test — is a challenge. This disconcerting truth is known all too well to our technical colleges, working overtime to train more skilled workers — but is it their job to teach character and self-control? In this economy, we need to make sure our sharpest kids aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. Going to one of Georgia's technical colleges, even as a high school student (as my son is doing), is a good start to getting a job.

But there seems to be an equally successful track in the military. These same Georgia manufacturing supervisors relay to me that their best skilled laborers are military veterans. They show up on time, have a great attitude, do the job right, and they don't struggle with drug abuse. At Georgia's two nuclear power plants, I hear the same positive story about employees who came out of the Navy's nuclear program. They are prepared and do an excellent job. Maybe Congress should rethink any cuts to the military personnel budget for this reason alone. It sounds like we need to direct more of our young people toward serving their country and the benefits that come with it.

Remember last year when crops rotted in the fields of south Georgia because there were not enough laborers to pick them? I thought more than once that a week of picking tomatoes, watermelons or okra would probably do most Georgia teenagers a world of good.

It did for me. Growing up in the Echols family meant not only working in the family summer garden, but cleaning cars on Saturday, selling peanuts at our car auction at night and running a lawn business after school. All that sweaty manual labor, dirt and sore muscles taught me the value of hard work and 15 cents — the price of a bag of parched peanuts I sold. And it really made me appreciate the college education I received at the University of Georgia once I got there.

Our society has put a tremendous emphasis on getting a college education — as we should. Educational achievement is still the best indicator of financial success, as Census Bureau statistics indicate. But I have to wonder if, between the crib and college, we are shortchanging

our children by not making them do more old-fashioned, physically challenging work. The master carpenter, skilled plumber and veteran brick mason once held stature in our country. That's not so much the case today, and that is unfortunate.

Finally, we should ask ourselves if our kids are spending too much time in the air-conditioning with a video-game controller or iPod in their hand. Are we doing them a disservice by not having them explore vocational opportunities offered through our technical colleges?

Let's reassert the value of "work." Our future depends on it.

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