1999 Second Place Personal Narrative

Of Pirate Ships and Silver Steeds

We poured the foundation yesterday, and now we were pulling the forms off the cement and hauling them out--back onto Ralph, our two-ton truck. The sun beat down. As I bent over to pick up another eight incher I glanced towards the pit. First, came a black bandanna. Next, came protruding straggles of curly blond hair. Then, a grimace and a roll of the eyes--Danny's trademark--appeared as the young man hauled himself out of the hole. Following the head, came a tattered shirt and matching shorts. The holes in the shorts were normal, but when Danny turned imploringly toward me I discovered the cause of the shredded shirt.

Aaron had just hopped off the top of the foundation, and he said as he walked towards the truck, "I'll be back. Tell the other guys. Just do the fillers on the outside, and then you can start on the inside. I should be back by then." Then came the usual, "Take your time. Be careful. Take lunch in a while."

Dan raised his arm and asked, "Do I have one back here too? It feels like there is something there, but I can't see it." I swallowed and nodded.

"Hop on in Dan," Aaron called as he started the truck. Gingerly Danny responded. They were heading for the hospital where he would receive fifty-three stitches to close up the two holes in his side.

"Well, another exciting day working cement," I thought as the F-250 pulled away.

Dan had slipped on his first attempt to get out of the hole, and he fell against two flat-ties protruding from the newly created foundation. Flat-ties are those thin pieces of silver metal that stick out from the walls in your basement before it gets finished. As the forms for the walls are being set in place on top of the footings, flat-ties are sent through the wall so that the inside form can be connected to the outside form. Although this whole idea about flat-ties may seem intriguing, the important thing to learn is that if one flat-tie is left out, however insignificant this may seem, the pressure of the cement is sufficient to cause a 'blowout' in the wall. Many times I think that people forget to enjoy the details in their lives, and so events turn into 'blowouts' instead of grand adventures.

Mylan, my boss, has a wife and seven girls to worry about. He is constantly battling employee turnover, and he is always juggling three or four jobs. With all this, everything could be going great. But, if he doesn't order enough ree-bar for a house and we come five bars short, everything shuts down. We have to wait an hour, or two, or three while we have some delivered. Details are an important part of adventures and probably, they are most important in the way they shape our attitudes towards these adventures. I am beginning to believe more and more that in life it is not so much big events and experiences that lead to our overall happiness, but the way in which we observe, organize, and construct the details.

Working cement is tough. It is really hard. It is the hardest work I have ever done--by miles. Most days were very hot, very long, very dirty, and very physical. Many people will say, "Why would anyone subject themselves to this kind of a life?" These same people watch Indiana Jones and say--"Wow! That's excitement and adventure." However, they forget the small details that accompany such a life. They forget about the very hot, very long, very dirty, and very physical. Adventures are not always born out of these circumstances, but
they are almost always born out of some trial, pain, or discomfort.

Concrete, for me, is over now, and instead of heading out to Syracuse and another job, I head down into the basement of the Harold B. Lee Library. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I know my way through my math assignment at a carrel near my locker. Occasionally, no, quite frequently, while I puzzle over a differential equation, workers pass back and forth through an access door.

"Hey, should I close this door?" one asked.

"Yea, might as well, then we can swear," the other answered, warming to his own idea.

"Yea, that's what I'm thinkun," as the door closes, and they retreat down the hallway. Their conversation, both in subject and tone, reminds me of the many long days with Jeff.

"Keep hittn', its not up yet," comes the stern reply to my inquiring glance. The sun beats down. Rubber mallet in hand I turned on the wall, and lashing out, I hit, then hit again the plywood between the steel ribs on the back of the forms. Squish, squish, plop. Mud oozes out between the eight-footers. Drops of sweat, fast becoming streamlets escape my saturated baseball cap. "Move down a panel!" was the next shout coming down from on high. We were pounding the walls to keep the mud flowing underneath a metal window frame. If we didn't keep it moving a gap would develop between the frame and the concrete. To accomplish a complete fill it usually took a person on each side of the wall pounding like a maniac for about five minutes straight. This is lung tiring and shoulder fatiguing, but it is survivable. However, we were on our third window without a break. I mean, really, there are only a certain number of times you can switch hands with a mallet.

Jeff got really annoying after a while. I couldn't stand his smoking, and I appreciated his language even less. However, to me he was always an example of an extremely hard worker. He has to be at least thirty, and every day for the past however many years he has worked construction. He was always on us to find a task or to complete a job, but only because he would be doing the same. There was a driving force that kept him cracking away at each succeeding job.

That is one of the keys--to keep cracking away. Adventure is so appealing to me because I look at it as opportunity for growth and development. I love being better the next time than I was the first. I love being stronger tomorrow than I am today. I hate getting worse. One of my favorite sayings is desire creates power. True desire comes only after time and effort have been expended. Then, I know that my desire is strong enough to keep me pursuing my goal no matter what obstacles arise. Whether I am at work or simply hanging out with my friends, I have realized that there is always a chance for learning.

"Wow, you're good! Do you dive a lot?" Devin asked.

"No, I just like to mess around in the pool," Matt responded as he walked towards the board again. There were no outside lights on at Mike's house, and the shadows, the water, and the moon infected me with a surreal impression of the evening. Jim and I tiptoed up the steps towards the house and pulled back the cover on the hot tub. "Sweet! It's on," as my hand pushed through the water. We both started to climb in, but stopped, legs in midair, and turned around.

"Hot tubs need chicks," Jim quipped. "Hey Alicia, come up here."

"Why?"
"I need to talk to you," he answered. Just then Josh came by, and seeing the hot tub shouted back to the others, "Hey guys, the Jacuzzi's on."

"Dooeh," I grumbled as Alicia was passed by five crazed eighteen-year-old guys. Barely, we all fit. We had graduated a month ago, and we were still high school individuals trying to find our place in a post high school world.

"I've worked every day since school got out," Dave Cook proclaimed.

"How much are they paying you?" someone returned.

"My job's easy," Josh broke in, "all I do is run errands for Brett's dad all day."

"You workin' Dev?" was the next query.

"Huuu? Yea, he's working. How many hours did you work this last week?"

"Be quiet, ----, Mr. concrete man."

"Is that what you're doing, ----?"

A nod followed by short, quick, quiet laugh.

"What do ya think. Is it tough?"

"Yea, it's way tough. I, yea. . . ."

"So, you're still at Einstein's then, Dev?"

"Uh huh. . . ." That's it? That's all the attention I get? I work myself to the edge of insanity every day, and that's all the attention I get.

I needed to go soon, so I removed myself from the tangled masses and collected my things. Mike had just arrived, and I stopped to talk to him. For the summer he was working with a guy who videos special events and then edits the footage into a video presentation. It was good to hear him talk. His same mannerisms and diction enveloped me in a cool, refreshing shower of recollections and reassurances. He was telling me how he and his boss had been involved in a car accident on a freeway off-ramp, but that they were okay. Alicia stood up in the hot tub and splashed Mike and me. My head turned to give one penetrating glare, and then I resumed my conversation with Mike. "Now where was this, again?. . ." "She wants me," I thought, but I knew it wasn't true.

Everyone has their own individual events and details that make up their lives. It is really how we look at these experiences that determines whether they are adventures or simply more time spent caught in the doldrums. During the summer I came to realize that the things that happen to me, and the things I'm a part of, and the relationships I develop--pleasant or unpleasant, in comfortable conditions or miserable conditions--become the very substance of who I am. I grow the most, and I am the most happy when I look for the adventure in everything.

"Waylering is very important," Ben reaffirmed as we walked, buckets in hand, around the newly set wall of forms. "If it's not waylered right, when the cement goes in, the wall will either bow out or tilt. Also, when it's
waylered it makes a good place to stand on." I wiped my face as the sprinkle changed to a light rain. "Got your hammer?" he asked.

"Yea, no, where did it go? I really need to get a hammer hock. Here it is."

"Okay, you got that end?" We raised a two x four onto the row of wayler ties protruding from the forms. Then we grabbed another and positioned it directly below the first. With one hand on the boards we both retrieved a wayler clamp, slipped it through the tie, and pounded it into place. This continued rather treacherously, as the rain increased. I would climb up only to slip back, while Ben was trying in vain to cling to the form with one hand and slip a clamp through a tie with the other. I shivered as drinking fountain drops soon drenched my T-shirt. Pressed up against the forms in search of shelter, I smiled over at Ben. "Great stuff, huh?"

"Oh, yea!" came the cheery response.

"Hey, are those guys still here? I can't here them." Like enemy troops scaling the castle wall we fought our way upwards through the rain and peeked over the edge. Deserted.

"I guess we take lunch now."

As I think back on the summer, my struggles with the 100 pound, two foot x eight foot forms is a sweaty contrast to my trips to Mike's house in the cool of the evening. However, both have somehow become part of the intricate pattern that makes up the recorder of this story. No one really cares what you did for your summer job. When it comes right down to it no one really cares that you have seen someone almost die. All this becomes bottled up in the adventure of a life. The sun will beat down on my life; instead of withering I want to rise up to embrace it.