Labor Day 2005: These people work hard at jobs that are particularly hard

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By Alana Semuels, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's easy to complain about work -- about the long hours and the demanding bosses and the paycheck that's not quite big enough. But it could be worse. What if you had to clean Port-A-Johns for a living? Or cut tumors from people's brains?

The Post-Gazette set out to find some of the hardest jobs in the region, by asking readers to write us if they thought their jobs were really difficult. We asked for jobs that were physically tough, mind-numbingly boring, full of stress and pressure, or marked by excruciatingly long hours.

Many people contacted us -- including a man who cleans office buildings, a once-obese bike messenger, a customer service representative, a boilermaker repairman, a fuel tanker driver, a clerk-typist, a cookie delivery driver, and an attorney.

It was tough to choose. We're not saying that these jobs are absolutely the hardest jobs in the world, or even in the region, and we know there are people out there who would give anything to have a job at all. Some of the people we've profiled are quite well compensated for their labor, others get great benefits, or prestige -- but all the same, these jobs could never be called easy.

Dirty work

A lesser woman might complain about spending her workday with the least pleasant substance.

John Beale, Post-Gazette

Anna Kerin of McKees Rocks, an employee of "Mr. John," cleans a portable toilet at a construction site near Sam's Club in Monroeville. Kerin can completely clean and scrub a toilet in under three minutes.

If she's not sitting five feet from the human waste of hundreds of individuals in a large and unwieldy truck that sputters and gasps, Anna Kerin can be found inside a Port-A-John.

She removes the foul-smelling material from the toilet, cleans the whole thing with a solution, replaces the toilet paper, and puts up her initials, a signature of sorts where others before her have left their mark. All of this in under three minutes flat.

Anna Kerin is good at this job, and is the only female driver that Mr. John of Pittsburgh employs. Dressed in jeans and heavy work books, she somehow finds the time to put in sparkly earrings and comb her closely coiffed hair.

hair.

Click photo for larger image.

On a rainy day this summer, she reflected on her line of work while sticking a thick hose down into the toilet, sucking out the contents.

"When I first started, it was the winter, and the odor was not that bad," she said. "In summertime, when you turn that pump on, you get an odor. It's pretty ripe, too."

It's not just the putrid smell that makes her job tough.

There was the time that she found a dead possum in the toilet, and had to pull it out by hand and throw it over a hill.

Gusts of wind often knock over the toilets. And then there are those pesky kids, who knock over portable toilets with the same abandon that country kids probably tip cows.

When that happens, the compact mother of two pushes the toilets upright using the drainage pipe, and cleans the waste off the walls. Sometimes, she opens the door to clean the toilet only to find a man going about his business, and has to wait for him to finish before she can do her job.

Kerin, 48, of McKees Rocks, doesn't mind her job at all. She once was a truck driver, hauling tires and paint and supplies all over the country in an 18-wheeler. But as a divorced mom, she missed her two sons, and started looking for a way to stay closer to home.

She loves the driving her job requires. On a slow day, she drives 286 miles to clean just 25 portable toilets. On her busiest day, she'll clean 76 Port-a-Johns.

Although it took a year, she's more accustomed to the odor now. She's developed a strange affinity for clean toilets and Port-A-Johns, as well as a sense of disbelief about how some humans behave like animals in the confines of four kelly green walls and a plastic roof.

A few weeks ago, she visited a flea market and had to use the portable toilet of another company, which almost made her, a veteran of the dirtiest bathrooms in the state, gag.

"If a toilet has mess on the seats, I hate that. I have to scrub until it's off," she said. "I clean it the way that I would keep my own bathroom clean. No one should ever have to see a filthy Port-A-John."

Death hangs on

The thing about spending all day thinking about dead people is that it's pretty near impossible to leave death behind.

John Beale, Post-Gazette

Michael Burns can take off his dark black suit, drive away in a car that is not a hearse from the Beinhauer funeral home in Peters -- he can rinse his hands of the embalming fluid that he uses to replace the liquids that once made a body human -- but he still can't rub his mind of the fact that everyone he knows is eventually going to die.

Michael S. Burns is funeral director/manager for Beinhauer in Peters.

Click photo for larger image.

Being a funeral director is much more than thinking of death, of course. There are the flowers to arrange, the "remains" to collect at all hours of the night, the urns and caskets to order, the families to console. The bills to send.

But of the tasks that make up a funeral director's day, all lead back to death and to what we'd call a funeral -- what Burns calls a celebration of life.

For Burns, 41, of Mt. Lebanon, and funeral directors like him, the process of burying the dead starts with death, unless someone has planned ahead. He and others at Beinhauer are on call 24/7, and when someone dies, they go out in their gray vans to collect the body.

It's brought back to the funeral home and embalmed, in which the corpse is washed, disinfected, groomed, massaged, and the blood is drained and replaced with embalming fluid. Embalming also includes making the body look like the human it once was, a challenge that Burns says has taken him as long as 12 hours for a man who was in a bad accident.

"This is a major loss for someone," he said, "There's no room for error."

So important is the task that when his wife's grandparents died, he wouldn't let anyone else touch them -- he felt that only he could preserve their bodies the right way.

But it's the time he spends with the family that to Burns is often the most emotionally draining.

To Burns falls the task of gently prodding family members about how a person might want to be remembered, and then interpreting these wishes into a memorial service or funeral that can include touches like wheeling a motorcycle into the funeral parlor or placing golf clubs next to the casket. He often deals with families who might be divided about the wishes of the dead.

Burns must also be sure to keep his distance, or else the 1,200 people that Beinhauer buries every year begin to take their emotional toll.

"Getting emotionally attached is not a good thing," he said. "Not knowing everything about a person is a good thing."

It's hard to do, especially for those who died suddenly, or as children. He says he cries at funerals all the time.

He remembers burying a 1-month-old baby just a month after his wife had given birth to their first child. He went home feeling a combination of guilt and elation, and then of worry, knowing that it could have been his daughter.

His job reminds him to spend all the time he can with his family, and he's more careful going about the tasks of daily life -- he's seen every cause of death you can imagine, and knows that almost anything and everything could put him back at the funeral parlor in another capacity -- and make it, instead of work, the last place in the world he'd ever want to be.

High wash act

Poised nearly 600 feet above the ant-sized people swarming the sidewalks below, Timothy DeBold tries not to think about the time that a fellow window washer fell 35 stories to his death.

John Beale, Post-Gazette

Timothy Debold washes windows at a building in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh.

Click photo for larger image.

Or that if the thin cables that hold his cart aloft failed, DeBold and his partner -- who happens to be his son -- would leave their family in Munhall bereft.

Sometimes, when the wind blows especially hard and sways his scaffold, the accidents are hard to forget. For one thing, on the smooth glass of the Mellon Bank building, there's nothing to grab.

"It starts blowing, and you think, there I go," he said.

DeBold first started washing windows 25 years ago, figuring to make some money while he decided what he wanted to do with his life. Ten years later, still a window washer, he climbed into a chair 11 stories above the ground and began the better-paying task of cleaning windows at frightening heights.

Now, he and his son are responsible for the windows of the Mellon Bank Building -- the tallest building in Pittsburgh that is cleaned from the outside, as well as the windows of other buildings around the city. He works both for Shamrock Cleaning Services and as the owner of a private business, TD's Window Cleaning.

There have been slips on the way up. There was the time in 1996, when the ladder that was holding DeBold three stories above the ground collapsed. He fractured his left heel, partially ruptured two discs in his back, and was out of work for nine months.

The constant squeege-ing with his right hand led to a repetitive stress injury, which had to be corrected by surgery.

But he still climbs back onto the scaffold to complete the task of cleaning windows that become dirty just about as soon as he washes them. The Mellon Building, for instance, takes about a month to clean. He cleans it three times a year.

It might seem boring to keep doing that over and over again, kind of like moving the sand of a whole beach with only two hands, but DeBold said that the job keeps him alert. Sometimes, the antics of the people inside provide amusement: he once got an inadvertent peek into a girls dormitory, when a few residents ignored or didn't see the signs that warned them about the men at work on the windows.

"On the buildings in town, you don't see much happening. But people make hand gestures like you're crazy to be out there."

He feels especially crazy during the windy cold of winter or in the sweltering heat of summer, or during the days when sudden rains trap him on the scaffold and the threat of lightning makes him wonder just why he's standing hundreds of feet above the ground on a wire buggy.

But the fear has gone from the first day that he climbed into a seat hanging off the side of the building, when it took him an hour to climb over the wall, and then another hour before he could start doing his job. He wanted to quit.

"I was scared to death," he said. "But the foreman said just hold on, you'll be okay, you have nowhere to go except down."

Head case

Surrounded by doctors and nurses in light blue scrubs, surgical masks, and hats that look like shower caps, Dr. Brad Bellotte cauterizes the bald and shaved scalp of the woman who lies prostrate before him as smoke emanates from her head.

Through the flap of skin he has opened, he cuts though tissue and blood to reach the skull. Under his supervision, a medical student uses a hand-held drill to reach the patient's brain as sounds like those from a carpenter's bench fill the room.

Bellotte peers into the pulsing penny-sized red hole, and begins the process of inserting a small shunt that will drain water from the patient's brain to her abdominal cavity, perhaps helping her live a more comfortable life.

An intricate procedure into one of the human body's most complicated organs -- all done in 36 minutes flat.

As a neurosurgeon, Bellotte is a carpenter, professor, ethicist, doctor, customer service representative and Grim Reaper all in one. He's also a marathonist of sorts -- in some spinal surgeries, Bellotte is on his feet for seven hours at a time, and one Christmas holiday, he was in the operating room for 36 hours.

There's a reason that proud parents of smart kids speculate they're going to grow up to be an astronaut or a brain surgeon. It's a hard job.

But Bellotte's job is as grounded as an astronaut's might be celestial. It's all about digging into the body parts that make us work -- the brain, the spine -- and making them function again. Some of the spine surgeries he performs require hammering and dealing with bolts and screw.

Aneurysms, spine surgeries, skull fractures -- things that in most humans dredge up feelings of worry and foreboding, actually excite this guy. He loves removing brain tumors. Enjoys the relieved expression on patients' faces after he has pounded their herniated discs back into place. Thrives on teaching medical students how to cut through a patients' skull.

Not that Bellotte is any sort of a butcher. The very essence of doctoring means gently treading into families' lives, telling people that mom or dad are going to die, or maybe be okay.

"You have to know when to say no -- families rely on us for guidance," he said. "No

one wants to be the one who says don't operate on grandma."

As Allegheny General Hospital's director of neurotrauma, he's called into the emergency room to perform surgeries on patients who end up there, unexpected, a sudden shock after a car crash. These are emotionally difficult.

"We're starting from the worst part of their lives," he said.

As the father of a 3-month-old baby girl named Emma and the husband of an anesthesiologist at Allegheny General, Bellotte finds that scheduling is rarely easy, nor is leaving work behind.

But he wouldn't trade it for any other job, he said. "I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

Coal, coke and cluckers

As a boy, Clarence Richey watched his dad get up every day to go work in a coal mine, and knew it wasn't for him. He wanted to be a radio broadcaster. He never wanted to have anything to do with coal.

But coal has a certain draw to a teenage boy right out of high school trying to make some money.

Coal even seemed fun after his first worst job, at an egg farm where he carried hundreds of live chickens from the delivery truck to their holding pens. He would grab them by their skinny legs, a few at a time, dodging their pecking and flapping to put them in their new home.

So after high school, he headed off to the coal mine, trying to ignore the claustrophobic spaces and darkness while he stood 400 feet underground, much like his father had.

But when the mine closed down, Richey moved on to the Clairton Coke Works, cooking the coal he had once mined. He never became a broadcaster.

"Reality bites," he said.

For his current job, Richey, 49, of Whitehall, dons long underwear, flame retardant gear, goggles, boots, a hood and a respirator at the US Steel's facility, where he spends days and nights cooking coke and its by-products like sulfur, benzene and tar.

He's a pusher machine operator, and sits in a piece of equipment that ferries coal into the ovens. When he works overtime, it is often as a jamb cutter, removing the tar residue from the doors of 2400-degree ovens, or as a lid man -- removing and resetting the lids on top of batteries.

The heat is miserable, especially in the summer -- on top of the batteries, thermometers have registered as high as 150 degrees. Richey sweats "buckets" inside his protective gear most days. Some days, he gets so bored he wishes he could read a book or magazine.

"A monkey can do what I do," he said, "But hey, it's a job."

He's had his nose broken by a snapped handle, and was hit in the head with a piece of coke the size of a bowling ball. His sleep schedule is hampered by the rotating shifts he has to work -- starting at 8 a.m. one week, 4 p.m. another, and midnight the next.

Life outside work is good for Richey -- he owns a sparkling townhouse, takes his wife on cruises, has a college degree. Perks through US Steel have allowed him to go back to school and get a bachelor's in business administration and study computer programming.

But it's still hard to forget that he has to wake up in the morning and spend the day in a uniform more constricting than a corset. Nor is it lost on him that all of his one-time jobs -- working in a coal mine, on a farm, in a coke plant -- might be going the way of the dodo.

To that, he has an answer: two years. That's the amount of time left till he's worked 30 years for the company, and if the negotiated benefits hold up, he can look forward to retirement. It's really the only reason he works, he said, putting in the grueling hours in the white hot heat, doing something he never wanted to do -- the knowledge that some day, he'll be able to stop working.

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