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Proud to build the building

Oprah, I'm not. And I don't have a book club. But this morning, I read about a book in *USA Today* that I believe might appeal to thefabricator.com's visitors. In fact, I'm guessing many of you could have written it. I plan to read it; maybe you'll want to also.

The book's title is *Blue Collar & Proud of It*. *USA Today* published a **Q&A with the author**, Joe Lamacchia, 50, of Newton, Mass., who owns a landscaping company. Newton argues that despite societal pressures to the contrary, not all high school students need to go to college to be successful. This sentiment is shared by many in the metal manufacturing community, including "Welding Wire" readers who responded to last month's newsletter about disappearing voc-tech programs.

The item that generated responses quoted a welding professional who laid the blame for the programs' demise on counselors, school systems, and even some vocational teachers who lack "real-world" experience.

Tom, who works for a fabrication shop in the Midwest, wrote, "You are right on about counselors and whole going to college deal. I taught vocational machine shop from 1973 to 1976 in [the Northeast]. It was the same then. You were some kind of *hood* if you went to vocational school. The kids out of all our programs learned a useful skill, and we placed them directly out of high school into good paying jobs. In a lot of cases, the four years of earning power that these kids had over their college-bound classmates made them such that only a few [college graduates] passed them in monetary status later on in life.

"I have worked my entire life in manufacturing, and we still cannot get trained help. Most of the training places have closed up, and almost all of the vocational centers have been closed and the buildings and equipment auctioned off.

"It continues to be a frustration for all of us. Maybe if there is enough "noise" about it, we can get the vocational centers going again and remove the stigma this time that it's for dummies."

Michael, a graduate of a voc-tech school in Pennsylvania, wrote, "I worked in the field as a welder directly out of high school and had the opportunity to earn pretty good money. I now have children of my own who went to college, and all three, having a trade, are doing well.

"Here's my argument: Do you feel college is needed? I don't feel that way, providing you decide to take up a trade. Your job may require you to train and most will do the training at the job site. How many do we know who have been through the apprentice programs at local union halls? Welders, millwrights, electricians ... How much do they make per year never having to attend college for a degree. My wife is a staunch supporter of attending college, while I, myself, am not. I made it in my life as a welder/supervisor/plant manager in Fortune 500 companies.

"Are those days gone because we no longer teach the trades in voc-tech schools? Welding has since been taken out of [the voc-tech school]. [If it had not been discontinued] maybe we wouldn't have a welder shortage in Northeast Pennsylvania.

I agree that more attention should be focused on trades in schools of all types. There are those who like to work in an office building and those who like building the office building. It should make one proud to say they built the building.

Lamacchia couldn't agree more. When asked why he wrote the book and whether he thought people nowadays don't respect blue-collar jobs, he said he first started a Web site (bluecollarjobs.com) in July 2003, "because my kids' teachers would tell me that they wouldn't make it if they didn't go to college. Then I noticed that I can never get a hold of a plumber or an electrician, because there is such a shortage. I just want a place for people to turn where they can feel they are normal. And maybe pick a place in the back of the book where they can get some training. We need to hit it, bang it, see it, smell it. (If not for blue-collar workers), you wouldn't have your bridges, your tables, and your showers."

Lamacchia has told his children what his white-collar dad told him: They can do whatever they want, just be aggressive. You can't take these kids, treat them like they're pieces of clay, and roll them down the assembly line.

When asked what he thought caused the stigma that is attached to blue-collar workers, Lamacchia said, "I think it was from the roaring '90s, the roaring lights of Wall Street, the computers, the cell phones—it was such an economic boom, it was unbelievable. It created all these jobs. I think we need to get back to basics. If you go to school, it doesn't mean you're going to make \$150,000 a year. It's almost like we're producing too much of what we don't need and not enough of what we do need. I don't get it. I don't have a stigma toward my accountant. I need him, and he needs me to pave and plow his parking lot."

Unless your accountant is **Bernie Madoff**, **Allen Stanford**, or someone like them, this is a very healthy, respectful, commendable perspective.

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