

Our Young People Need Real Jobs for the Real World

By Federal D. Glover

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WITH ALL the graduations occurring last month and the recent Independence Day celebrations, my thoughts turned to all the young people graduating from high school and entering the job market and those college grads joining the work force. What kind of America are they inheriting?

The employment figures don't look promising. In California, the unemployment rate in May soared to 6.8 percent, a whopping 1.5 percentage points higher than it was a year ago, according to the California Employment Development Department.

The great American middle-class is shrinking. A few are moving up into the upper income brackets but too many are slipping into that great mass of people who are living from paycheck to paycheck, one pay stub from poverty.

Moreover, what does the future hold for our young people?

For the first time, we cannot guarantee that their standard of living will be as high as preceding generations.

The presumption that America will be the top economic force in the world is shaky with the surging economies of Asia and the dollar's plunging value.

Our education system, once the envy of the world, is struggling in the middle of the pack of industrialized nations. Where once the world's best students sought a U.S. education, (and usually the cream of the crop found ways to stay here) the best and brightest are now going abroad and bringing their creativity and knowledge with them.

In addition, barring medical breakthroughs and a quick reform of the U.S. healthcare system, today's young people can expect a shorter life span than their parents.

Bay Point is not the richest community in the county and life expectancy in Bay Point is 11 years less than for residents of Lamorinda. Except for the usual fast food positions, job opportunities are few and far between. There is plenty of reason for people to throw up their hands and give in to the woe-is-me mentality, hang out on the corner. The more ambitious will find some way to "hustle" or give in to the easy temptation of gang life.

So when some of Bay Point's young people decided to be proactive instead of accepting the status quo, I saw a glimmer of hope and perhaps a blueprint to provide help and services in these financially strapped times.

With the County's Workforce Development Board and the Bay Point Health Clinic partnering with nonprofit community-based agencies such as La Clinica de la Raza, the Contra Costa Interfaith Service Community (CCISCO), and Henkels & McCoy, an employment and training provider, they were able to secure a grant to create Youth Employment Services (YES).

YES held its coming-out event in early June with a score of youth attending workshops and interviewing for jobs. In the future, they hope to provide internships and counseling for those kids who want to continue their education or seek financial aid for college.

In the past few decades, America's economic policies have favored the wealthy and the well-connected creating a wider and wider gap between them and those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

My first paying job was sweeping up in a small beauty parlor in Pittsburg. The summer job market, which is where most of us find our first work experience, is shaping up this year as the weakest in more than half a century, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

Just a little bit of help to the youngsters trying to get their first tentative foothold in that economy should not be too much to ask and I have to give kudos to those employers who showed up at the YES event. I hope more of our local employers, private companies and big corporations are encouraged to put more social capital into their communities. They are investing in their future workforce.

That's why I encouraged the relationship between our community college district and local industry to create and update technical job training programs -- process technicians, health careers and electrical and electronic technicians -- so that our youngsters can develop those skills needed in the 21st century job market.

It may be popular in some quarters to characterize the younger generation as slackers or derisively call them the "entitled" generation, but many young people, especially these youth from Bay Point, want to work.

On the July Fourth holiday it is appropriate we ponder the future of our children and our country. Our nation needs to develop their untapped talents, creativity and skills. America needs these young people to succeed.

Supervisor Glover represents District 5. Reach him at dist5@bos.cccounty.us.