

Article Series

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It's hard to believe that it's been 26 years.

On January 12, 1987 a massive fire destroyed the Kerr Mill complex, leveling the structure, putting an end to a number of struggling businesses, and turning close to 1,000 workers into the ranks of the unemployed.

At the time I had the opportunity to meet some of these displaced workers, many of whom had worked at the mill in the same jobs for 30 or more years. The majority of them were hard-working, dedicated employees who left school before getting their high school diplomas, providing for their families in what would likely be the last generation of workers in the needle trade industry in Fall River.

As I spoke with them, I learned that many chose not to take advantage of the free, emergency GED and job-training programs that were put in place soon after the fire. Why would people turn down the opportunity to finish their high school education and train for other opportunities? I'll never forget one woman's response to that question: "There's no need. The owner promised to rebuild and reopen the shop," she had said.

But that didn't happen.

While I was impressed by this woman and her coworkers' loyalty and optimism, I was saddened by their lack of vision for the future. Unfortunately, the future for many would be one of competing for the few local manufacturing jobs that were left, struggling to find non-factory work without any other skills or education, or the inability to find any suitable work at all.

Today the former Kerr Mill site is home to the UMASS Advanced Technology & Marketing Center, which opened in 2001, and a neighboring four-story, 120,000 square foot facility built in 2008 by Meditech. Yet, despite the modern, forward-thinking success of these facilities, there are still some people in the city whose attitude is still rooted in the 1970s and 80s.

Yes, there are still people in Fall River who believe that a college degree or even a high school education is not necessary. It's time for us to change that way of thinking.

It's OK for us to admit that while we may have managed to "make it" with only a high school diploma thirty years ago, it's simply not possible in today's work environment. It's OK to tell our children and grandchildren that what may have worked for us will not work for them. It's OK to tell them to stay in school, get training, or earn a certificate, and to tell them that today's employees need to be educated, computer-literate, and flexible in order to have stable, well-paying jobs.

It's not too early to begin telling them these things while they're in elementary school. And it's not too late even if they're in middle school or high school. But talk with them today, or tomorrow you risk hearing them say the same thing that we've said.

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