T. Pritt Interview Group Kristen MacAleese AMST 358

 Transcription of Troy Pritt Interview

I- Interviewer TP- Troy Pritt

I- Whenever you’re ready say your name and introduce yourself however you’d like.

TP- OK. My name is Troy Pritt, I’m a former worker at the RG Steel Sparrow’s Point plant.

I- (:23) How long did you work there?

TP- I worked there for fifteen years.

I- (:28) What year did you start there?

TP- I started there in ’97. That was my second “real” job, I’d worked for US Gypsum for eight years when I first got out of school and was very fortunate to get a job at Sparrow’s Point.

I- (:50) What specifically was your job there (Sparrow’s Point)?

TP- I worked in the coated products division, I worked on the galvanizing line. I did multiple jobs there, from crane operator to quality control. As things went on there, jobs were combined to cut costs, so we pretty much learned to do everything.

I- (1:36) Was that hard, did you have to go through multiple trainings?

TP- Went through multiple training, but it gave a finer sense of being part of a team. So it helped out, because you were able to move people to wherever, to their strongest areas. As opposed to “this is just the one job you’re going to do for the rest of your life.” I think that made for a better fit for everyone.

I- (2:03) Did you find something that you were specifically better at?

TP- I would say that most of my co-workers would argue that I wasn’t really good at a whole lot. But out of all of it, I really enjoyed running the crane the most. It was nice to be up there and just be Fred Flintstone and just, you know, work the controls, the radio playing, you could listen to ballgames and that was… I’d have to say out of all that I did down there, I enjoyed running the crane the most. And I enjoyed being a union rep. I was a shop steward for a little while, and I enjoyed that. It gave me a chance to go to college, to learn things, so I enjoyed that.

I- (2:45) You’ve mentioned the friendships and teamwork, was that a big part of working there?

TP- I was a *huge* part. It was like a family, and I don’t think that people really get that about what we did. ‘Cause it was such a part of our identity. It wasn’t a job, it was who you were. People now get a job, and it’s to put on their resume, to go to this job or to that job, but there it was you went in and you had a job for forty years. This was your family. And for a lot of guys, their fathers, their grandfathers, their uncles, their aunts- so it was, you were going home. This was your home, as well as your career, as well as your job, and that’s what I think a lot people really don’t understand about the experience of working at Sparrow’s Point.

I- (3:40) Did a lot of your family work there too?

TP- My father worked there. Um, my wife’s family, three generations of her family worked there. And that’s one of the reasons why we were so prepared, because she kind of saw the writing on the wall and she was like “I’ve been here before. Things are gonna get bad.” So we had saved for this, to where it became an opportunity for me. So we were prepared for the worst.

I- (4:18) We wanted to ask about your tattoo. Is it related to the mill?

TP- My tattoo? No, my tattoo is not related to the mill. This is, if you look at it, this is a motorcycle. And it says Max. My uncle Max had passed, and when he did, I took the OCC logo and the three letters from Max and went to a tattoo parlor and said if you can make that up so that when I go down the road, Uncle Max rides with me.

I- (4:47) Are you still in contact with a lot of people that you worked with?

TP- I am. Maybe once a month or so, every couple of weeks, I’ll call certain ones, see how they’re doing. A couple of the guys I had encouraged to take the training, to go to school. So they’ll contact me, you know, “Hey I’m having this problem” or “hey, I really love it, I’m glad that you encouraged me.” Yeah so we’re still in contact. I get in contact with a couple of older gentlemen that are having trouble finding employment. They’ll call and just want somebody to talk to. A lot of the guys miss the camaraderie of being in the mill.

I- (5:25) Since the mill closed, what made you decide to come back to school?

TP- Well, before the mill had closed, when we were still Semperstall, things got bad and they started to offer ten-week voluntary layoffs. So was June, schools were getting ready to close, my son was getting out, and my wife says “look, why don’t you take the 10-week layoff, you’re a union rep, they’re gonna keep you. Let the junior guys work. We’re prepared, take the ten weeks layoff. When are you going to get a summer off again? So I took the summer off, went out to Vegas, rode motorcycles, spent the summer with my kid. It was just great, this was awesome. Another ten weeks came around and my wife was like “you need a plan”. So I went back to school. So that’s when I started at CCBC, doing my prerequisites, and I learned a lot. I kind of almost started to become resentful of the mill. That “well, I could have done this had I had that opportunity as a younger person.” It really opened up my eyes to “wow, there is life other than going to the mill.” And it does, it sounds kind of ridiculous, but I was really pigeonholed with my view of the world. One of the first classes I took was sociology, which was great because it just gave me this vast understanding of different cultures and different ways of thinking about things. So when I had to go back to the mill, it was like, “God, this sucks!” And, yeah, I really didn’t want to go back, but you do what you gotta do.

I- (7:12) So what do you want to do now, what are you studying?

TP: I’m going for my business degree and I haven’t necessarily narrowed down what that means. I’m still trying to figure out how all of this equates to employment, because this is really beyond my scope of understanding. This is nothing that my family’s ever done, I’m the first one to go to college, so I’ve been in contact with the professors, and it’s like “Um, I’m 44 and I need to figure out what I want to be when I grow up.” And they’ve all been really helpful and (they) guide me in different ways. I just left marketing class, and I think that that’s a really good fit for me because I’m a people person and I really feel like I’d like to do something where I’m interacting with people as opposed to just being in one spot, pushing buttons. I’d like to do something completely different than what I’m used to.

I- (8:10)How has the experience at the mill affected your view of being in school, and things like interactions with students?

TP- I think that working at the mill has given me a better understanding of what I’m learning. A lot of kids that are in the class, they don’t have any kind of practical understanding of, like I have a local management class, and I can relate to why things are being outsourced, and how our country’s changing, to where it’s real abstract to a lot of the younger students, and the teacher understands that. You know, (The teacher says to Pritt) “Could you explain this better than I can? Can you explain this from your perspective of coming from the mill, how this is?” So it’s given me a better perspective, I guess you could say.

I- (9:05) So you would say that your experiences at the mill, and having to deal with it firsthand has directly affected how you see this?

TP- Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. In a much different way that I thought that it would. I had a very narrow view of “this happened to me” and now I understand why this happened. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. This is really just a natural selection when it comes to marketing. It comes to global business. Businesses are going to go overseas. And newer business will happen here. There should be this rollover in businesses and marketing. It’s given me a much broader view of it.

I- (10:15) I have here a poem that you wrote. Would you mind reading it?

TP- No, not at all.

I- (10:20) And then maybe afterwards talk about why you wrote it.

TP- Okay. This is actually a story, not really a poem, called “Silent Steel”:

The furnace cold, and the steel no longer flowed, silence enveloped the land, that hadn’t heard silence for over a hundred years. He stood in the parking lot not knowing what to do next. Four generations of his family gave their lives to the mill. When the boss passed him in the parking lot, he yelled out “Where do I go?” The boss replied, “You go home.” He nodded in recognition, however he didn’t understand. “I am home,” he thought.

And that kind of like really sums up the feeling that we lost a home. We lost a family. We lost a huge connection of who we are. I had initially written this for *Esquire* magazine. They had a contest, (to write) a story in 79 words. They sent it back to me, you know, a form letter like “Thanks, but you suck,” and I threw it in a drawer, (but) my sister read it and she’s like “God, this is great”, and I was like “*Esquire* magazine didn’t think so”, and she said “they didn’t understand the subject matter.” And she put it out on Facebook, and to different people in the mill, and they just went nuts over it. They really identified with it. The retirees had asked me to come in and read it at their meeting, so that took off. I’m so touched that you saved it (laughs).

I- (12:06) Well, you could’ve written about anything in 79 words, why did Sparrow’s point come to you?

TP- Um, I had a teacher tell me once to write about what you know. And, I figured in 79 words I wanted to tell a story that I knew. And, um, it was a huge loss, it was almost like losing a spouse. It was, um, it was that kind of devastation, it was…it’s hard to make people understand that it wasn’t just a job, that it was who we are. It was our community, it was our family, it was everything that was about us. It was gone. That there was, you know the one guy, he had said that it’s almost like if someone had taken Grandmom’s house, and locked the doors and said “you can’t go to Grandmom’s anymore.” Because that safety net, that “this is home” is gone. And it’s really hard to make people understand that, because people change jobs and people don’t have that connection to the people that they work with anymore, I don’t think, as we did. And I don’t think the people depend on one another as much as we did. Something else I wrote for another magazine was, um, we were almost like soldiers. We depended on one another, we supported one another. That was our battlefield. We marched in every day. And it wasn’t about the money, it wasn’t about the benefits, as much as it was who we were as a people. It went past gender, and it went past nationality. There was no “man” and “woman” in the mill, there was no “black” or “white”, there was “us.” We were steelworkers, we were a culture in our own. That’s the way that I have always seen it.

I- (14:19) Where did you live? Did you ever live near the mill?

TP- I lived three miles from the mill. Yeah, I could roll out of bed and be to the mill. My car wasn’t warmed up before I parked it in the wintertime. I’ve always lived within five miles of the mill.

I- (14:40) What has that been like?

TP- It was awesome. In the springtime when it was warm out, you could hear the mill at night, you could hear the trains coming. As a kid growing up, it was very much like having this big huge train garden with all this stuff going on. At night you could hear it. It was cool. And then to be there, and to be a part of that, to see all these weird machines moving around, and all this weird equipment, it was actually like going into a train garden.

I- (15:13) How do you feel about the community now?

TP- Change isn’t good, change isn’t bad. It’s just change. I don’t necessarily think it’ll be bad. Or that it’ll have a negative effect. I just think it’ll just be different now. I definitely think that we will (unclear) lost that community sense. Because it was always your dad worked at the mill, my dad worked at the mill, you know. You don’t want to step out of line because somebody may know your father or your mother. Because there were so many people. I think in their heyday (there) was 49,000 people. And to put that into perspective, I think that there’s 49,000 people that run all the Disney parks in Florida. So that’s a huge amount of people on that piece of land.

I- (16:22) Can I get you to answer a question about your tattoo again? Because we have a wider shot so we can actually see it better.

TP- Oh. Yeah. It’s really weird that anyone wants to know about this tattoo.

I- (16:33) You mentioned that it was for your uncle. Was he a steelworker as well?

TP- He was not. But this is kind of funny. My family also owned a home improvement company, so that was the days of the aluminum siding and all of that, and we did a great deal of work right around the mill because there was money to be spent. And so as the mill started to close, so did these little family businesses. This was for my Uncle Max, and when he passed I had this tattoo done up. And (I) got the OCC logo and (I) told the guy “draw up something that says Max,” so that’s my motorcycle. I’m a little embarrassed about it now, being a business student, you know, but it keeps me grounded of who I am, and Max goes down the road with me when I go out on the bike, so that’s my tattoo story. Anything else?

I- (17:32) (Unclear)

TP- No, I think we’ve covered everything. Just that I’m happy to be here, I’m grateful for the opportunity that’s been allotted me to be retrained. I really thought initially that it was going to be a hard transition, and my wife and I had thought about how are we going to go about doing school or retraining and luckily the government has taken care of retraining and I never thought in a million years that I would ever be at a university level, or even consider a Bachelor’s (degree). So, I got to go back down the path and start another one. Not everybody gets that chance. I’ll never be able to go home again, but I can find a path to a new home.

I- (18:26) Sounds like you’re enjoying it.

TP- I’m loving it. I really thought that I was going to be the creepy old guy, but I’m not, and the kids have really embraced me, so it’s made me feel really comfortable. It’s nice.