

MY FATHER'S TOOLS

by Sarah Casale



When I was a very small child, I remember my father coming home from work each day.

He walked through the door with a pair of faded jeans, a sweat-stained work shirt, and his dirty orange helmet. The helmet fascinated me. I used to play with it when he left it out on the table, putting it on my head and letting it fall down over my eyes. I wondered why anyone would need such a hard hat to do their work, and why the straps inside kept the hat from really touching his head.

Then, with the closing of the mills, my father lost his job at Copperweld Steel.

A few years later, I remember my father coming home from work, this time all dressed up. Khaki pants, pressed button-down shirt, and a stethoscope dangling from his neck or bunched up in his hand. The stethoscope fascinated me even more than the orange helmet had. With it, I could listen to my own heart beating in my chest.

My father had gone back to school, to Youngstown State University, to learn to be a Registered Nurse. In essence, he traded in his hard hat and got a stethoscope. But what do these two seemingly different tools have in common?

What was the helmet? In short, a device designed to protect the life of the user. With its smooth, hard plastic, the helmet was meant to keep my father's head from being injured in any of an infinite number of possible accidents. Millions of men and women across the country donned hard hats each day at work, trusting in their effectiveness to save their lives if need be.

And the stethoscope? Well, a stethoscope is not intended to save lives, but to aid in saving them. Those who use a stethoscope are not in immediate danger, but the people they use the stethoscope on may be. It is a tool used by a much more specialized number of people than a hard hat, but it is as essential to doctors and nurses to do the job properly as a hardhat is to



steelworkers, construction workers, and the like.

My father used his helmet every day, and it showed the wear and tear. In the picture at the top of the page, he is about to go to



work on his very first day at Copperweld. The helmet is still bright and shiny, and his flannel shirt still clean and untorn. Whether or not the helmet would serve its purpose that day by keeping him from injury, he would wear it during his entire shift.

When he left Copperweld, and after finishing school, he also used the stethoscope every day. It, like the helmet, was a constant companion to him at his workplace. Whether he used it all the time or not, it was always there.

When I think of the work my father did in his lifetime, I know on the surface his jobs differed drastically. He worked at Copperweld for about 4 years, and the job he did there was dangerous at least. But who is to say the job he did in his different nursing positions hasn't been dangerous? He went from nursing homes, to hospital psychiatric wards, to an adolescent psychiatric hospital, to his current position in the psychiatric ward at Trumbull Correctional Institute. It would be a stretch to say that working in daily close contact with violent and mentally unstable criminals as he does is less dangerous than welding at a steel mill.

There are other similarities between the two types of jobs which pull the stethoscope and the hardhat closer together. In the steel mills, the unions fought fiercely for their rights, wages, hours, etc. In the hospitals in which my father has worked, the unions have played a big role in his life. My father is usually on the negotiations boards during contract deals, and he spent a lot of time in one of his positions helping others start a union there. No matter where you work, it seems there will always be a union, with the workers constantly pitted against the corporation, hospital, or even the government in a fight for fair labor and wages.

Currently, CSC Ltd., as Copperweld became, is in crisis. My father says he knew it would close one day, he just thought it would have been sooner. In addition to that, at the time of this writing there was a nurses' strike at Forum Health in Youngstown, Ohio, another past place of employment for my dad.

The tools my father used and uses in his different jobs are seemingly different on the surface, but just beneath there is a wealth of similarities behind them. No matter where you work and no matter what you do, some things will always be the same.