

Helping with the Harvest

Reluctant daughter reaps rewards on the family farm | BY JESSICA HILL

Gwendolyn, Oregon, in the north-central part of the state, was once a small farm town of about 10 residents, with a dirt road through the middle. Its population is now my family of five.

My father owns all 5,600 acres that once made up the town. He purchased them from my grandfather, who bought them for farmland in 1974. Each summer, between University of Oregon terms, I come home for the two weeks of harvest. And each summer—after sitting on a dusty, brown seat, driving a combine, I tell my father that it's my last time to do so, because the following year I will have a "real job."

However, I still feel a deep connection to our family and our land, and that keeps drawing me back—as does my father's keen understanding of how to motivate people, at least me.

Four years ago, exactly one week after I told him I would most definitely not be available for harvest, he called me back with a proposal. "I heard you've been looking at the newest laptop from that Apple brand. I'll make you a deal: You come home for harvest, and I'll give you a chance to earn one."

So at the end of my freshman year, I came home once again. Usually my father makes fair deals, but I wasn't prepared for the additional, post-combine-driving task he had in mind. Five days, several sore muscles, and a lot of sweat and tears later, I had finished polishing the aluminum on two semi trucks until I could see the reflection of my tired face everywhere I turned. After I earned my much-deserved laptop on top of my regular harvest paycheck, I again vowed I wouldn't put myself through the harvest.

Nine months passed, and I had all but forgotten how much I disliked polishing trucks, when my father called to remind me how much I'd enjoyed myself the summer before, and how much better it could get if I returned.

"You know those Audi TTs you've been talking about for a couple of years now? I found a black one with a convertible top, six-disc CD changer, leather seats. ... You come home for harvest this summer, and the car is yours."

I was smart enough to do the math and determine that the price of the car was more than five times what my normal harvest paycheck would be, and a few weeks of dust would be worth it.

That year's additional post-harvest task sounded like a piece of

cake—I was to blow off every surface and crevice of both dirty combines with an air compressor. But I realized it might be more than I bargained for when my father tossed me a face mask and goggles. "These will probably help," he chuckled. "And you should get an early start before it gets windy." His tone conveyed his full awareness of my aversion to waking before 10.

Before I was halfway done with the first machine, I looked like a piece of cake: a dirt cake with wheat and chaff sprinkles. It took only one glance in the mirror to decide that this was my last dirty job.

When I went back to school, I decided to study abroad for a

term in Spain. My departure date was conveniently set during the middle of harvest. Although my very supportive parents were paying for all of my college schooling, studies in another country at four times the cost of my regular tuition wasn't included in the contract. My decision to get a loan went against our goal of my graduating debt-free, but it was an experience I was willing to pay for.

"You know how hard it is to pay off your debt when you first graduate college?" my father called to ask casually as my Spain departure date approached. I agreed and

continued my list of things to pack. "Well, it won't be easy," he reminded me for the umpteenth time.

Days later, he called back. "If you postpone your departure date and drive combine for me, I might think about paying for your Spanish adventure," he said, although we both knew it was a concrete offer. I had to admit, it was the best deal yet, and no filthy jobs were included.

I came home for harvest, again, and as I drove the combine, the process of steering across swaths of wheat put me in a trance-like state that eventually led to the conclusion: This isn't so bad.

In the end, my dad and I both got what we wanted. He got his daughter to return home for harvest, and I got a three-month, all-expenses-paid stay in Europe. If having me around makes him feel younger and keeps me from growing up too fast, then I'm glad it worked out. This summer, I will be a debt-free college graduate looking for a "real job." I've been telling my father that I am moving to the big city to become a successful adult, and won't be returning home for harvest. But, secretly, I'm already trying to figure out how to tell my future employer that I need two weeks of summer vacation to drive the combine on my father's farm.

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