**Back to square one: After 60 job applications, honor student back home in Missoula**



November 30, 2009 2:30 pm  •  [By ELI SASLOW of the Washington Post](http://missoulian.com/search/?l=50&sd=desc&s=start_time&f=html&byline=By%20ELI%20SASLOW%20of%20the%20Washington%20Post)

Her parents redecorated the bedroom soon after she left for college, as sure as everyone else in Missoula that Melissa Meyer would not be moving back. They took down the photos of Melissa meeting the Dalai Lama and laughing alongside Vice President Joe Biden, placing them in the closet. They packed away dozens of high school honor certificates – valedictorian, class president, outstanding chemistry student – and stored them in plastic boxes under the bed.

Melissa had always been too big for this town, her father liked to say. She was editor of the school newspaper, intern in the United States Senate and the only student from Sentinel High School’s class of 2005 to attend college on the East Coast. On her rare visits home from George Washington University, old friends liked to tease her: “Hey Melissa, are you president yet?”

So, how to explain this? Each morning, Melissa wakes up in her old bedroom, scans the foreign decor and thinks: This is the guest room now. I am the guest. I am not supposed to be here.

She graduated magna cum laude from the GW business school in May, applied for 30 jobs at some of America’s best-known companies, and heard nothing. After visiting the campus career center and redesigning her resume, she applied for 10 more. Still nothing. The lease expired on her Washington apartment in June. There was no place to go but home, with a collection of rejection letters and a haunting sense of betrayal. For 23 years, she had advanced down America’s path to success – perfect grades, a $200,000 college degree, a folder overstuffed with business cards – only to have it dead-end back where she started.

“What was the point?” she asks.

For Melissa, that question is the legacy of the recession as she rises one Tuesday morning in early fall and begins her day with the same routine that defined her adolescence. She rummages through her parents’ refrigerator, eats leftovers from a dinner party hosted by her parents the night before and then retreats upstairs to prepare for a fill-in shift at the same job she held throughout high school. After changing into cowboy boots and a skirt, she borrows her parents’ car and drives three minutes to work at Rockin Rudy’s.

The shop smells of incense. Classic rock plays through speakers. Customers come and go in tie-died T-shirts as Melissa stands behind a register and rings up CDs, bandanas and a gigantic bronze frog.

Midway through her shift, a man approaches the counter ready to buy three necklaces. He introduces himself as a palm reader. Melissa sticks out her hand.

“I know nothing about my future,” she says.

Once, she thought she knew exactly what to expect. She would follow the same direct path to achievement as her father, a partner in his own accounting firm; as her mother, a public health nurse; as her sister, a Truman scholar pursuing a doctorate; as her brother, a pioneering accountant in Australia. For the Meyer family, success had always been defined as a straight line: education, career, hard work and a salary big enough to provide the next generation with a head start toward the same goals.

With that tradition in mind, Melissa applied for a handful of positions during the first semester of her senior year at GW and earned interviews with Procter & Gamble, Deloitte and General Electric. After a few hopeful weeks, she received similar e-mails from all three companies explaining that they were no longer hiring.

Melissa’s father, Jack, suggested she could improve her odds by networking, so she chatted up customers while working as a hostess at Kinkead’s restaurant in Washington and joined the GW alumni association, introducing herself to strangers during meet-and-greet happy hours. A school counselor told Melissa that she could sharpen her applications by taking a career aptitude test, which revealed she could market herself as “energetic,” “enthusiastic,” “flexible,” “assertive” and “a good communicator.”

For a stretch of two months, as spring turned to summer and the jobless rate continued to climb, Melissa applied for at least one job every day, sending applications to Philadelphia, Washington, Seattle and Portland, Ore. She spoke with hiring managers at a company in Seattle that once had recruited employees with an in-house gym and wine bar, but now the wine bar was closed, and the company asked Melissa to check back in six months.

As graduation neared, Melissa spent her culminating business class comparing rejection e-mails with classmates. There were 40 students in the room. Three had jobs.

Melissa redesigned her resume one final time before she moved home to Missoula. She had all but given up on launching a career now, instead aspiring to any job that would prevent her from being completely dependent on her parents. Her professional resume seemed too striving to submit to shops more accustomed to hiring high school kids, hippies and transients. Melissa deleted mention of the $36,000 she raised for alternative spring break trips and the 50-person events she coordinated for a women’s leadership program, replacing them with new categories.

Restaurant Host: “Greeted patrons, scheduled reservations and arranged seating for a restaurant with 64 tables.”

Reception Assistant: “Aided reception staff by answering phones, preparing billing statements and scanning documents.”

Sales Associate: “Organized, cleaned and displayed inventory to create a stimulating shopping environment.”

This is the resume Melissa carries with her one September morning as she enters an orientation meeting for prospective Missoula substitute teachers. She has never taught before, nor does she particularly enjoy children, but she has been turned down by a restaurant, a bakery and an herbal shop during the last two weeks.

More than 75 others are crowded into a room when Melissa arrives. There are women in business suits and men in ties, all carrying three letters of recommendation and hoping for a chance to earn $10.29 an hour without benefits by substituting in a school district that has only four high schools. A middle-aged man stands at the front of the room and explains the order in which Missoula substitutes will be selected. He asks those who qualify under each category to raise their hands.

“Who here is an assistant teacher?”

Six hands shoot up.

“OK. Who has a teaching degree?”

Fifteen more people raise their hands.

“Great. And who has a college major that is taught at the high school level, like English or science?”

Practically the whole room is reaching toward the sky now, but Melissa, who majored in marketing and finance, continues to scribble on the cover of a seminar handout. Not until 15 minutes later, near the conclusion of the seminar, does the instructor explain how “less-qualified” teachers like Melissa can win substitute assignments. She should print out business cards and hand them to her old teachers at Sentinel High School, he suggests. Maybe the staff will help out a former valedictorian by requesting her as a substitute.

“My triumphant return!” Melissa whispers sarcastically.

Soon she is out the door and back in her parents’ car. She drives across town for a job interview at a restaurant called the Depot, where the new resume – and particularly her experience at Kinkead’s – helps her earn a part-time job as a hostess. She will work three nights a week, from 5 until close. The Depot manager offers his congratulations and reminds her to “smile big and wear sensible shoes.”

It is the first good news Melissa has received after six months and 60 applications, but she can hardly feign excitement.

“Sometimes, thinking about what I’m doing right now, it becomes a little depressing,” she says later, while driving home.

She turns a corner and her parents’ house comes into view. She has plans to have lunch with her dad, maybe go for a hike. Then, nothing.

“I know I am under-selling myself,” she says. “But maybe there’s more to life than what position you have and all those things.”

A few days later, Melissa sits in the living room with her parents, Jack and Shelly. Melissa is dressed for yoga class. Her parents are dressed for work. Shelly puts a hand on her daughter’s knee and asks the question that now rules over so many of these moments, even if it often goes unsaid.

“So,” Shelly asks, “have you thought any more about what’s next?”

They love having their daughter home. It has been more than four years since she lived with them, and Jack and Shelly now revel in the company of a daughter who lingers with them at the dinner table and offers to help with the dishes. She visits Jack for lunch at his office, goes to exercise classes with Shelly and teaches her parents how to play a game on their porch that involves swinging at rotten fruit with a cricket bat, until they are all competing in a make-believe home run derby and laughing like mischievous 10-year-olds. The highlight of their autumn has been having Melissa home.

Melissa loves being with them, too. Spending so much time with family in Montana has helped her “thaw out from the go-go-go of D.C.,” she says. Her dad suffered a health scare not long ago, and now Melissa watches football with him and asks his advice on relationships and work-life balance. Her parents treat her like an adult, allowing her to come and go when she pleases and to sleep at her boyfriend Will Freihofer’s house. But most of the time, Melissa prefers to bring Freihofer home so they can spend evenings watching movies with Shelly and Jack.

And yet there remains this one topic which divides them.

“I’m still figuring out my plans,” Melissa says. “I don’t know yet.”

“When will you know?” Shelly asks.

“I don’t know,” Melissa says.

“How long will it go on like this?” Shelly says. “It can’t go on forever.”

They taught their children that a respectable life begins with hard work. Jack’s father, a shoe salesman, died when Jack was 14, so Jack went to work at the shoe warehouse to help his family compensate for lost income. Shelly’s father, an airline technician, moved six times in 10 years, following his job. Both Jack and Shelly were among the first in their families to attend college, and they graduated from the University of Colorado and have worked ever since.

With each paycheck, they stockpiled money into education funds for all three of their children, promising each a fully paid tuition for a state university or a heavy contribution toward the bill at a private college. Melissa’s education cost the most – about $100,000, even after scholarships and financial aid – and Jack and Shelly paid every cent. An investment, they called it. The return was implied: good grades, a successful career and income to create college funds for children of her own. The straight line.

Maybe, Melissa thinks now. But maybe there is something else, a more wandering path to fulfillment. She is falling in love with Freihofer and indulging whims like searching for Montana’s best beef jerky, writing letters by hand and hiking each morning. When Freihofer, who works as a rafting guide, asks what she will do next, she mentions not career possibilities but possible adventures she has researched online. “Why waste my time continuing to apply for jobs that don’t want me?” she says. Instead, she imagines a future far away. A yoga ashram in Nepal? Trekking through Argentina? Picking grapes at a vineyard in New Zealand? A road trip across Australia?

All she knows for certain is that she wants to save $4,000 for airfare and depart in early 2010, for somewhere. “I don’t want to look back after 30 years in a cubicle and think, ‘I should have ...“’ she says.

It is an outlook some in her family struggle to comprehend. When Melissa mentions the yoga ashram, her sister responds with an e-mail demanding a more practical plan, “by the end of business hours today.” Her brother visits from Australia and, during a fight over access to the shower, calls Melissa worthless for living at home. Shelly comes upstairs to referee. “You two figure this out,” Shelly says, “because I really don’t want either of you here.” It is an untruth spoken during a moment of irritation, but Melissa bursts into tears and rolls the words around in her head for days. Has she become a burden to her parents? It is the one thought that makes her want to find a cubicle, fast.

“We just want you to be happy,” Shelly says now, in the living room.

“I know,” Melissa says. “Me too.”

“It will work out,” Shelly says.

“I hope so,” Melissa says.

They are silent for a moment, looking at each other, and then the conversation begins again.

“What do you think you will you do?” Shelly says.

“I don’t know,” Melissa says.

**Answer the following questions:**

1. **Explain the premise (argument) of the article.**
2. **What examples does the article incorporate?**
3. **While the article does seem to present both sides, which side does the article favor? How can you tell?**
4. **Do you agree or disagree with that message? Why?**
5. **Cite something you think Melissa did “the right way” to try to put herself in a position for long-term success. Explain why you think this was “the right way.”**
6. **Cite something you think Melissa did to hurt her chances for long-term success, or something she did that was not “the right way.”**