

A Place to Work Things Out

TWENTY YEARS ON, A FATHER'S QUIET PERSPECTIVE STILL ECHOES.

By Joe Warminsky '94 Edu/Lib



I HAVEN'T LIVED in a house with a garage in about 25 years. It's not something I usually think about, mostly because I don't care much about cars; the one I have is more than a decade old. It takes a beating on the Washington, D.C., streets, and I'm OK with that.

My house doesn't have a basement, either. When there's no indoor space for machines and messes, things find their place eventually: There are tidy sheds in our yard, good for bikes or garden tools. Balls and bats go here and there. A mower, properly covered, can survive the winter outside.

It occurred to me recently, though, that my son—a city kid since birth—probably will never know what it's like to walk out into the garage and see me or my wife hunched over a project. A popped hood. A broken thing on the workbench. Rows of empty seed pots at the end of the winter. The impersonal light, the different air, the slower conversations.

The kid is almost 13 as I write this. We were fixing a broken gate one night not long ago. "Did you help your dad like this when you were a kid?" he asked. "Of course I did—and usually I did something slightly wrong that frustrated him, just the way you do," I joked, not looking up.

The kid never met my father. He died in his early 50s of a brain tumor that he never knew he had. The sun came up one morning and he was barely holding on. I was 25. My mom still lives very happily in that house in Bethlehem. The garage smells the same: oils and solvents and paints and sawdust.

There were conversations in that garage, of course. For me, the indelible one was in the spring of 1989. Dad, who had enlisted in the Navy in the '60s but never went to college,



always half-joked that I had two choices: the Naval Academy, or Penn State. He believed in durable brands.

A few weeks earlier, a letter had come from my congressman—a nomination to the Academy. I'd already been accepted to University Park. The choice had become obvious, though, at least to me: I was in good physical shape and quite capable of taking orders, but the military wasn't what I wanted.

I like to think that it was a mature, self-aware decision. I spent most of my college years listening to music, working at the *Daily Collegian*, and trying not to goof off too much. (My brother, **Josh Warminsky '95 Eng**, came through later and got an engineering degree, which made more sense to Dad.)

In the garage that day, Dad leaned back against the workbench. I can't remember if he was smoking a cigarette or not. I explained that I didn't want to be a Navy officer. He crossed his arms. "If there's one thing I've learned about you," he said, "it's that you usually do things your own way, and it all seems to work out in the end."

Joe Warminsky has spent more than two decades reporting on government and culture in and around Washington, D.C.