

It's the Simple Things

By Sheila Johnson

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans entered an era that offered great opportunities to improve our earning power. Ah, success! We previously relied solely on manual labor to produce whatever we needed through strenuous, grinding work. The average child graduated from grade school into the labor force. Child labor laws didn't exist, and only the brightest or wealthiest children progressed to high school, and fewer advanced to colleges or universities. After the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-1800s, people were considered 'successful' only if they survived coal mine explosions, escaped fires in overcrowded buildings, or came home from WWI alive. 'Success' in the early 1900s was measured by survival, not money.

Two decades later, more efficient ways of living were birthed. Electricity and oil replaced the coal industry; chemical goods moved Grandma's remedies to drug stores, the stock market increased our nation's prosperity, and the world bought more American goods. The automobile industry exploded and made the United States the richest country in the world. The Harlem Renaissance boosted east coast businesses for Negroes as well as for all Americans. It was a time when whites began to recognize the intellectual contributions of Negroes, and Negroes asserted their identities and abilities as writers, artists, and musicians. The word 'success' took on a variety of definitions for a diverse group of Americans.

But in 1929, the stock market crashed, fifty percent of all banks failed, unemployment rose to twenty-five percent, homelessness greatly increased, housing prices sunk by thirty percent, and international trade dropped by sixty percent. All of these events caused the Great Depression. The face of success changed. It was now defined by what few had—money. The almighty dollar suffered an almost fatal blow.

As our nation's intellect increased, our emotional stability decreased. Out-of-work Americans stood in long breadlines, regardless of the weather. We begged for food, sold whatever we could on street corners, and became more and more depressed. Want and despair ran throughout every community, and those who had never seen the face of poverty became that face. To add insult to injury, the states of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, and eastern Colorado together became known as the Dust Bowl and powdered that ugly face of poverty. Sharecroppers in the South, both black and white, suffered severe degradation and deprivation. No one dared to speak of success; not even the wealthy.

Over several decades, the United States of America has eased its way out of despair through presidential programs, the hard work of its citizens, thousands of migrant workers earning less than the minimum wage, multiple government sponsored social programs, and the military economic demands of war. War always temporarily boosts the economy.

I'm an empathic by nature. I don't give up easily. I go deeper than most. I see success every day. I look for it. When an autistic, non-verbal child creates their own language that others can understand, that's success. When paraplegics learn to hold paint brushes with their mouths and

produce beautiful art, that's success. When a homeless mother of four survives one more night in the cold, that's success. When a twelve-year-old child with dup15 syndrome goes potty for the first time by himself, that's success. When addicts of every kind and flavor, rejoice over one day or several years of sobriety, that's success.

Success. It's really not about money. I promise.