

Testimony of Mike Rowe

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Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

May 11, 2011

Chairman Rockefeller, Ranking Member Hutchison and members of this committee, my name is Mike Rowe, and I want to thank you all very much for the opportunity to share a few thoughts about our country's relationship with manufacturing, hard work, and skilled labor.

According to the credits, I am the creator, executive producer and host of a TV program on the Discovery Channel called *Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe*. In truth, I'm more like a perpetual apprentice.

For seven years, I've been traveling around the country, working alongside the people who grow our food, provide our energy, tend to our infrastructure, and manufacture our things. To date, I've completed nearly 300 different jobs, visited every state, and worked in just about every industry. A less flattering assessment might suggest that I've been fired 300 times in less than seven years. Either way, my current resume has more to do with trying than succeeding, and my opinions should not be confused with those of an expert.

Dirty Jobs is first and foremost an entertainment program. It does however, have a mission statement, and every episode begins the same way. "My name is Mike Rowe, and this is my job. I explore the country looking for people who aren't afraid to get dirty."

Hard-working men and women who do the kinds of jobs that make civilized life possible for the rest of us."

For years, no one paid much attention to this mission. But in 2008, the recession made *Dirty Jobs* relevant in ways I never envisioned. As unemployment became a dominate topic, and my own dirty resume continued to expand, reporters were suddenly interested in my take on all sorts of work-related issues. Labor disputes, free trade, currency devaluations, outsourcing, student loans – I was invited to weigh in on lots of issues for which I had no real expertise.

For the most part, I pleaded ignorance and kept my mouth shut. But when a writer from *The Wall Street Journal* asked me to "reconcile soaring unemployment with an ever-widening skills gap," I felt compelled to say something. So I referred him to the mission statement of the show and added, "once upon a time, our country was filled with people who weren't afraid to get dirty. Times have changed. The definition of a 'good job' has changed."

I went on to suggest that the skills gap might not be a "problem," but rather a symptom of something much more fundamental; a societal disconnect with work, brought about by the rapid transformation of a manufacturing-based economy into one dominated by financial services and technology.

The reporter wanted to hear more so I kept talking. I told him about my grandfather, a modest man with an eighth grade education that went on to become a plumber, a mason, a mechanic, a carpenter, and a master electrician. A revered craftsman who could build a house without a blueprint. A man who today, would be mostly invisible.

I talked about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we marginalize work in today's culture. In the media, our portrayals of working people rarely surpass one-dimensional

stereotypes and predictable hyperbole. Best-selling books like “The Four-Hour Work Week” fly off the shelves, a testament to short-cuts, and a growing belief that technology (or something) can somehow replace hard work. I talked about the way colleges have become “institutions of higher learning,” while all other forms of knowledge are relegated to “alternative education.” I suggested a PR Campaign for skilled labor might be in order, and concluded by saying this Administration’s goal of creating three million shovel ready jobs might have a better chance of succeeding if our society still respected the people willing to pick up a shovel.

When the article came out the flood gates opened. On Labor Day of 2008, I launched mikeroweWORKS.com, my own modest PR Campaign for hard work and skilled labor. Its primary purpose is to challenge the notion that a career in the trades is some sort of “vocational consolation prize,” handed out to workers unfit for a four-year degree.

Fans of *Dirty Jobs* helped collect and assemble thousands of links to trade schools, apprenticeship programs, community colleges, on-the-job-training opportunities, and other resources that might be of use to anyone considering a career in the skilled trades. I set up a foundation and began to raise money for the purpose of tool scholarships and farming initiatives. Mostly though, I tried to encourage a bigger conversation, and challenge my partners to get behind this message in a significant way. I wanted mikeroweWORKS to function as a kind of connective tissue for other companies and organizations, and to that extent, I’m happy to say it’s working.

Ford, Caterpillar, Kimberly-Clark, Lee, Master Lock, and other large corporations are all working with mikeroweWORKS in some capacity, and are highly motivated to change perceptions about skilled labor. A few weeks ago, Alan Mulally at Ford pulled me aside and said, “Mike, this issue is nothing less than the soul of America. Our country's future is at stake, and this is a battle we cannot afford to lose.”

Aside from major corporations, other like-minded initiatives have begun to use mikeroweWORKS as a resource for their own purposes, and I've been honored to speak on behalf of several campaigns that have already been deemed successful.

Last August, mikeroweWORKS partnered with "Go Build Alabama," an education and recruitment campaign designed to bring new people to the commercial and industrial construction industry. I appeared in a series of advertisements that called attention to the fact that one third of all skilled tradesmen in the construction industry are over the age of 50 and retiring fast, with no one to replace them. The campaign drives people to GoBuildAlabama.com, where potential employees can learn more about skilled trade careers and find information about training programs.

In this same spirit, I was also proud to join forces with Caterpillar and The Association of Equipment Manufacturers for the launch of "I Make America," a national grassroots campaign to promote US manufacturing jobs through infrastructure investment and the passage of export agreements.

I would also like to commend the White House initiative called "Skills for America's Future," which is designed to reduce the skills gap by working with employers and community colleges to make sure the education students receive will translate directly into the marketplace, increasing their chances of finding and keeping a good job.

The fact is, there are many initiatives out there making a difference. The problem that so many encounter though, is a tendency to "preach to the choir." With respect to issues like the skills gap, we too often speak only to the people directly involved, the employers, desperate to hire skilled talent, and the unemployed, woefully untrained for the task at hand. To really make a difference, we need to change the perceptions of a much larger audience, and challenge the prevailing definition of a "good job." Americans

need to see these workers for what they are – the key to civilized life as we know it. And that means a campaign and a message that reaches *everybody*.

Toward that end, I'm pleased to help launch a broad-based initiative sponsored by Discovery Communications that will reach millions and millions of people. Discovery's goal is to empower both unemployed and underemployed Americans with access to critical resources that will assist them in obtaining marketable job skills.

TV personalities from across Discovery's networks will participate in this campaign which will leverage Discovery's position as the top nonfiction media company reaching more than 780 million cumulative subscribers across our 14 US networks and Discovery Education's unparalleled reach into schools across the country. Participating on-air talent have been chosen because their distinctive skills are particularly valuable and needed in today's marketplace, and because they are credible to viewers interested in similar professions.

As the leader in both nonfiction programming and broadband-delivered educational content and services to US schools, Discovery is uniquely qualified to deliver this message to a mass audience, and to provide meaningful support on a national level. The people you see on Discovery's air are not only real people, but are also successful professionals working in critical areas of the economy.

To be clear, I support the efforts of Congress and the Administration to create three to four million shovel-ready jobs. But obviously, it's no longer enough to merely create opportunity. If that were the case, we wouldn't have 200,000 vacant positions in the manufacturing sector, or nearly 500,000 openings for tradesmen, transportation, and utility workers. We need to create respect for the work itself, and for the people still willing to do it.

As the host of a TV show about hard work, people often assume I speak for tradesmen and skilled workers. In reality, I don't. I can only speak for myself and anyone else who shares my addiction to paved roads, reliable bridges, heating, air conditioning, and indoor plumbing. The tradesmen I know don't need a spokesman. It's the rest of us who need to worry. Because a civilization without skilled labor, is not a civilization at all.

Along with Discovery, I am ready, able, and eager to partner with the federal government to help reconnect our country to the importance of manufacturing and skilled labor.