The Meaning of Work
For Chris Dansby, the Search for a Job Is About More Than a Paycheck

By David Finkel
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On the morning of his 25th birthday, Chris Dansby made the same wish that he'd made when he turned 24, 23, 22 and 21: Let this be the day where everything worked out, the one he'd been promised since he was a boy.

He was living for the moment in his girlfriend's apartment, surrounded by nothing of his own. It was her bed he awoke in. Her leftover rice in the refrigerator. Her plastic bowl that he spooned the rice into. Her spoon, her sink, her shower, her iron, her everything except for Chris's clothes, a folder he carried that contained a copy of his résumé, and a wallet that contained no money and the business card of a potential employer who had stopped returning his calls.

Her car, too. With its gas tank on empty, Chris steered it into the parking lot of a city-run job center in Southeast Washington at opening time, 8:30 a.m. "It's my birthday. I don't have no money. I don't have no job. I'm feeling kind of mopey today," he said as he went inside the job center, which is in Ward 8, where he has lived his entire life, a part of the city that is 93 percent black and on this day had an unemployment rate of 16.3 percent.

Far away from the life of Chris Dansby, academics and policymakers debate the reasons that unemployment among black men is consistently and disproportionately high. Are the reasons societal, as some argue, or a matter of individual responsibility, as others argue? Are they a reflection of racism? Of defeatism? Of laziness?

Chris's attention, though, was on a list of jobs on a computer screen. Senior litigation paralegal was the first one. He needed a job suitable to a high school graduate who hadn't worked steadily in months. Account executive. And who didn't have a car except when he could borrow one. Software requirement analyst. And who was so broke that the only thing in his pockets other than the keys to a car that had no gas was a pair of dice that he extracted and rattled whenever he had nothing better to do.

Wellness coordinator. VP human resources. Biotechnology scientist.

Out came the dice.

"Twenty-five," he said.

Rattle. Rattle.

"I thought I'd be doing better than this."

* * *

'It's Hard Out in This World'
Why does Chris Dansby not have a job?

What happened? What can he do about it? What did he do wrong?

As Chris navigates the part of the nation populated by black men like himself looking for work, there isn't a day he doesn't wonder about these questions, the last one most of all.

"I don't know, man. It's hard out in this world. It ain't geared for me," he said. "I ain't making excuses, you can get out of it, but. . . ."

But why was his neighborhood's unemployment rate 16.3 percent while at the same moment, in predominantly white Ward 3, the jobless rate was 1.5 percent? Why, last year, as he grew discouraged, were 70 percent of all white men working, 71 percent of all Asian men, 75 percent of all Hispanic men -- and 60 percent of all black men? And only 49 percent of all black men between ages 18 and 24? And only 43 percent of all black men 18-24 with a high school diploma or less?

". . . But I don't blame anybody," Chris said. It's all on my shoulders."

The unemployed black male: He has been studied and commented upon more than any other any category of American worker, and always to conflicting conclusions. Some academics say the problem traces to what they describe as cultural issues within the black community: Fractured families, demeaning music, sports millionaires as role models, thuggishness as a virtue -- all contribute to a "culture of failure" of which joblessness is a part. The problem, these academics say, is behavioral.

Others, however, say it's structural, and point to a 2004 study in which employers were found to be as willing to hire a white man with a criminal record as a black man with a clean record. It was a finding that echoed the results of earlier studies, including a 1991 survey of hiring practices in Chicago in which employers said blacks were worse hires than whites because "they don't want to work," "they don't know how to work," "they come late and leave early," "they've got an attitude problem" and they are "just not as good."

The problem, these academics say, isn't behavioral but societal. Slavery began it, racism continues it, and it entrenches itself every day in neighborhoods such as Ward 8 in forms such as inferior schools, which lead to poor job skills, which lead to employment rates of 43 percent.

Back and forth the arguments go in the search for solutions, and meanwhile, underneath them, on the ground level that is Ward 8, Chris was saying, "I think this is the roughest period of my life. Because it can go either way. It could go, I'm out on the street, homeless, asking people for money, or it could go the way I want it to go."

He was on his way to a job interview. He was using his thumb to wipe a spot off his tie, which he never completely unties, instead looping it over his head because he's not sure he'll be able to retie it. He was thinking about what he would say. "I think I give a good first impression. I smile. I'm dressed nice. I try not to use slang."

But he was concerned about his résumé -- and all that it didn't say. For instance, it showed him working at the Giant Foods warehouse for two months, and what would an employer think of that? Should he mention that he was working the overnight shift? That on his last day, "I felt good when I got off work, I didn't feel sleepy"? That his eyes got droopy somewhere along Martin Luther King Boulevard, and they closed on Alabama Avenue, and when he slammed into a utility pole the engine ended up in the front seat, and the hospital bill that he has yet to pay is $1,500, and that's one of the reasons he needs a job? Preferably near a Metro stop?

And what about his first job, as one of the red-hatted guides in downtown Washington? "The best job I had," he said. It was $12.52 an hour, 40 hours a week. He had a bank account that got up to $700 -- and then, after 18 months of giving the same directions, helping the same homeless people, making the same
money, he quit.

"I wanted more," he explained. "It wasn't no career. I wanted something better."

And maybe that's when the tailspin began, he said, because he didn't have another job lined up, and there went his savings, and there went his car soon after, and now, two years later, tie on, résumé in hand, wondering why "I waste opportunities or don't see opportunities," he was down to this one option. It was an interview for a job with Jiffy Lube, arranged by a government-funded job-placement service whose clients are mostly black men.

"God, help me out," he prayed before going in.

A week later, at a Virginia Jiffy Lube that was a 43-minute subway ride from Ward 8, Chris began his new job. Eight dollars an hour, 40 hours a week, $16,640 a year. "Looks like it's gonna work out," he said.

That night, his girlfriend told him their relationship was over.

The next day, he moved in with his mother.

Two days later: "I don't know what happened. I haven't heard from him," said Wally Kenner, his boss at Jiffy Lube. "If he doesn't call me or show up tomorrow, we'll probably have to let him go." 

The next day: "He no longer works here," Kenner said.

The next day: "I don't know, man. Stuff happens," Chris said, sitting in his mother's home, head down, lights off, voice barely audible, trying to explain.

"If I had the answer, I'd tell you, but I don't know," he said. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know."

* * *

'My Mother Did Her Best'

His mother's name is Brenda. She is 52 years old, and after 10 years of working as an attendant at a nursing home, a job that paid her $7 an hour when she began and $9.75 an hour when she was let go, she wonders if she will ever work again. "I want a job. I definitely want a job," she said one afternoon, but interviews haven't gone well.

"My ma would have a great chance if she stopped thinking so negative when she go in the door. She's already thinking she isn't getting the job," said Chris, now settled in.

"When I go to an interview, I take my bath, I don't put on a lot of cologne, I put on a nice outfit, I go with a positive attitude," Brenda said. "I walk in, I'll greet people with my handshake, and they give me one of these." She held out her hand limply.

"That's because you're a female," Chris said. "That's how they do it with a female."

"No. I mean come on now. My hand is like a firm grip, and their hand is like this, like they don't want to shake my hand, and I know I ain't got a damn chance," Brenda said. "Once they give me that handshake, I know it's over."

"My mother did her best," Chris said later, away from her, of the woman who dropped out of high school and raised him and an older brother as a single parent. "But she didn't even prepare herself for life, so how could she prepare me?"

As for his father, who has been only a vague neighborhood presence: "I remember one time I asked him to fix my bike," Chris said, thinking back to a day he telephoned his father when he was a little boy, "and he said he would, and he rode past and waved his hand."
Still out of money, no prospects in sight, Chris was headed back to the city-run job placement center on Naylor Road SE, a 10-minute walk from his mother's home. Some parts of Ward 8 are gentrifying with new stores and luxury homes, but this walk took Chris through a dirty parking lot where opportunity was represented by a boarded-up restaurant and a man $50,000 behind in child-support payments who was trying to remedy that by selling socks out of his car.

As usual, Chris was there at opening time to scan listings, use the free phone and meet with his case manager, Alan Morrison, who said of Chris's inability to find work, "He has a good résumé. A good educational background. He interviews well. So I don't know what it is."

The job center was busy, as always. No matter how low unemployment is nationally, or how vibrant the U.S. economy might be, the churn at Naylor Road is constant. So, too, is the racial composition of the clients: Black face after black face filled the lobby, and the computer area where people check job listings, and the conference room where the daily session on job-interview tips was underway for the newest registrants.

"They're going to be taking a look at your total package," an instructor was saying to a dozen people seated around a long table. "The way you enter. Your handshake. Your eye contact. The whole nine yards."

"I don't mean to be rude," a man interrupted. "You got Hispanics coming into this area, they don't have contacts, they don't have resources, but they're getting more jobs than we do, so I'm lost. I don't think Hispanics and Asians are using all these techniques to get jobs."

That's because Hispanics are willing to take any job, a woman sitting across from him said. "They'll stand outside in lines," she said. "I don't see us doing that."

"Another thing, they stick together," a man said. "They ain't complaining about what they ain't got."

"Yeah, but we're here fixating on body language," the first man continued, exasperated.

"What you're facing is a serious unemployment rate for black Americans," a second instructor said. "Let's stop comparing. Let's stop worrying about someone else. Let's start looking at ourselves."

Down the hall, LaMia Chapman, the job center's manager, explained the difficulty of conveying that bit of sentiment to people so discouraged.

"It's like swimming in a whirlpool. That's what it's like around here," said Chapman, who grew up in Ward 8. "If you have severe disappointment after disappointment, and your environment feeds into negativity, it's easy to decide, 'This is the way it's going to be.'"

Meanwhile, after checking for new job listings, Chris was ready to leave.

"Nothing," he said.

Back home:

"I'm proud of him," Brenda said, "but--"

"That's what my ma do," Chris said, cutting her off. "She looks for the negative."

"He's doing the best he can do," Brenda said after a while, when Chris was no longer listening. "The only thing he's not doing is using his mind like he should -- because I know he's a smart, intelligent young man. He showed me that when he finished school.

"He's better than what I am," she said.

* * * 'You Can Do It!'

These are the hallway decorations at the high school that Chris graduated from, called Ballou STAY. Though attached as an annex to Ballou Senior High School, it is not the same thing. Ballou High, which Chris attended before dropping out just before graduation, is where results on the Stanford-9 achievement exams for that year showed that 64 percent of students were below basic proficiency levels in reading and 84 percent were below basic proficiency in math. Ballou STAY is where dropouts return for their diplomas in an environment of relentless inspiration, one in which hallway posters are only the beginning.

"I have counselors. Substance-abuse counselors. Academic counselors," said Wilbert Miller, the school's director. There are social workers, too, he said, along with mentors, workshops for students to "teach them how to tie ties, how to dress for success," workshops for parents and classes that go late into the evening. "They need hope. They just don't have a lot of hope," Miller said. "We say, 'You can do it! You can do it!' "

Or as it says on the bulletin board across from his office: "I CAN DO IT."

Or in a poem students recited at orientation this year: "Yes, I can!"

Four years ago, Chris heard the same exhortations. He also heard them at Ballou High, and before that, in middle school at P.R. Harris Educational Center, where there was extracurricular outreach to students like Chris from a club called Concerned Black Men, which was overseen by an assistant principal named Ron Miller, now retired.

Miller's memory of the club is that "it was just wonderful." Every Saturday, he said, dozens of boys would hear from speakers including Jesse L. Jackson and Marion Barry. Or "we'd put the kids in a circle," Miller recalled, "and I'd throw a medicine ball, and whoever I threw it to would have to stand up and speak for three minutes about himself."

"Self-esteem," Miller said -- that was the point. "We would tell the kids, 'You can do anything you want to do as long as you believe in yourself.' "

Chris's memory: "I think I remember sitting down in little groups talking about things," he said. That's what he can remember. No Jesse Jackson. No medicine ball. No details at all, other than believing he might be a football player someday, or a police officer. Even when looking through his middle school yearbook, he could remember nothing more, and was puzzled as to why he wasn't in any photographs.

And then he did remember: It had to do with not having Christmas that year, and how he was so angry about it that he decided to stay home for a day when school resumed in January.

And then a second day.

And then every day for the rest of the school year.

"The whole year," Chris said, shaking his head. "I can't remember how I did it. I think I would leave out like I was going to school, and then I'd just wait a little bit -- I had the door key -- and come back in the house."

And do?

"Nothing. A bunch of nothing," he said.

And no one knew?

"She was working," Chris said.

"And then I would come home, find something to eat, go to bed," Brenda said. "I didn't even know till he got grown that he didn't go to school that year."
"I mean, it's not my mother's fault. It's my fault. It's my responsibility," Chris said, and then he turned toward his mother. "It's not your fault," he said. "I never blamed you for nothing."

Four years later, in 2000, at Ballou High School, Chris quit again. This time he was a senior in need of four classes to have enough credits to graduate, but when June came and his friends moved on, he pretended he was done, too.

Quietly, over the summer, he made up two of the courses, and at a citywide graduation ceremony in August, Brenda was watching in the audience as her son walked across a stage and paused next to a woman who whispered something in his ear. "We have to talk after this," the woman whispered to Chris, who knew that he still didn't have enough credits, that he shouldn't have been on the stage, that he had been invited to the ceremony mistakenly. But as far as Brenda was concerned, her family had its first high school graduate ever, and Chris, so embarrassed, didn't tell her otherwise.

He didn't tell her then, he didn't tell her the next year, when he was one more young jobless black male on the streets of Ward 8 doing nothing at all, and he didn't tell her the following year when he became a student at Ballou STAY and really did become the family's first high school graduate.

"June 2002," reads the date on the diploma. Four years after receiving it, and laminating it, and putting it in a folder along with his résumé and birth certificate, Chris had yet to show it to a single soul.

"I'm ashamed of it," he said. "It's supposed to say June 2000."

** 800 Barnaby St. SE

He thought he had a job as a stocker at K-mart, but on the day he was to start training, he didn't have bus fare, and that was that.

"Here's one," his case manager said one day, handing him a listing for an assistant manager position at Rent-A-Center, but it required a driver's license, and Chris's had been suspended after the accident.

He got a job as an $8-an-hour security guard at a Rite-Aid in Dupont Circle, and on the second day, when a customer tapped him on the arm and said, "Excuse me, where's the foot powder?" he was only too happy to help. "It should all be good now," he said mid-morning, but then his back began to hurt from standing, and he used the word "boring," and two customers began having a loud conversation about Gas-X, and he said, "I'm going to try to tough it out. I mean, I ain't gonna try, I am going to tough it out," and from that point forward every minute became an act of persuasion until he walked off the job in the middle of day 10.

Back home, once again: "You got any money?" Brenda asked.

"What money, Ma?" Chris said.

Mid-afternoon. The day already felt over. With nothing better to do, Chris and Mike Rogers, 32, an old family friend who had spent 10 years in prison for shooting someone when he was 17, and who was temporarily staying at Brenda's, went to visit 800 Barnaby St. SE, where they grew up. Two months after Chris's 25th birthday, his life was nearing its bottom.

"It was right here," Mike said as they looked at a patch of grass and trash where there had been an apartment building until it was torn down as blight. "There were 14 units, around 10 families, around 25 to 30 kids, and every one of them is probably more ashamed of their life up to this point than proud of it. Nobody from 800 was successful. Not one person. Nobody , nobody made it."

He described the men who lived in the building as "bums. Total drunks. In and out of jobs." The women, he said, were women who "settled for less," and as for the children: "We did more adult things at extremely young ages than anybody that I knew. It was just so much going on, and we were always around adults, but it was a constant party for them. All they did was drink, they tried to drink themselves out of their misery, or smoke themselves out of their misery. So we always saw all the adult things. Everything was always right
So many years later, Chris looked at the grass and tried to see it. "But Mike," he said.

"Listen to me," Mike said. "The bottom line, dude, is that none of us have anything. We're still struggling."

"Everybody that lives in America has the same opportunities," Chris reminded him. "If you work hard?"

"It sounds like you're trying to sugarcoat something to me, champ," Mike said.

"I'm not trying to sugarcoat," Chris said. "I'm saying everybody have the same opportunities."

"No," Mike said. "I'm gonna tell you why, brother. Don't get upset with me."

"I'm not getting upset," Chris said.

"All right. How many times were you ashamed to go to school because you didn't look right?" Mike asked.

"A whole lot of times," Chris said.

"Your clothes were ripped and you ain't had nothing?" Mike asked.

"What I'm saying is I don't want nobody feeling sorry for me," Chris said.

"I don't even get this," Mike said. "Where did you come from? You came from nothing. You came from exactly what we're looking at. The bottom line is you are having to learn what some man -- your dad, or somebody -- should have been instilling in you as a child. We didn't get that. We lacked the male influence. That's why you run around here, you can't make up your mind."

"But I should have realized," Chris said, getting more upset by the moment. "I should have been smart enough to be like: 'He's not here. I got to step up and do it myself.' And that's what makes me angry with myself because I didn't do it."

As for his mother, he continued, "I seen my mother for however long she stayed at that job, always coming home, complaining about the job, and I don't want to feel that way. And that's the way I be feeling with these jobs."

"Listen to me, dog," Mike said.

"No," Chris said. "You listen. Because I'm not stupid. I'm not stupid! I have a high school diploma. I shouldn't have to settle for an eight-, nine-dollar-an-hour job. It's making me angry just thinking about it."

"But listen to me, man," Mike said.

"I shouldn't have to."

"Listen to me, man."

"Everybody I know, outside of an employer, says there's nothing wrong with my résumé, with me, with the way I talk when I go on an interview, so why can't I get hired? Why can't I get hired at a job that's paying real?"

"This right here is depressing me," Mike said. "Because where 800 was? Come here. Look. It's a place where trash is at. That's all it is. That's all it ever was. Look at it. Look at it. Look at it."

"But there were some good times," Chris said.

"But there were a lot of bad times," Mike said. "And that's what's driving you, whether you know it or not."
"But I don't know," Chris said. "That's the thing that's beating me up. I don't know, man. I don't know. What's my purpose? You know what I'm saying? I'm just a speck, man. I feel like giving up sometimes. I feel like I be in limbo. Like nothing sinks into me. Like why don't I remember this? Why don't I remember that? All I remember is bad. I don't want to be that way, man. My two options, I really feel in my heart, is to make it, or to die. Just let go. For real."

"Don't talk to me about that," Mike said, turning away.

"Mike, I'm talking about what's in my heart, man," Chris said, his voice breaking. "I don't want to be out here in limbo, on the street. I gotta find a way, man. I'm not happy, man. I feel so lost. I don't know where I'm at."

Here was the bottom:

"I don't even know if I'm supposed to be here."

Mike turned back.

"All you got to do is love yourself, dude," he said.

"That's what I'm saying," Chris said quietly. "Where do I know how to love?"

Mike looked Chris in the eye. Just like they teach at the job center and in the schools, except that this was nothing like that.

"You can do anything, man," Mike said. "You're 25. You can do anything."

** Another Chance

Two weeks later, Chris got his next chance.

Early one morning, he pulled together enough change to take a bus to the subway, and the subway to a second bus, and a short walk later he was at a business called Gov't Movers, where nearly every one of the 100 or so employees who move furniture and boxes around government buildings for $7 to $12.72 an hour is black and male.

"To be honest with you, it's been a little disheartening," Torrance Poindexter, the human resources manager, said of the typical applicant he sees. Not because of race, he said, although he'd like a more diverse workforce, but because of demeanor. "There just seems to be a lack of motivation," he said. Applicants arrive late, he said, and show up in sweat pants. They slump in their seat and say, "I'm a hard worker." They say, "I haven't thought about it," when he asks some about their goals. "One guy, he had a toothpick in his mouth," Poindexter said.

And here came Chris, in dress pants, an ironed shirt and a tie, arriving 10 minutes early. "He was alert," Poindexter would say after the interview. "He seemed to be enthusiastic, he seemed to want to work," he sat straight, he spoke clearly, he made good eye contact, and he had a good answer when asked about his goals: "to improve myself."

What is the truth about black men and employment? It is a national employment rate of 60 percent. It is an unemployment rate in Ward 8 that is higher than in any other part of the city. And in early November, it was Chris on the 11th floor of a government building in Silver Spring, in a uniform that said Gov't Movers, ready to get to work.

"It's got potential," he said of the job. "Things could start happening for me."

His plan was to not only get the job but also to keep it, to not only earn money but also to save some. He would pay off his debts. He would get his driver's license. He would get a car. He would get a new girl. He
would get a place of his own.

His spoon. His sink. His shower. His iron. His everything.

First, though:

"We got to move all that?"

He was looking inside a storage room.

"Everything," said a government worker who had unlocked the storage room and whose title was space coordinator.

"That's a lot of everything," Chris said.

The storage room was filled with boxes, boxes that had to be taken to cubicles, cubicles that were replacing older cubicles from which the boxes had been removed. That was today's job.

Five at a time, Chris loaded boxes onto a dolly and delivered them to wherever they were supposed to go. The working world: Here was a cubicle where someone was dialing a phone. Here was a cubicle where someone was entering data into a computer. Here was a cubicle where someone was rummaging through a drawer filled with notebooks and pens and Christmas lights. Here was an empty cubicle where Chris stacked four of the boxes. One to go.

The space coordinator again:

"There's some file cabinets that need to be moved," she said. From a distance, she had been watching how hard Chris was working and had said she was impressed. Up close, she saw that he was perspiring.

"We're just trying to work you to death," she said.

"That's okay," he said, smiling.

He picked up the final box, carried it to a far wall and placed it under a window that happened to offer a breathtaking view to the south.

Down there to the right was Ward 3, where the unemployment rate was 1.5 percent.

And down there to the left was Ward 8, where the 16.3 unemployment rate no longer included Chris, who stood now at the window transfixed.

He'd never seen things from such a perspective.

In a moment, he would get back to work. He would move some filing cabinets. He would keep a job. He would learn how to love himself.

But right now, all he could do was stare.

"Damn," he said.

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