

Maile Jeng

The image shows the name 'Maile Jeng' written in a black, elegant, cursive-style font. The letters are connected and have a fluid, handwritten appearance. Small black arrows and numbers are placed around the letters to indicate the correct stroke order and direction for writing. For example, a '1' and arrow point to the start of the 'M', and a '2' and arrow point to the start of the 'a'. Similar markings are present for the 'i', 'l', 'e', 'J', 'e', and 'n'.



PASSION: FACT OR FICTION?

BY: MAILE JENG

In Silicon Valley, teens face pressure to conform to narrow, predefined social ideals. This can lead to teenagers feeling like they need to follow the cookie-cutter path of being high-achieving to get into a good college. Working hard in high school gets you into a good college, which can lead to a well-paying career, which leads to happiness. The assumption seems to be that there is some happiness payoff down the road, which you have to believe to deny yourself happiness and authentic sources of fulfillment in the present. But when they finally get what they thought they wanted, or rather were told to want, they aren't satisfied. In an article written for PBS, Gail Cornwall writes, "Beyond developing their own perfectionism, these kids end up living for the future rather than the present" (Cornwall). Kids end up too focused on where they're supposed to be in life in the future or where they think they need to be that they end up neglecting the present. They checked off all those boxes of what they thought they needed to accomplish in life, but that doesn't lead them to happiness. You've been told your whole life what you are supposed to want, but fulfillment through a career will never come from meeting the expectations of other people, no matter how much of a people pleaser you are. In an article from the Pew Research Center, "Only 51% of Americans are satisfied with their jobs overall" (Horowitz and Parker). This could be due to various factors, but one of the factors is that people don't have a reason for the work they do. That can make work feel aimless and as if the work that's being done is pointless. Having a reason for why someone does their job is one of the main reasons that keeps people working. But

numbers and arguments only go so far—what does passion really look like on the job? Given that we spend a third of our lives at work, the stories of three Silicon Valley professionals—Nathan Coleman, David Jeng, and Chris Hung—show how intention and purpose can turn any role into a fulfilling career.

Nathan, a lighting director, David, a taekwondo master, and Chris, an IT specialist, each illustrate how to find passion in any field when you actively choose to look for it. People always associate passion with work in jobs that are outside of STEM, like art, but through the perspective of these three people, you'll come to realize that passion can be found in any job, if one chooses to find it. One a lighting director, one a taekwondo master, one an IT man. Even through different jobs, there is a reason behind why they do what they do, and that reason is what connects them. High schoolers can easily feel lost in life because they haven't experienced enough in life to know what they want to do, but the issue with that is that they don't know what they want to do, so they tend to fall back on careers that are deemed "safe". That can lead to teens later entering jobs and not understanding why they chose this as their job. It's not exactly about working in what someone would consider their passion. Beyond that, when there is meaningful intention behind work, it is able to change the definition of what success in the workplace is. When teenagers are able to discover who they are, it allows for the expansion of traditional success by finding a personal mission or reason behind their work, creating a bigger purpose in work than just working.

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- Cornwall



CHAPTER 1: BORN PASSION

Above a dark auditorium in the catwalk, there's a bustle of people placing down lights and wires. As they place the lights, they yell over to one person in specific for confirmation and questions. Meet Nathan Coleman, a seventeen-year-old lighting designer, stagehand, technical director, and business owner. Nathan is a senior at Los Altos High School who's made theater his life as he continues his plans for theater beyond high school and into college. Throughout his high school career he's done more than twenty shows and that number is only going up. Coworkers of his have described him as a "lighting wizard" and that becomes really apparent when you see him working. He found theater from a young age, being involved with plays and musicals at his elementary and middle school before deciding that he wanted to do more. He took the initiative to learn lighting and expand what he learned from his class in middle school. The passion that Nathan has for his work didn't come from nowhere, of course there is that spark that he felt to bring him into lighting, but it was him who brought it forward into something bigger.

While asking Nathan how he thought work and passion were connected he mentioned that, "I can't work if I'm not passionate about it [...] but I love lighting design. And so even though it's my job, I still love it. I think it's because even though it will be my job, I'll still love it" (Coleman). It's so unique for someone who's still a teen to completely understand what they want to do with their future and already have it planned out. Nathan shows why it's important for someone to genuinely enjoy their job. He puts in the work and the hours because he genuinely cares about what he's doing, compared to how he talks about school there's a clear difference in how much he cares about it. "How many es-

says can you write? Not a lot, but you can design so many shows and they never get boring to me" (Coleman). Nathan is willing to do whatever is necessary for lighting because he enjoys it. He isn't willing to wake up early to go to school, but he'll wake up early to set up lights for a show and that just proves that passion will triumph over all else.

An issue that comes from living in Silicon Valley is the pressure that it puts onto the children living here to live up to certain standards. There is more emphasis put onto grades and working a job in STEM that people often focus all their efforts into that, without having a chance to figure out who they are or what they want. Debbie Sorensen, a Denver-based psychologist, said, "Younger millennials and Gen Z were raised with a lot of pressure to be high achievers, but are starting their careers in a chaotic landscape where they have little autonomy and freedom to find a meaningful, well-paid job" (qtd. in Smith). Kids from Silicon Valley are high achievers as a byproduct of the environment that they're stuck in and once they get into their jobs, the supposed final destination, they're left lost on who they're supposed to be.

"I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE AROUND THIS AREA ESPECIALLY, ARE LIKE, I'M GONNA BECOME A SOFTWARE ENGINEER, DOCTOR OR WHATEVER BECAUSE MY PARENTS WANT ME TO. AND I F***G HATE THAT MINDSET. IT'S SO STUPID. BE WHO YOU WANT TO BE AND BE OPEN TO IT"**

-Nathan Coleman



CHAPTER 2: FOUND PASSION



Moving into an unassuming office building for Stanford in Redwood City, there's a room tucked away inside the finance office. In this room is an IT group run by David Jeng, a Taiwanese immigrant turned Mountain-View local and IT Manager for a finance group at Stanford. With his major in international relations, becoming an IT professional doesn't seem like an obvious choice, so what changed for him to become this way? The path for people to find their jobs isn't always clear. It's better to try many things, to experience life, and with those combined experiences, understand what they want to pursue. For David to enter the world of IT, he had to take classes at community college while simultaneously working a full-time job and a part-time job.

A defining moment from David's career was how he was treated when asking for help with his computer in the past. They would treat him like an idiot and act like the questions were something obvious, which just made him feel dumb. He said, "And so once I got involved in this, I was gonna never try to never make somebody feel that way. But I think that's what helped me too" (Jeng). And he says that's what makes him so good at the job that he does, not only is it his skill, but it's also that he came from a background without understanding computers so that helps him explain to regular people. Hardships are what shape a person, and they help guide people to become a better version of themselves. People are only products of what they experience in life and it's how they choose to react to those experiences that they are able to grow and change.

David's passion for work comes from the feeling that it gives him. What keeps him coming back is, "And then now you're the one doing it, and when you're done, then people are happy with you and all that. It's a good feeling" (Jeng). He's able to feel purpose in the work that he's doing because he can see the positive effect that it has on people. David mentioned that one of his

goals when he entered his job was to be able to mentor someone and help them in a way that he hadn't been. Through a program that Stanford has that supports minorities without college majors he was able to fulfill this wish and help one of his employees get into a field they previously knew nothing about. When people are able to find a meaning in the work that they do it allows for them to feel more rewarded.

In a student podcast from PBS News called How Do You Define Success, they were asking the question of how high schoolers define success. A high schooler responded, "Success is a lot about going through all those tough times. You have to be mindful of all those obstacles you were able to overcome to get to where you are now" (How Do You Define Success). To David, this is already more than he thought he ever would do in life because if he stayed in Taiwan with his family, he would have become a farmer. He created the role he had in his company because it had never existed before him, and by doing that, he's creating a path on his own. His success might seem more typical, it's a job in technology in Silicon Valley, but his success already began the second he decided to continue discovering who he was outside of a college degree.

"SUCCESS IS A LOT ABOUT GOING THROUGH ALL THOSE TOUGH TIMES. YOU HAVE TO BE MINDFUL OF ALL THOSE OBSTACLES YOU WERE ABLE TO OVERCOME TO GET TO WHERE YOU ARE NOW"

-How Do You Define Success





CHAPTER 3: KNOWN PASSION

Down El Camino, there's a taekwondo dojo filled with kids sparring with each other. Expressive yells fill the air before the kicking between the students starts. In the back of the room, yelling out advice every once in a while is the owner of this dojo, Tiger Martial Arts, Chris Hung. Chris is a Taiwanese immigrant who now teaches taekwondo to people of all ages. His career was very unclear throughout his life and he's done various different jobs. With his degree in biology, he took his first job in water science, but he felt like the work that he was doing was all the same thing; it was too mundane. That led to his next job in finance, before he realized that that wasn't quite what he wanted to do either. While on this journey though, he said that, "Everything that I do kind of brings me back to martial arts. So, you know, whenever I was stressed or whenever I had to work, I would always go back to training, martial arts and in every, every situation in my life, I would go back to my safety net, I always go back to it for some reason" (Hung). So maybe it was fate. Everything in Chris's life was leading him back to taekwondo, which led to the opening of his business, which has been running for the past twenty years now.

The path to his job wasn't clear at all, and it took him many years to really realize what it was that he wanted to do. The fulfillment that he got from his dojo, which he didn't get from all the other jobs that he took, came from simply wanting to help others. "I wanted to help people. Because I feel, when I was younger, I guess I was a little bit alone because I didn't speak the language very well and that's why I work on bringing people together now" (Hung). People have to experience adversity because it causes them to take a step back and look and see how to make things better for, not only themselves, but also others. It comes from a place of not wanting other people to experience the same traumatic thing that you've been through, and in turn making the world a better place for others. In this way, people

are to make meaning out of the work that they do. In an article by NC State University it notes that, "[...] an important part of being empowered is having a deep sense of meaning and impact at work" ("Finding Passion Through Everyday Work"). If someone simply works as a means to an end, sure, it'll work, but it becomes tiring. And, at the end of the day, if there's something that you truly care about, you can make it a reality through the work that you do. That's why Chris said, "If you have a passion for something, find a way to get paid for that passion" (Hung).

Chris was able to find a way to get paid for his passion, even though he could have had a more "stable" job working in finance or water science. His biggest regret was honestly not starting his career earlier; if he could go back, he would. But the other jobs he took gave him the experience to see other fields of work, and that helped him realize what he wanted. Chris placed a heavy emphasis on putting the effort into your passion: "But then you have to take a risk. A lot of people, what they do is, they kind of sit back and they don't see the risk. They don't really try to put themselves out there" (Hung). For people to follow what they want to do it can be hard because the road doesn't look easy, but without even giving the effort to try it doesn't even matter. If people give up, deciding that it's too hard before they even begin they won't know what could have been and they will never know. Jessica Bryant, a data reporter, stated that, "52% of high school students feel pressure to make decisions about their future too soon" (Bryant). That's the honest truth about it because high schoolers haven't experienced life and haven't experienced enough in life to understand what they want to do. Chris's story is helpful in understanding that because through the various careers that he took he was able to learn more about himself, what he did or didn't like, and take that even into his next career.

"THEY [TAEKWONDO MASTERS] WOULD DO IT [TEACHING TAEKWONDO] FROM WHEN THEY LEAVE COLLEGE. AND THEN EVEN WHEN THEY'RE 80 YEARS OLD THEY'RE STILL TEACHING, I FEEL THAT THE PASSION IS REALLY STILL THERE"

-Chris Hung



Maile Jeng is currently a Junior at Los Altos High School and a Design student at Freestyle. When Maile isn't working or at school, you can find her making some kind of art, reading with a cup of green or black tea, or coming up with outfits. Although she doesn't know what she wants to do with her future, she hopes to continue to choose what she loves above all else.



If you want to check out more, here's a link to my website! Thanks for reading this book!