

Maile Jeng

Mr. Greco

English III

17 April 2025

Passion: Fact or Myth?

What do you want to do in college? I've faced this question time and time again from my parents, aunts, uncles, and basically anyone I've talked to recently. As a sixteen-year-old who's been forced to think about college, there is an underlying choice between a job that's seen as typical or a job in art that's seen as unstable. Living in Silicon Valley, there's always been this strong focus on STEM and especially careers in things like computer science, but it's never struck me as something I could do. I've never had an answer to the question I asked above because I could never pick. But is there a way to enjoy work even without that being your dream job? Is there an underlying reason why people can remain happy and content doing their jobs while others count down the days till retirement?

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.

Passion—feeling purpose and excitement in your work—is often missing for a lot of workers who simply go through the motions until retirement, waiting to pursue what they truly want to do. Perhaps the definition of what passion is in work can be seen a little differently. Instead of viewing passion through a lens of what someone already enjoys doing, like a hobby, change it to something that can be found in the work someone does. In an article by Gettysburg College, one-third of someone's life will be spent working, and it's everyone's own choice if they spend that time in a job they can love or one that makes them dread waking up in the morning (Naber). Then, to become satisfied with the work someone's doing, having passion can help in defining a reason for working or motivation to keep working when it's hard. 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.

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 essays 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. That's why Nathan placed an emphasis on trying different hobbies or interests that pop up because without trying someone will never know what is that thing that flips the spark inside of them. Contrary to how in *Screw Finding Your Passion*, Mark Manson refers to a friend of his who always complains about not knowing what to do in his life. While this friend has a business

that he wants to do, he refuses to work on it. Mark Manson says, “His passion already found him. He’s just ignoring it. He just refuses to believe it’s viable” (Manson). He refuses to see that that business is something that could work if he puts the effort into it. From Mark Manson’s friend, teens can learn that those jobs that are viewed as something that isn’t a real job or isn’t a viable career can be a career with the correct effort. Theater isn’t a common career and most will only view it as something done in high school, but Nathan has taken that challenge and made it into his job.

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. Without a sense of purpose in the work that someone does there is nothing to guide the work being done. Nathan’s personal opinion on how Silicon Valley impacts high schoolers he said, “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” (Coleman).

The ability to see the impact of the work that Nathan does is another aspect that keeps him continuing his work. He said, “You spend so much time working on a show and being able

to share that with other people and to share the magic of theater with other people is what doing shows is all about to me” (Coleman). While some jobs have this abstract idea of what the whole purpose of the work is, to Nathan it’s very clear. Nothing about Nathan’s job is conventional and it isn’t what people would normally consider a stable job, but that’s okay for him. He doesn’t need to have a typical nine to five office job because, despite the stability and security that that brings, it isn’t him. His passion is the reason why he’s so talented and that makes him one of the best at what he does. That’s because he isn’t defining success by the amount of money he’s making, but rather with the opportunity to continue what he loves. With both the passion for his work and the ability to see his impact on his community, Nathan continues to work and will continue to follow his dreams.

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. David is originally from Taiwan, before getting adopted by his Aunt and Uncle in the United States, coming over for a better education. With his high school years spent at Mountain View High School, he said that, although he didn’t know what he wanted to do initially, “I knew I wanted to go to college without a doubt” (Jeng). 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. It wasn't easy, but once he understood what it was he wanted to do, he was committed to following through with it.

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.

For people to find their passion, David recommends "Try[ing] as many things as possible. Especially when you're young, just try things, it doesn't matter if you're good or bad at it, just try it" (Jeng). Taking risks and opportunities is the only way that people can learn about themselves and what they want to do in life. 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. It's reported that when people feel like their work is meaningful, "Their performance improves by 33 percent, they are 75 percent more committed to their organization, and are 49 percent less likely to leave" (Bromley). It's proven that having a sense of importance about work helps people in turn stay in their job. So that brings up the point that passion isn't the sole thing that people should focus on, it's not only passion but also the meaning and fulfillment that someone gets out of their job. In this way David's success is not because of what he makes from his job, but the ability to help others around him.

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.

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.

Chris's success comes from his ability and desire to create a space for people to train and discipline themselves. When asked why passion was important for work, Chris said, "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" (Hung). This is why passion is so important. It keeps people working, not for the money or what

they get out of it, but because there's a genuine connection and love for what they do. Of course, Chris followed what he enjoyed doing, taekwondo, but it isn't just his passion that keeps him in his job. Rather, it's the connection to people that keeps him there, and being able to find a connection to work that doesn't rely on always loving the job itself.

Together, all of these stories come together to form a picture of the reality of work and the core importance of finding a meaning in the work someone does. Though all of them lead different lives and various different careers, from one in the arts to one in computers, there is one major point connecting all of them. All of them mention the importance of having a motive or significance to the work being done and which allows them to have success in their jobs. They are allowed to truly be content because they are satisfied. Without that, there is no sense of direction, and the work that's being done can feel insignificant and pointless. That points to what passion in work really means, to have a passion for work is made up of these different aspects that keep a person wanting to work. It isn't only one aspect because people can't love every part of a job every moment, but smaller parts of a job that can keep a person motivated and keep them interested. In the world, multi-millionaires and billionaires are always trying to get richer, and maybe that's because they never feel satisfied, because the "success" they have is only that which is temporary and monetary. When someone is able to see the impact of their work in real life in a community that matters to them, it not only benefits those around them, but also themselves. David, Nathan, and Chris all do the work they do not only because they love it, but because what they receive out of it is emotionally fulfilling. They are able to see that what they do is helping other people, and so in turn that helps them.

As a teenager in Silicon Valley the environment I currently find myself in is one where the pressure to take high rigor classes and enough APs heavily weighs on the minds of students.

It isn't the reality I want to be living in though. Although I have seen high schoolers who have put themselves through, not only tough classes, but numerous extracurriculars, excel and receive the results they wanted, they miss part of their life in the present. Weekends are booked away with volunteering and working just to stay ahead of classmates. This isn't the environment that should be conducive for high schoolers to learn, and the increasingly smaller chances of getting into what are seen as "top-tier" colleges aren't helping.

That's why it's important to understand that there will always be a choice for those who choose to look for it, and it will never be too late to find it. Just like how Chris took two different careers before finding taekwondo, a person's journey through life and passion will never be over. Personally, I am sick and tired of seeing the same cycle of people taking jobs because they feel like they have to follow a certain path to be successful in life without taking into account what they truly want to be doing. The greatest success in life can only come from doing what keeps someone happy. By allowing yourself to try things and take risks, people are able to chase the future that they want, but only if they give themselves the chance to try.

Works Cited

Bromley, Timothy. "Making Work Meaningful from the C-Suite to the Frontline." McKinsey &

Company, 28 June 2021,

www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/making-work-meaningful-from-the-c-suite-to-the-frontline.

Bryant, Jessica. “High Schoolers Feel Pressure to Make Decisions about Future: BestColleges.”

BestColleges.Com, Best Colleges, 23 June 2022,

www.bestcolleges.com/research/students-feel-pressure-to-decide-future/.

Coleman, Nathan. Personal Interview. 4 February 2025.

Cornwall, Gail. “How Today’s High School Students Face High Pressure in a Grind Culture.”

PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 1 Feb. 2024,

www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/how-todays-high-school-students-face-high-pressure-in-a-grind-culture/?scrlybrkr.

Elbaba, Rawan. “How Do You Define Success?” On Our Minds, 15 July 2024,

studentreportinglabs.org/on-our-minds/season-4/how-do-you-define-success.

“Finding Passion in Everyday Work.” *Poole Thought Leadership*, NC State University, 1 Sept.

2021, poole.ncsu.edu/thought-leadership/article/finding-passion-in-everyday-work/.

Horowitz, Juliana Menasce. “How Americans View Their Jobs.” Pew Research Center, Pew

Research Center, 30 Mar. 2023,

www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/30/how-americans-view-their-jobs/.

Hung, Chris. Personal Interview. 2 March 2025.

Jeng, David. Personal Interview. 28 February 2025.

Manson, Mark. “Screw Finding Your Passion.” Mark Manson, Mark Manson, 8 Feb. 2023,

markmanson.net/screw-finding-your-passion.

Naber, Andrew. “One Third of Your Life Is Spent at Work.” Gettysburg College,

www.gettysburg.edu/news/stories?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b.

Accessed 15 Apr. 2025.

Smith, Morgan. "Burnout Is on the Rise Worldwide-and Gen Z, Young Millennials and Women Are the Most Stressed." CNBC, CNBC, 14 Mar. 2023,

www.cnbc.com/2023/03/14/burnout-is-on-the-rise-gen-z-millennials-and-women-are-the-most-stressed.html.

Note About Gen AI

I did not use generative ai in the process of making this documentary.

To my parents, for supporting me through my journey of life and discovering my passion.
To all the people who decide to follow their dreams and inspire others to do the same.

I would like to thank my teachers at Freestyle for their support through the process of making this documentary. Mr. Greco, for helping me through the process of writing my paper and guiding my project in the right direction. Our discussions together really opened my eyes to new topics and made me realize the importance of talking through my ideas. You pushed me to work more on this project even when I wanted to stop and that really expanded my topic beyond its beginnings. Ms. Parkinson, for guiding me through making the documentary book and learning InDesign. Learning to create a book from scratch was challenging, but seeing the pieces come together has been the most rewarding part. I would also like to thank my three interviewees for sharing their stories with me. Nathan, for being the first to volunteer to help me out with the project. Although the original topic of this documentary changed, the story that you shared with

me was still important and helped shape this project. Finally, I would like to thank my Freestyle classmates, specifically, my English tablemates, for our discussions about our concerns about this project. You helped me vocalize my issues and encouraged me when I needed it. Landon, for telling me to take a risk and change my topic even though we were halfway through our project. Josh, for being my proofreading partner and answering all of my nonsensical questions. This documentary wouldn't have been possible without the help of all of these people.

s

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.