



Tacos for Tuition

By Ali Palumbo

“I need two chicken tacos, a beef taco and order of queso to table 12, guys.” The tall, lanky kid stands behind the line staring at a row of blinking faces. They wipe their dirty, gloved hands on permanently-stained white aprons, and calmly rest their arms on the ticket window, taking in the scenery of a packed restaurant. Despite his calm-demeanored request, quite the feat with a line of hungry customers out the door, the kitchen staff doesn’t respond to the order. He shifts his grease-stained hat up and down a couple times, matting his clean-cut black hair. Dragging his hand down his face, distorting his features, he tries again: “Guys, we’re backed up out the door; I need table 12 now”.

Underneath a bed, next to old camera boxes, stacks of bills and worn cards from past birthdays stripped of their cash rewards, he drags out a black leather bifold. Imprinted into the leather reads “Watkins College of Art, Design and Film”. He opens it up to reveal a perfectly pressed slip of paper reading “Raymond D. Palumbo III - Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography”. A smile crawls across the side of his face, hesitant pride. Ray’s graduation, May of 2013, led a class of about two hundred students, all majors in the arts, into a world unyielding to their creative paths. The rigidly structured business jobs many of their peers took seems like a foreign concept to Ray and his fellow graduates. His fingers crawl up to his neck; just imagining himself in a suit and tie make him feel confined. His gaze drifts up, reveling in the possibility of immediate job security. “Nah. I could never do it,” he immediately shoots it down. Ray tosses the leather book atop a mound of wrinkled clothes, blur-

ring the line between clean and dirty, on his unmade bed. It topples off the pile of clothes and onto the floor as he grabs a faded grey, grease stained Local Taco work shirt on his way out the door.

Ray, skinny at 6 feet 3 inches, looks anything but frail. His intimidating stance instantly vanishes the second he opens his mouth. He always speaks while looking you in the eye and his half smile and casual hand-on-hip posture give off the feeling that he's truly interested in anything you have to say. From his warm eye contact to his firm handshake, Ray's personable demeanor makes it seem like he's taken Business 101: How to Network. It's not until mid-conversation with him that most people realize this is actually his genuine personality, not some lame attempt at networking. His straight black hair is cut in the hip-yet-professional style that most twentysometings sport today, but a Local Taco trucker hat hides the neat appearance. A freshly pressed button down shirt hangs loosely over a



worn, dirty work shirt. Black-framed glasses sit on his nose and, for a second, he looks like a stylish, well-off individual, not an art school graduate who slings tacos to pay his student loans.

Ray is not the only one who still holds his barely-above-minimum-wage job despite having a gleaming college degree. Jobs among his friends range from maintenance worker, to baristas, to moving back in with parents. To the students themselves, the real frustration comes with their dedication to their art, which isn't enough to pay the bills. When they're not dishing out tacos or fixing broken sinks, these students are entering their films in major festivals, freelancing their graphic design talents and, for Ray, starting a wedding photography business. To them, they are working in their fields and they are living the dream until they are pulled back into reality by the next customer demanding extra foam on her skinny vanilla latté.

As we sit on the dilapidated Goodwill couch in Ray's quaint apartment the grads are perfectly content analyzing the hidden meanings of the next award-winning indie film. In the background, Ray and his girlfriend/business partner Alyssa edit their most recent wedding shoot. They argue over the amount of exposure an image needs and plan out how they will divide the editing in order to get it back to the anxious bride and groom in ample time. Presently, the group is not stressing out about finding jobs; keeping up with their side freelancing takes away a bit of the monotony of working service industry jobs. But with Ray a sense of urgency comes up when I ask him about his college debt. His loans will kick in soon and he will now have another item on the list of bills.

“I feel like I’m holding the business back...my priority has to be work.”

While the graduates are taking the lull in ideal employment surprisingly well, the ultimate loom of student loans is enough to rouse some emotion in the most stoic. And with art school graduates averaging \$21, 576 in debt as of 2013, it's no wonder these students cling on to their service jobs with every ounce of urgency they have. Not only is the debt itself frightening, but art school graduates are known to make less money upon graduation than some of their counterparts who choose other popular majors such as business or accounting. In Tennessee, the average income of a photographer is \$30,290. With wages like these, it's hard to argue Ray's decision to move up to manager and make \$15 an hour at his food service job rather than risk pursuing his dream career full-time. At least he has a secure income at the Local Taco so he can pay the upcoming student loans. With this realization though, Ray assumes the typical, morose art school student attitude of being misunderstood and underappreciated.

Walk through the halls at Watkins College and one will be greeted with decapitated doll heads stapled to white canvas, crumpled fast-food bags stuffed inside the organs of a dead mattress, and even animal bones articulated by students themselves: the environment of the starving, misunderstood artist. Used to criticism, the students have established a strong, individualistic attitude and multiple snarky comebacks to defend their work. They poise ready to analyze and explain any photograph, painting or model to a mere passerby about to write it off as air-quoted 'art'. It's difficult to not compare these traits with those of government, science and business majors. The only difference is that one group has jobs, while the other is simply floundering in a common, purgatory-like stage grasping at beginnings of careers. So they have the skills, but how can these students get past the art school stigmas that potential employers are so ready to place on them? While most employers praise creativity mostly as a hobby or supplemental job trait, and definitely not something to spend four years and thousands of dollars studying, the graduates struggle to fit in to the job market and resort back to the security of their service jobs.

The neighborhood of Sylvan Park is just shaking off sleepy remnants of Saturday night as the street fills with young parents pushing baby strollers, and the most fit of joggers gliding their way down intermittent sidewalks. On the patio of the dim restaurant chair legs skim the air as they are slowly taken off tables and placed on the clean floor. In one of the tables sits Ray with a giant chalkboard reading 'Daily Specials' carefully balanced on his lap. His

back arches over as he grips the chalk and presses it against the black surface. His shoulders jolt towards his ears as the chalk sinks too deep into the board, creating the unpleasant sound. ‘Lobster Tacos’ crawls its way across the top of the chalkboard and a dancing lobster is scrawled below the words. Ray stands up, hangs the chalkboard up and throws his arms over his head with a yoga-esque inhale. He continues into the restaurant, flicking on the lights, picking up bits of food littering the floor—results of a hasty closing staff—and finally unlocking the front door readying himself for the Sunday crowd: a steady stream of mimosa-craving customers.

“I told you never to shoot in one-four, Raymond.” Ray and Alyssa crowd around a hand-me-down desk. On the desk sits a clean, giant monitor, a keyboard and an Apple mouse. “Yeah, so.. well... I was mistaken on that and I thought you meant never to shoot at one-four because nothing’s in focus,” Ray carefully lays out his comeback. “You were shooting at three-two ya fool!” Alyssa says as the two playfully swipe at each other and pan their gazes back to the computer screen. They grab mismatched chairs from the neighboring kitchen and living room and poise themselves at the desk for a day of editing. “Why do you get the driver’s seat?” Ray prods at Alyssa as she folds up her legs on the cushioned, roller chair. She’s clearly not moving. They trade sly smiles and get to work. Elbows on the desk, the two lean in, faces almost touching the monitor and each other’s. Ray’s arms, trailed with burn marks (battle wounds from over five years in the food service industry) snake through Alyssa’s as he grabs for the keyboard. A quick pound of a specific combination of keys and like a skilled pianist he has enhanced the image of the bride’s dress in just the right way.

A blown-up abstract photo that Ray took and printed himself during college watches over their workstation; a jarring red line breaks up the ocean-blue background. His cluttered closet-sized room, which doubles as their office (another source of frustration in their newly blossoming business), is lined with photos progressing from the abstract blue image to beautiful portraits of people, some he knows and some were snapped in haste as the subject chased after him. A documentary series of images showcase the portraits of a group of clearly irritated fast-food employees. The tattoos and scars on their faces protrude from the images. He’s proud of them in a modest way. Juxtaposing the gnarly subjects he’s chosen for his portraits sits a flawless bride and her perfectly groomed husband on their computer screen. “We should really just shoot in one-four for receptions,” Alyssa’s calm critiques draw him back in. “But I really like some of your shots,” she reassures. Ray nods, a little excessively, as to reassure himself, too.

We sit at a blue-checkered tablecloth lined with seven bottles of crusty-topped hot sauces, colors ranging from burnt brown to a slightly vomit-esque green. We order our food, plates of meat, potatoes and green beans, prepared by a short, stout southern woman who treats each of her customers as if they were her grandchildren. She places the food in front of us and with a gentle touch on our shoulders she glides back to the kitchen.

A few small-talk questions about how his day is going, and Ray reveals his frustration with his situation almost immediately. “Oh, it sucks,” he says before I even finish asking him

how work is going. “It makes me kind of feel bad because I feel like I’m holding the business back a little bit my priority has to be being at work, you know?” Making tacos forty hours a week leaves Ray with little time for attending/editing weddings (about a week process). It also requires him to take off multiple weekends from the Local Taco, and forfeit 10-hour shifts, to attend these weddings. The lack of extra time leaves the graduates with little space to freelance, start their businesses or to figure out how to conform their skills to meet then needs of the open jobs in the market. The graduates constantly “wonder what viable place they can occupy in a tightening economy, which now is luring young people into more stable careers in government, the sciences, health care or consulting” (Shapira). For Ray, though, the lack of stability doesn’t cross his mind.

He straightens his massive frame in the chair and places his utensils neatly on his folded napkin. If he traded in the flannel shirt, jeans and Local Taco hat for a nice suit, no one would guess he was an art student, just a guy extremely uncomfortable in a suit. “You have to constantly have that drive to do something ‘cause when you graduate, you’ll definitely lose it and if you don’t work toward it ...you’re gonna be stuck working at Whole Foods for the rest of your life.” The prophetic phrase sounds completely out of place coming from the grungy graduate, but is filled with a seasoned experience, a ‘been there done that’ kind of attitude.

It’s clear that Ray and his fellow graduates are all stuck in the same art school graduate rut, but some of them are more lackadaisical in their dealing with the drive. “They come from a spot that has all these assignments every week ... to now you really don’t have to do anything,” Ray explains wistfully. He longingly gazes at the jars of jams and jellies that line the restaurant’s dilapidated wooden shelves. Swatting a fly away from his food, he reigns back in his driven attitude, shaking off the desire to simply just do photography.

The woman comes back over to clear our empty plates out of our way and asks if ‘you babies’ need anything else. “No, ma’am. Just the check whenever you get a chance,” Ray responds with a learned politeness. As a Pennsylvania-native, the ‘ma’am’ concept is a relatively new one. We make our way up to the register as he hands the woman his card: “Let me get hers, too. She’s still in college.” In the parking lot, Ray bends to an almost 90 degree angle to hug me and heads toward his moped. “I can fill it up for \$4!” he brags as he trades his Local Taco hat for a black helmet and glides onto the street with a wave.

Ray easily hides the frustration that working at the Local Taco steadily brings him. He also hides his passionate desire to photograph for a living and the pride he has in his photos. He reassures me that in a year he will “hopefully” be able to do wedding photography full-time. “So that’s gonna be basically two years after I graduated that I can get a job I really love. But I think that’s how it all works. Normally.” Whether normal or not, Ray and his fellow art school graduates struggle to pursue their passions in life after college. Though frustrating, it is the joy of editing photos, grabbing the perfect images and capturing a wonderful moment in time that take Ray away, even if momentarily, from the drudgery of shouting out taco orders. ◆