

**Billy Yanelli** lives at home with his parents. He and I meet there. Billy somehow manages to look both just like his grade-school self and strikingly older. He is heavy set, with clear skin and bright eyes, and he has a buzz cut that is gelled to stand straight up. He is wearing long baggy shorts, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes. The Yanellis have remained in the same house, in the same white working-class neighborhood I visited when Billy was in elementary school. The house has a freshly remodeled kitchen, with new maple cabinets, a tiled floor, and new appliances. Mr. Yanelli did all the work himself. Financially, the Yanellis are doing reasonably well. Mr. Yanelli feels good about the way things have gone for them since we first met: “getting better, little by little . . . I can’t complain.” Ms. Yanelli is still cleaning houses, but she is working by herself now. She likes not having to report to her former boss. When Billy was in elementary school, his father’s company unionized. Mr. Yanelli’s wages “probably double[d]” and, more importantly, his benefits increased. For the first time, he has health insurance. Recently, Billy became an apprentice in the same union.

Much as when he was a fourth-grader, Billy had behavioral problems in middle school and high school. “I wasn’t doin’ too good, I was bad,” Billy says. He got in trouble for “being the class clown,” and “for fighting.” He recalls “getting suspended for this and that [in middle school]. Talkin’ back to the teachers, stuff like that, just a problem child.” High school brought more of the same. “There wasn’t nothin’ much about school,” Billy says, trying to explain his behavior. “I just didn’t wanna be there. And like, high school, I was in the lunch room all day. You know, I never went to class.” His parents said that his local high school, Lower Richmond, had a “bad” reputation. The school district had a few high schools that attracted youth from middle-class families, but this was not one. From day one, Billy had not been optimistic: “And I knew I wasn’t gonna graduate high school as soon as I got to high school. . . . Then I got in a little incident there. (pause) Me and my buddy were

running around the hallway one time, slamming doors. And then, I slammed the door on one of the teachers and [the teacher] got hit. Chased me, the next day they tried to lock me up and . . . I forget what happened.”

His mother is vehement in her repudiation of the school’s version of that event. She strongly believes Billy was wrongly accused of hitting a teacher and that the resulting suspension was unfair. He dropped out his sophomore year. Later, he enrolled in a test preparation course for the GED, took the exam, and passed. “I basically paid for my diploma,” he says, and then elaborates. “I paid five hundred dollars to go to this little school. They gave me the GED test so I knew what the GED test was. . . . It got me in the painters’ union. That’s all I cared about.”

As a teenager, Billy never considered applying to college, nor did he know anyone who had gone or was planning to go to college. Now, although he is barely twenty, he thinks it is “too late.” His knowledge of college is vague, but he maintains that “Everybody that comes out of college right now is gonna be loaded [make a lot of money].” Still, he is not tempted: “I already got my heart set on a career. I’m trying to hang with this, I can’t hang with college.”

Despite Billy’s hopes for a career, his work experiences thus far mirror his school life: behavioral problems undermine his success. He is on probation in his apprentice program. He walked off a job, and then on a later occasion, he failed a mandatory urine test for drug use. (He had smoked marijuana with friends the weekend before the test.) These actions make his job precarious. “It’s like, three strikes, you’re out,” Billy explains to me. Ms. Yanelli is worried sick that Billy will be thrown out of the apprentice program. Mr. Yanelli is unconcerned; he’s confident he can intervene with union officials if problems arise: “I think it will work out fine.”

Billy feels that overall, he is doing well. He has his GED, a job, and a car (he owns an eight-year-old Infinity Q45, which cost him \$15,000). When he compares himself to his neighbors and peers, he is more than satisfied: “I feel like I’m a lot more

successful than a lot of people in this neighborhood. I'm one of the top five. I can say that. I'm in the top five out of maybe a hundred people my age, never been able to say that. . . . I mean, I got a job. A nice car, always had a nice car. Don't do drugs, don't get locked up. I didn't graduate high school—I mean, I'm not perfect. But compared to a lot of people in this neighborhood, I think I'm good. I'm doing better than a lot of people.”

He takes great pleasure in his car—especially its sound system—and enjoys “partying” with his friends. Sometimes they drive out to a beach town and share a hotel room for the weekend. He has not had a serious girlfriend. When I ask him about his plans for the future, he is optimistic. “Hopefully, have a house, a nice car,” he responds, and then, summing up his vision of the future, adds, “Just working and going, still having fun.”