

**1979**

I like taking the work experience kids when they come to our office.

It's good to work with someone different and, as I have two boys of my own, working with young people I look for clues on how to close the generation gap in my own family.

However, some of the kids we get can be difficult. Some are doing the work experience only because they have to. Others come to us when they have been unable to find a placement in other jobs they were really interested in.

Such a kid was Tony. On the first day he told me that he's wanted to do TV but that all the "crawlers" in the class had got those placements. He was sullen and I could see why the school's work experience co-ordinator would not be inclined to do Tony any favours.

I'd organised him to work with me on a job that involved some inspections in the suburbs. But he wasn't interested. He stared blankly out the passenger side window as I drove out to the job and in his every action he put out the message that he was bored.

Driving back to the office on the first day the Smashing Pumpkins song "1979" came on the vehicle's radio. Now I'm not really into the Smashing Pumpkins but I do like some of their "less heavy" numbers – like "1979."

I tapped my fingers to the rhythm on the steering wheel. Tony looked across.

So I said something like, "This is a good song. Every generation has this kind of song. This is kids in 1979 doing what every generation of kids has done."

Tony said. "No, you've got it wrong. These aren't kids **in** 1979. These are kids that were born in 1979. Haven't you seen the video of it?"

I hadn't.

But I had him talking. I discovered he watched every "Rage" and video hits show that he could. He only liked the "heavier" Smashing Pumpkins numbers – not "1979." He thought a degree in Media Studies would be "a waste of time." He liked action movies. He didn't like school – or sport. He liked vodka. His family was verging on dysfunctional.

He became better company. In the course of the next couple of days we covered the narrow band where our tastes in music overlapped. He may have carried out some tasks with a slightly better grace but his interest in the jobs we were doing did not change. He was bored.

On the last day he disappeared from his desk in the early afternoon. There was no coming round to say "thanks." I told a few lies, forged a signature and sent his paper work back to his work experience co-ordinator at the high school.

A few months later I was walking through a bus interchange. I saw Tony with a group of his friends: oversized clothes, caps on back-to-front, swearing, spitting. Looking ahead I could see that he'd recognised me and was going to avoid any the chance of eye contact with me.

Among his friends he would not be wanting to acknowledge acquaintance with a middle-aged, brief case carrying public servant. So I walked past, looking straight ahead.

But I was a couple busbays down the interchange when I heard this gruff voice call out the one word "pumpkins."

I didn't turn around. I raised my left arm in acknowledgment and kept walking.

But I felt really good about it.