Mike Rowe has had many jobs: actor, podcast host, even opera singer. But he is best known as a serial apprentice, participating in over 300 grubby gigs on the TV show “Dirty Jobs” and its successor “Somebody’s Gotta Do It.” Affably working alongside people who do the unglamorous tasks that keep our economy humming, such as castrating lambs or laundering tons of dirty diapers, Rowe’s wit and wisdom have made him a favorite with viewers. But over time, he realized that something decidedly un-funny was happening in our country. A narrative that college is the only path to success began to tyrannize the young, honorable trades and manual jobs were not supported, and America began to suffer from a critical skills gap. Millions of youths began to fall between the cracks, at the same time that employers found it impossible to staff millions of well-paying blue-collar jobs.

So Rowe rolled up his sleeves and created mikeroweWORKS. It has provided over $3 million in scholarships for training in the trades. Rowe is also using his public platform to spread the message that manual work is valuable and dignified. Allison Futterman interviewed Rowe for Philanthropy to learn more about his philanthropic work on behalf of honest labor.

Philanthropy: What does your foundation do?
Rowe: mikeroweWORKS is designed to challenge the stigmas and stereotypes that keep millions of people from exploring a career in the trades. Its primary goal is to close the skills gap by calling attention to millions of unloved opportunities, and challenge the idea that a four-year degree is the best path for the most people. We also offer scholarships that pay for specific types of vocational training. At its base, mikeroweWORKS is a P.R. campaign for hard work and skilled labor.

Philanthropy: How did it come about?
Rowe: When the economy crashed in 2008, national unemployment was headline news. With every new jobs report, a growing sense of dread seemed to be overtaking the country, as the number of unemployed Americans kept growing. On “Dirty Jobs,” though, it was a very different story. The employers I met on that show were all struggling to find skilled workers. Even at the height of the recession, I saw “Help Wanted” signs in all 50 states, and talked with hundreds of small-business owners who said the biggest obstacles they faced were the stigmas and stereotypes that dissuaded people from exploring a career in the trades. It seemed obvious that closing the skills gap would never happen if we didn’t confront those misperceptions head on and challenge them at every turn.

Philanthropy: How do you change the way people feel about work?
Rowe: Well, it’s hard. Attitudes and perceptions don’t change overnight, and measuring success is difficult. But I had a big advantage going in. “Dirty Jobs” was already a very popular TV show, and part of my job as the host was to promote the program whenever possible. So the first thing I did was change the way I talked about the show in the press. Rather than focus exclusively on exploding toilets and misadventures in animal husbandry (which I still cherish, by the way), I started talking about the widening skills gap, the crumbling infrastructure, and the looming student-loan crisis. These issues were in the headlines, and “Dirty Jobs” touched on many of them. Pretty soon, I was speaking all over the country about the skills gap, and testifying before Congress about the need to reinvigorate skilled labor. Ultimately, I was able to promote my foundation by promoting my TV show, and vice versa.

Philanthropy: You started by building a database, right? How did that go?
Rowe: The Trade Resource Center was a challenge, but it was important for a couple reasons. Practically, I thought people could benefit from finding a specific training program in their state or county. So we organized thousands of existing programs and put them all under one virtual roof. We started with apprenticeship programs and on-the-job training opportunities that served the specific trades most in demand. Then we expanded to include trade schools and community colleges, along with specific data on what jobs were most in demand in various parts of the country. But the larger reason for building a national database was to prove that the opportunities in question really did exist.
**Philanthropy: Why?**

**Rowe:** Of all the things dividing us today, the very existence of opportunity is somewhere near the top. Half the country is convinced that opportunity is dead. That the system is rigged. That there is simply no hope of finding a meaningful career that pays a fair wage. It’s almost impossible to reinvigorate skilled labor if people believe that nonsense. Just as it’s impossible to champion apprenticeship programs if everyone believes that success can only occur if you purchase a four-year college degree. “Dirty Jobs” challenged those misperceptions in every episode, but I wanted to challenge them in a more tangible way, with proof that opportunity was alive and well.

In the same way “Dirty Jobs” was programmed with viewer suggestions, the Trade Resource Center was built with viewer submissions. By 2008, the “Dirty Jobs” online community was not only enormous, it was comprised of fans who were completely engaged with all aspects of the show. So, when I invited them to send me the details of successful apprenticeship programs in their area, thousands responded. We built the Trade Resource Center online—thanks to the fans.

A lot of people used it, and a lot of people found work as a result. We also built a “Watercooler” where skilled tradesmen volunteered to answer questions and offer advice, which was even more important. So the Trade Resource Center met a practical need. But the biggest benefit of building it was all the press that surrounded its construction. Building the Trade Resource Center got lots of people talking, and put our efforts on the map.

**Philanthropy: So what became of it? It’s no longer on your site.**

**Rowe:** The site became too cumbersome to maintain, and too far removed from social media to maintain a robust conversation. By 2010, people’s habits and attitudes online were shifting dramatically. Had I understood that then, I would have never built a “destination”; I would have simply taken the message to where the people already were. Once it became clear that Facebook would dominate the social conversation, I started posting over there, and that changed everything.

The real lesson for me in all this has been the importance of being as congruent as possible with my audience, wherever they might be. On Facebook, that means maintaining a personal page that makes no distinction between business, personal, and foundational elements. I’m not talking about traditional “cause-related” marketing—I’m talking about integrating my foundational objectives into everything I do. Because mikeroweWORKS is rooted in my own personal beliefs about the nature of work and education, and because most of what I do in television and media involves creating content that reflects those beliefs, I can benefit the foundation every time I go to work. I can also generate the kind of headlines I want to create, and then steer the resulting conversation around those headlines in a useful direction. It’s a very opportunistic approach to creating awareness.

For instance, last month, I wrote a good-natured rant about Hasbro’s decision to replace the work-related icons on the Monopoly board. (The wheelbarrow was swapped out for a rubber ducky. Madness!) I posted the rant on Facebook. Over 5 million people shared it. FOX and CNN and Good Morning America all called to have me come on and have a conversation about America’s dysfunctional relationship with skilled labor—inspired by the removal of a token from the Monopoly board. In the context of that conversation, I was able to talk about our Work Ethic Scholarship Program, and encourage people to apply.

**Philanthropy: How much have you given away through your scholarship program, and why the emphasis on work ethic?**

**Rowe:** About $4 million in total. Half from funds we raised directly, and half through various partnerships with trade schools. We focus on work ethic because that’s what most employers crave in a new employee. That, and a willingness to learn a skill that’s in demand. At base, we want our scholarships to reward the kind of behavior we wish to encourage. Today, there are no shortage of scholarships based on academic ability, athletic ability, musical talent, and all sorts of other things. But I’ve never seen one based on work ethic. We look for applicants willing to show up early, stay late, and approach the job as the opportunity it is. You have to sign a S.W.E.A.T. Pledge. We also insist on references. I really want applicants to make a persuasive case for themselves.

**Philanthropy: A sweat pledge?**

**Rowe:** It’s a simple, 12-point pledge that espouses personal responsibility. It stands for Skills and Work Ethic Aren’t Taboo, and I suspect it sounds a little silly to many. But it’s just one more way to bring the conversation back to the kind of qualities I believe most employers desperately want in their employees.

We get some resistance, but that’s actually part of the program’s success. It gives me a chance to say publicly—and respectfully—that those who object to the tenets I think are important might be better served by seeking out a different pile of free money. It gets people’s attention. Fact is, it’s hard to reward work ethic, because frankly, it’s hard to find it. Currently, I’m trying to give away about $700,000 to people who want to learn a skilled trade. You’d think people would line up for a chance to get the training they need to get a job. But they don’t. And that’s part of the conversation.

We have to change the current perceptions of what it means to have a “good job.” With respect to job satisfaction, a lot of well-intended parents and guidance counselors have done a great disservice to hundreds of thousands of millennials by pushing them toward a four-year degree. It’s a cookie-cutter approach to education, and it’s causing massive problems, including a $1.3 trillion debt, a widening skills gap, and soaring tuition costs. But there’s also a widespread belief today that job satisfaction is only possible for those who find the proper job. That’s just not true. On “Dirty Jobs,” we featured hundreds of people who were very satisfied with their work, in spite of the fact that they didn’t set out to do that particular job. Somewhere along the line, the notion of opportunity was replaced by the expectation of landing a “dream job.” That’s led to a lot of disappointed people, and a lot of unrealistic expectations.
interviews

Philanthropy: Who is your typical scholarship recipient?
Rowe: There’s no age restriction on the Work Ethic Scholarship, but the majority of applicants are in their early twenties. We get a lot of people who are halfway through college, and looking to change course. Some people need $2,500 for a certification. Others need $15,000 of tuition. It depends on what they want to do and where they want to get training. We work with the largest scholarship organization in the country, Scholarship America, which assists many foundations. It’s great at vetting the first round of applicants. Then my office goes through them one by one.

Philanthropy: How much have you given personally toward the foundation compared to raising outside funds?
Rowe: About half a million dollars. But the money I put in initially was not nearly as important as the smaller amounts I raised auctioning stuff from my garage. I have a garage full of mementos collected from “Dirty Jobs” that I autograph and sell to the highest bidder. We call them “C.R.A.P. Auctions,” which stands for “Collectables, Rare And Precious.” Basically, my version of a “Dirty Jobs” telethon. We’ve raised a lot of money, but more importantly, we’ve generated a ton of press. (Jay Leno actually featured some fossilized polar bear poop that went for thousands of dollars.)

We’re also supported today by other companies and organizations that share our goals but don’t necessarily want to go through the headache of administering a scholarship fund. “This Old House,” for instance, has a vested interest in seeing more people enter the construction field, but rather than setting up their own program, they said, “Why don’t we raise money for scholarships and give it to mikeroweWORKS?” Three months later, they handed me a check for $500,000. Very cool.

Philanthropy: What are your thoughts on American manufacturing moving toward automation, and what that will do to the availability of jobs?
Rowe: So much has already been written about the advent of robotics and the impact of technology it now seems more historic than futuristic. All I know for sure is that 5.6 million openings currently exist that aren’t in danger of being filled by robots. That’s a fact that’s impacting our economy right now. And those vacancies represent more than opportunity, they represent a threat to national security. We need a skilled and balanced workforce, and right now, we don’t have one. As for technology, it’s always impacted the economy, and it will continue to do so. But currently, the skilled trades are in no danger of being usurped by technology. Carpenters, plumbers, welders, mechanics…these jobs are available as we speak. And I suspect they always will be.

Philanthropy: How did your relationship with your grandfather influence your views on work?
Rowe: In every way imaginable. My grandfather could build a house without a blueprint. He only went to school through the seventh grade, but he became a master tradesman by the time he was 30. My hope was to follow in his footsteps, but alas, the “handy” gene is recessive, and I didn’t get it. The natural ability he was blessed with. Pop was the one who told me—when it became clear I would never be able to build a house on my own—that I could still be a tradesman, but only if I got myself a different sort of toolbox. And so I did. I went to a community college and took a theater class. I took singing lessons. I started doing voiceovers and commercial work and hosting all sorts of random shows on various cable channels. I got my new toolbox in order, and went to work in television. Years later, when Pop was 90, my mother called me to say how nice it would be if my grandfather could turn on the television and “see me doing something that looked like work.” Ultimately, “Dirty Jobs” came about as a tribute to him.

Philanthropy: You’re an Eagle Scout. I take it the Boy Scouts were a formative influence on you as well?
Rowe: They were. I was shy and withdrawn as a kid. My parents were worried, and forced me to join a gang of local hoodlums who met in the basement of the local church. It was transformational.

Philanthropy: Hoodlums?
Rowe: Well, no. But it felt like that my first night. The kids were rough. The games they played—Swing-the-Thing, British Bill Dog, Capture the Flag—were magnificently violent. There was a boxing ring, where disagreements were settled the old-fashioned way. Bloody noses were a weekly occurrence. But when the Scoutmaster—a former colonel in the Army—blew his whistle, the level of discipline was amazing. I honestly believe the rigor and the physicality would rival what passes for basic training today.

The Boy Scouts got me out of my comfort zone, that’s for sure. Sleeping under the stars, even when it was raining. Forcing me to give speeches even though I had a stammer. Challenging me constantly to master simple skills that I didn’t even know existed. But the real benefit, looking back, was not the importance of trying new things—it was the realization that being uncomfortable was an important part of any worthwhile accomplishment.

That’s been so valuable to me throughout my life. I often credit the Scouts for impacting so much of my career. Since “Dirty Jobs” started, I’ve sent out around 55,000 congratulatory letters to newly-minted Eagles. I also patterned my foundation’s S.W.E.A.T. pledge after the Scout Law. Truth is, I really think the country needs the Boy Scouts, the Future Farmers of America, and Skills USA. I’m glad to sing their praises whenever I can.

Philanthropy: What’s next for you?
Rowe: More of the same. If President Trump is serious about investing a trillion dollars in infrastructure repair, we’re going to see very quickly just how acute the labor shortage really is—especially in the construction trades. Bolstering the workforce is going to become a matter of national importance, and I suspect the government will probably have to team up with a number of big companies reliant upon a skilled workforce and embark upon a national campaign to help make a case for good jobs that actually exist. If mikeroweWORKS can be of use in that endeavor, I’d be happy to help. If not, we’ll stay the course, and keep trying to close the skills gap, one job at a time.