

Thoreau, Economy Inspire Students to Learn Lessons of Less

Contributed by Tara Malone
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"Sweep away the clutter of things that complicate our lives." - Henry David Thoreau

(Chicago Tribune)

Nathen Cantu jotted down dozens of telephone numbers he had programmed into his cell phone but never bothered to learn.

The Mundelein High School senior then shut down the phone that for years has been a social lifeline to his friends and a reassurance to his family. He surrendered it to his teacher last week, beginning a month without a text message or single call.

Five days later, Cantu was feeling twinges of withdrawal.

"It kind of feels naked, like you don't have something there that should be there," Cantu said.

More than a dozen students at the north suburban high school this year committed to going without something different each month, borrowing a page from author Henry David Thoreau, who famously withdrew to Walden Pond for two years "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what (nature) had to teach."

The Mundelein teens' project began in November, when they gave up sugar and eating at chain restaurants. A television blackout followed in December, and January's challenge was to forgo using sheets of new paper. They pledged in February to avoid buying anything that might end up in a landfill.

The next challenges are the boldest yet: a March without cell phones and an April without the Internet.

Cantu said he and his classmates have discovered parts of themselves with every sacrifice. As his voluntary cell phone ban continues, Cantu said he's more focused and inclined to spend time with friends rather than just send a text message.

"There's a pride to it too. There's a pride to saying 'no' to things," Cantu said.

The experiment in self-restraint comes as many families make real-life concessions to an economy gone bad, forgoing gym memberships, vacations and even private school tuition.

Although many students said they joined the group for reasons other than the economy, they acknowledge the lessons

they're learning may help them make the transition to an era of tighter teen budgets. In a recent survey, two-thirds of young people said they were concerned about their financial situation, according to a national report by TRU, a Chicago-based market research firm. Only 11 percent of those surveyed said they were not at all concerned.

"The longer and more drawn out the economic troubles are, the more likely they are going to be open to changing the way they live," said TRU trends director Rob Callender.

Going without can be good for teens, said Madeline Levine, author of "The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids."

Packing lunches, skipping the trendiest jeans or canceling cell phone service gives children a new role as a family contributor and a vital lesson in self-discipline, she said. In the process, young people reared in times of economic abundance may rethink their expectations.

"For many kids, this is an opportunity. I think that most of them are rising to the challenge," she said.

Just after 6 p.m. on a recent school day, 13 students filed into a Mundelein High School classroom. Teacher Steve Jordan reminded them of the offer he'd made a week before.

"I'd like to take and keep your cell phone for a month, to remove the temptation," Jordan told his students.

"No, thank you," quipped senior Karlie Alms, 17.

"Damn," sighed another student.

"These months are the hardest, and that's OK. We want this to be hard," Jordan said. "You can do it."

Jordan conceived of the Voluntary Simplicity experiment last fall as an after-school class in which students earn a pass or fail credit. They gather every week to compare notes and write about the experience.

Most students said they joined the simple-living experiment because it was a creative endeavor that would also help the environment. For many, the economic implications came later.

For two weeks last month, students collected every spent paper towel and granola bar wrapper to show how much trash they generated even as they were cutting back in February. The group agreed to buy only food, fuel, deodorant and toothpaste.

As students compared garbage, senior Emily Bauer confessed about a bracelet she'd been ogling for weeks.

She'd spotted the thick, banded bracelet on her favorite music stars and went online to get a closer look at the \$10 wristlets, stamped with phrases such as "Stay Gold" or "Believe." Bauer, 18, honored the pledge to avoid buying anything but the bare essentials. The nagging temptation remained.

"I want it really badly. I'm not going to lie," she said, laughing.

Ryan Menary, 16, a junior, said he's been tempted to buy new CDs and download a song or two. But holding back hasn't been too hard.

Senior Patrick Bradley said the exercise in restraint has felt surprisingly good. He spent less money by cutting back on the things he buys.

"You don't miss it that much when you don't have it," Bradley said.

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