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Canepa Family: Thomas Canepa (Youth)

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THOMAS CANEPA

As the alarm sounds, a teenager wakes up from his slumber and begins his daily routine. It's Friday, so after school ends, he'll be able to hang out with his friends. Unfortunately, this teen won't be able to stay out late. The next day is Saturday, and Thomas Canepa has to work.

When he was younger, Thomas relished the freedom of playing with his friends without having family obligations. But now, at age sixteen, Thomas has a part time job at the family car wash. He pumps gas and prints out receipts for customers. He is paid for his work and is treated just as any other employee.

Before he joined the ranks of the workers, Thomas didn't have the liberty of making many decisions of his own. Now that he has a job in the family business, where he is responsible for specific duties, he has been given decision-making opportunities. The job has been a step in his process of growing up, one that gives him the feeling of maturity, of feeling like an adult. Although the car wash, founded by his grandfather, is a family-owned enterprise which employs his father, uncles, aunts, and cousins, the expectation for Thomas is that he will work hard—just as hard, if not harder, than any other employee. Meeting this expectation makes him value the freedom that the money in his pocket has given him.

Three generations earlier Thomas' great-grandfather, along with other Italians, emigrated from Italy in search of a place where work was easy to come by and land was cheap. The migration of Italians to America began in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1922, the year of Thomas' great-grandfather arrived, more than 3 million Italians had become residents of the United States.

Some became entrepreneurs, others began farming. Despite the hardships they faced, they persevered. Today, Italians are the fifth largest ethnic group in the nation; two-thirds are white-collar workers in business,

medicine, law, education, and other fields. The immigrant generation shared a determination to prevail and a strong work ethic, qualities that made them successful.

Thomas' grandfather has told him how modern technology has reduced the level of human effort required to accomplish a task. But his grandfather's stories about hard work in such physically demanding jobs as driving a tracker have not been lost on the youth. Since working at the car wash, Thomas has gained a new perspective about the value of work—getting things done, serving customers, keeping the business thriving. He now knows what hard work means to the family.

Going to church and learning the lessons of his religion have also helped Thomas acquire moral values and a sense of right and wrong. His religious background, combined with the work ethic, has grounded Thomas on his way to becoming an adult. But he thinks that there are other steps just ahead before he truly comes of age.

He believes the next step in the process will come when he turns 18. This is when society will consider him an adult. That, complemented by more years of work experience, the growing independence that goes with the work and additional religious training, will send Thomas on his way to adulthood.

He shares with his parents the goals of success and prosperity. Thomas looks forward to going to college and obtaining a degree in business. That, to him, will be the final step in his coming-of-age story. As he works toward those goals, he expects to follow the "best piece of advice" he's ever received: "Always stay true to yourself, and work hard."

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Interviewer: Lucky Lorbier

Ethnic Group: Italian

Generation: Youth

