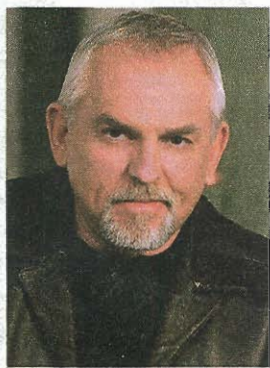


Story by Beverly Keel

'Cheers' For Blue-Collar America Actor John Ratzenberger promotes hands-on job skills



JOHN RATZENBERGER became famous for playing Cliff on the TV show *Cheers*, "where everybody knows your name." Now he's dedicated to making sure that everybody knows the importance of Americans who work with their hands.

While Ratzenberger, 62, remains active in Hollywood—he's the only actor to voice a role in every animated Pixar film, including *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *WALL-E* and *Up*—he's now singing the praises of blue-collar jobs.

It's important that people understand what built our civilization. Somebody had to build the ceiling before Michelangelo could go to work.

"I just finished writing an idea for a sitcom about someone who loses their white-collar job and they rediscover their dignity and self-respect in a manual job that they end up doing," says Ratzenberger, who lives in Thousand Oaks, Calif. "That is part of my DNA. I am a working guy, always have been a working guy. I bring the same ethic to the entertainment business that I did showing up at 6 in the morning at a building site."

Ratzenberger grew up in factory-dominated Bridgeport, Conn., where repairmen rarely were summoned to neighborhoods, he says, because "everyone tinkered." At age 7, he climbed underneath oyster boats to caulk the wooden seams, and two years later he landed his first job, sweeping out a barbershop. Before he became an Emmy-nominated actor, he worked as a journeyman carpenter.

"It's important that people understand that what built our civilization was the idea of, 'Get up in the morning, put your hand to something useful and be responsible for yourself and your family,'" he says. "Remember, someone had to build the ceiling before Michelangelo could go to work."

From 2004 until 2008, he hosted *John Ratzenberger's Made in America*, a Travel Channel series that honored workers and American-made products. He's testified before Congress about vocational education and participated in a Presidential Town Hall tour that encouraged voters to question the presidential candidates about their plans to strengthen the country's manufacturing base.

He's currently making a documentary called *The Industrial Tsunami* to sound a warning call about the nation's shortage of manufacturing workers.

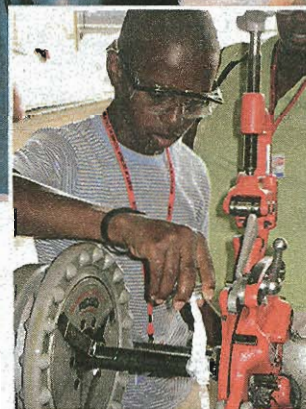
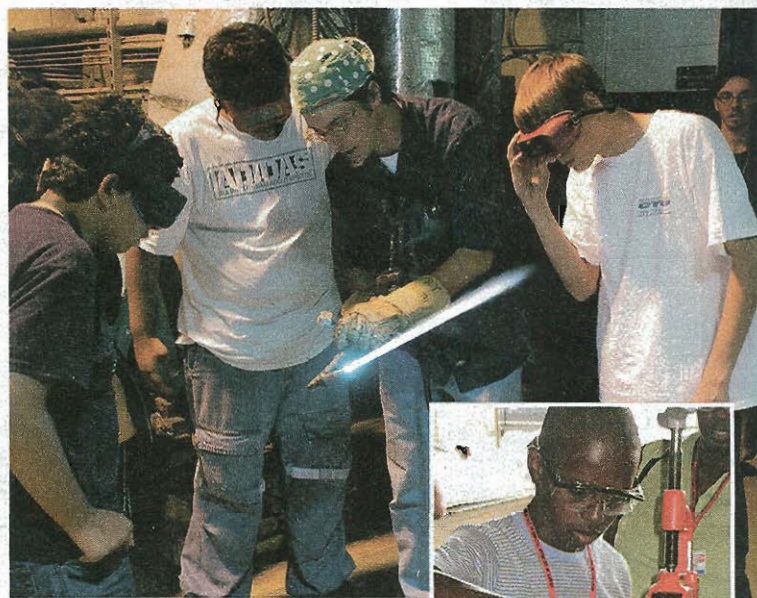
"With his name and his background, he is a voice that people listen to," says Marcie Arndt, dean of manufacturing technology at

Moraine Park Technical College in West Bend, Wis. "He's got a passion. He connects in a real-world way that people can relate to better than, 'I was on a TV show.'"

While touring the country for his Travel Channel show, Ratzenberger was told repeatedly about the critical shortage of skilled workers entering the engineering and manufacturing fields. So he co-founded the Nuts, Bolts and Thingamajigs Foundation to cultivate the next generation of carpenters, plumbers, builders and other manual artists by providing summer camps and training programs, as well as scholarships to technical and vocational schools. The foundation encourages children to get away from their video games and explore how things are made and fixed.

Vocational arts are "actively looked down on in school, and that is the mistake that the educational system—especially the guidance counselors—and Hollywood have made," he says. "In the last 30 years, you've seen the depiction of anyone who works with their hands, making an honest day's living, as deficient somehow or not as bright in comparison. Look at *It's a Wonderful Life*, the James Stewart film. All those characters depicted in there had dignity and respect, from the druggist to the cab driver to the cop.

"When I talk to the kids, I remind them that, sure, it's great to be a basketball star—but somebody has to make and install that basketball court and repair and maintain it." ★



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NUTSANDBOLTSFOUNDATION.ORG (2)

"When you build something with your hands, especially as a child, you are developing your common sense," says Ratzenberger, who founded the Nuts, Bolts and Thingamajigs Foundation to give kids hands-on experience in manual arts at summer camps and other training programs. "The smartest people I ever met in my life are people that I met in the trades."