



SHIFTING GEARS

In fall 2012, a man approached me in a rusted van. Its tattered roof interior hung down in shredded strips, like peeled wallpaper in a long-abandoned house.

by MARSHA MCGREGOR

I was walking through the parking lot of a Staples store, having bought \$155 worth of school and office supplies.

As the van slowed, a youngish man with broad shoulders and a thinning hairline leaned over to call through the open passenger window. "Do you think you could help me, ma'am?"

I thought he was going to ask me for directions.

"I'm just driving around asking for spare change from anyone who will give it to me. I've been out of work for six months and I've been looking and looking for a job and ..." he trailed off, staring out the windshield and clutching both hands to his head as if it was about to explode.

"I am so embarrassed! I can't believe I'm doing this but ..." He pointed to the gas gauge. "I'm actually *below* empty now."

I did not respond in the manner one is encouraged to when approached in this way. I did not refer him to a social service agency. I did not politely say, "I'm sorry, I don't have any change," and turn away. I could not walk by someone in that much shame and naked despair and pretend it was no concern of mine.

I opened my purse to dig out my wallet and the largest bill I found there. Ten dollars wouldn't take him far. Gas was averaging about \$3.60 a gallon that year, the most expensive on record at the time. I handed the bill to him wordlessly, in a way I hoped read not as pitying but instead said, *You do not have to be ashamed.*

We both spoke then, our words overlapping. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh, God bless you, ma'am," he repeated.

"God bless you, too," I said. "Things will get better."

I don't know why I told him things would get better. Who was I to know if the van would keep running and the job would come? Maybe I believed at some level that \$10 and an utterance of faith in things unseen might keep his head from splintering for one more day.

Driving home I invented a new life for him, his fortunes reversed, my paltry \$10 multiplying like loaves and fishes. I pictured him shifting gears, driving a van without a shredded roof. *No, why not a nice pickup brimming with fuel enough to take him wherever he needed to go?* I gave him a skill, a steady paycheck and the end-of-day ache from a full day's work. I imagined him swinging a hammer, something solid and true taking shape beneath his hands.

I still think about the man in the tattered van. Is it possible that right now, for a brief window in his life, the odds might actually weigh in his favor? A historic 4.1 percent unemployment rate finds

companies scrambling to fill jobs. The demand is especially high for skilled workers trained in construction and manufacturing. And corporations have

been gifted with a stunning windfall from a massive tax cut.

As economists lie awake at night, calculating the risks of raising our country's unpaid tab by an unprecedented \$1.5 trillion, what lies in the balance is this: Where will all that money go? How much of it will make its way from mahogany row to the cubicles and factory floors below?

Some companies are passing along a portion of that windfall to employees with one-time bonuses and wage hikes. Some are planning expansion and growth. This is their chance to multiply that gift by putting a hammer in somebody's hand and showing them how to build something new.

Not-for-profit organizations such as Edwins Leadership and Restaurant Institute might offer inspiration. Founded by Brandon Chrostowski, Edwins gives formerly incarcerated men and women — perhaps the least employable among us — a second chance by providing an intense, six-month program of tuition-free training in the culinary and hospitality arts, as well as basic business principles.

Edwins (short for "Education Wins") operates a fine French restaurant in Shaker Square staffed almost entirely by people who once lived in poverty or on its knife-edge. The program has a 95 percent employment placement for each class, and an astounding alumni recidivism rate of less than 1 percent. It's a powerful story, and the subject of the Academy Award-nominated documentary short film *Knife Skills*.

If Edwins can transform the lives of the recently incarcerated with education and training, companies that funnel a meaningful percentage of their newfound funds into job training could do the same for people who want to work but are running below empty.

Economics experts caution this historically low unemployment rate can't last, and probably shouldn't, for reasons I can't wrap my head around no matter how many articles I read. But no one in search of work should ever be reduced to asking strangers for pocket change to move themselves forward.

I think about my wishful vision for the man in the tattered van, his life rebuilt. Business leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to make that kind of wishful thinking come true — the hammer, the paycheck, and why not the nice pickup truck, taking him wherever he needs to go. **cle**