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**We're Under Thirty: Ignore us at your Peril**

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Good morning. My name is Gabe Kavanagh and I'm in year 11 at Sydney Girls High School. If all goes well at the end of next year when I do my Higher School Certificate, I should finish in the top five per cent of the state.

So what do I do for paid work? I'm a checkout chick. This is definitely not what I want to do for the rest of my life. I'm 16 years old and I should have an idea about what I want to do in ten years time. But the fact is I don't. But I don't want to be a history professor. I don't want to be a lawyer. I don't want to be a journalist. I don't want to be a dress designer. I don't want to be a mathematician. And I definitely don't want to be bored.

I asked 30 of my closest friends what they wanted to do when they left school. They all knew what they didn't want to do. They didn't want to be bored either. We know, from our parents and from older friends, that some jobs grind away your life in boredom. Most of us got a good look at that process when we went to do work experience during year ten.

My friend Irene says that when she went to do work experience in a law firm, she met a woman lawyer who had been doing the exact same work for ten years, week in, week out. There was absolutely no change. That's the definition of boredom: doing the same thing over and over, not being challenged; no expansion of the knowledge we already have. The idea that we might have repetitive jobs like that is quite frightening; it's also a bit depressing, that the thing we might be doing for the rest of our lives could bore us to tears.

It's not that I'm unprepared for boredom. Hey, I've sat through triple maths. But the thing is, it's over in two hours and I know I won't have to do it again until the following week. In the meantime, I've got chemistry; and drama, both of which I love. Somewhere in between are physics and English. During any school week, I fit in Thai boxing, debating, my job at the supermarket, a session with the local dramagroup; and some socialising. Life is mixed – and that's really what I'm looking for in work. I don't expect it all to be fun but if there isn't an element in it that's challenging and exciting, then I doubt I'd stay.

That's another thing that sets my friends and myself apart from my parents' generation. I'm not afraid of the thought of changing jobs. I'm not afraid of the thought of having a break between jobs. When my parents began their jobs in the early 80s, they thought they would stay in them forever. They were wrong and they were unprepared for the changes that came their way. I will never feel like that about a job. First, I can't imagine having

that kind of loyalty to an institution that isn't friend or family. I think I would be bored by the lack of change.

Also, I have to say that plenty about work excites me. I like the idea of being in an environment with people who've got the same interests as me and working on joint projects with them. I like the idea of working in a group where I might get the opportunity to lead in one way or another; or working in a group with a leader who is very inspiring; and who can teach me a lot. I also like the idea of being paid what I'm worth.

So how to combat boredom? Find a job where the goals are good; where the work mates are engaged with their work and where the pay is better than \$8 an hour, which is what I'm paid now. I find myself asking people if they enjoy their jobs; and if they think they are paid what they are worth. The interesting thing is that the more people are paid; and the more stressful their jobs are; the more they seem to enjoy it. Adults often talk about how stress is the element that's hard to manage in work. But at least stress is exciting. And well-paid stress sounds like a good deal.

But I often see one kind of stress that is unproductive. My parents are working parents. They share the responsibilities of looking after three children, cooking and cleaning, paying bills, having endless consultations with maths teachers. When my brother was born, 11 years ago, both of them had jobs where they had a lot of responsibility. Mum decided that to be her version of a good mother, she needed to work fewer hours.

Trying to be efficient in a paid job and run a home is tough and sometimes parents look like they are going to have a nervous breakdown. They get up early, like 5am. They go to bed late, at midnight. And drive us around to Thai boxing and hockey and cello and rowing and drama and dancing. They try to squeeze it all in and I can see it's difficult.

To my generation, the prospect of having a successful career and a good family life seems unlikely. We read all the time about the lack of adequate child care, the discrimination surrounding pregnancies and the difficulties in retaining your job if you choose to have a family. The huge commitment children require is also an issue. They take up a large proportion of their parents' time and I'm not sure I could ever be so unselfish. In fact, it's put me off having kids. And I might get one like my little sister and that would kill me.

I asked my 30 friends if they had to choose, would it be kids or careers. Only one girl said she would choose kids. Everyone else said they wanted fulfilling careers; and they all knew it was hard to have both. All of us have watched our parents go slowly mad.

We are all determined to make our places in work; and we want that to happen before we decide to have children. Some of us are concerned about the kind of world our children might inherit. A Christian friend said she didn't want to have children because of the high rate of divorce and the risk that a marriage might end in divorce. She said there was too

much pressure to try to do everything, work and family. No wonder marriages often don't work, she said.

Maybe the maternal urge will come later. But the women of my mother's generation all say that they were keen to have children from when they were quite young; and that they liked playing with babies. We don't have those feelings at all. My friends babysit on sufferance and because it's well-paid. I've never baby-sat. I'll stick with the supermarket.

I don't think the urge to have children is something you are born with. It's something that the world around you encourages; or at least it did. Maybe if there is an upswing in the facilities to look after children in workplaces and if there are better plans for maternity leave, then having children might become a more attractive option. But at the moment, my friends say they would prefer to have a career, to be financially independent; and to be successful.

So while girls in the past might only have been encouraged to do the kinds of jobs that could be fitted in around reproducing, my world is different. Yesterday, Susan Halliday, the former Sex Discrimination Commissioner, said she felt sexism was embedded in ordinary life. I can see from her point of view why she might say that - but I don't feel that discrimination myself.

The world around me encourages me to be the best I can be. It encourages me to think that I can be an astronaut or a miner; a politician or a plumber. The world around me doesn't value me because of my ability to reproduce. It values me because of the contribution I can make as a person.

At this stage of my life, I don't get judged because of my gender. I'm at an all-girls school where the word girls, is always followed by the words, can do anything.

So those are my opportunities. Can do anything. Doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to. I can go to university; expand my horizons; be financially independent; feel secure and satisfied. It feels like a good future. But I know there will be obstacles. Boys still tell blonde jokes, even if the blonde is beating them at physics. And someone out there, from a previous generation, will tell me I'm the wrong gender.

The legacy of sexism in previous generations is this: there are only a handful of women chief executive officers in this country. There have only been a couple of women premiers. There are hardly ever any women in Federal Cabinet. There aren't too many women on the Rich List and those that are there, often got their money from their fathers or their husbands. There's only a couple of women orthopaedic surgeons; and not too many female surgeons in other areas. There's one woman on the High Court. There are no female mechanics in the car servicing place up the road. I've never met a woman plumber. I know plenty of women nurses. Most of the checkout operators are girls. There are no male secretaries at either my mother's or my father's work. There are no male teachers at my old primary school. And mostly, it's mothers who pick the kids up after

school. This shows that there is plenty of inequality in Australia but I don't feel it yet. If I'm looking for obstacles, there are plenty of other things that come to mind.

I'm about to embark on higher education at a time when there isn't much money for higher education. Either I will have to pay or my parents will have to pay. And I think they would rather pay for a weekender on the beach (but that's babyboomers for you).

I've read about the lack of funding for universities but it felt pretty unreal, until I saw *Facing the Music*. It's a documentary about what is happening to the Department of Music at Sydney University and it shows how a small group of academics have no money to teach a proper range of courses; and can't afford to teach essential courses every year, it makes you realise the effect it has on students.

I plan to be a university student. But if ever there was an obstacle in my future, it would have to be what is happening to universities. Lecturers can't teach properly in overcrowded rooms; and without enough preparation time; and those factors will eventually be reflected in what the students know when they finish their degrees and enter the work force.

You need to have knowledge to be a success, as Kim Beazley has pointed out in his plans to make Australia a Knowledge Nation (mind you, I don't get the flow chart). And being successful is another issue that has arisen in most of my discussions about working life. We don't want just any old job. We want to rise to the top. We want to be in positions of power in our working environment. We all want to be leaders in our fields. As I said before, most CEOs are male and this isn't acceptable to us. Being at an all girls school we are all encouraged to be leaders and this is something we will take with us when we enter the work force. The fact is we aren't frightened to be in charge. We want to be in charge.