

GenX stereotypes

Supposed slacker, 20-somethings taking control



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Who would have thought the nefarious Generation X would start taking over so soon?

Or that they would even want to? The GenXers were supposed to be the slackers, the losers, the cynics and the drifters.

Represented by the 45 million born in America between roughly 1961 and 1977, the GenXers were characterized as a lost generation, wandering neck-deep in ennui and apocalyptic nihilism, bobbing aimlessly toward a vacant future.

All the hype started a few years ago, about the time that grunge-rock was exploding.

The Generation X stereotype became omnipresent in the media and advertising, dominating pop-culture imagery and iconography. The state of hipness was delegated through movies, marketing and "Rolling Stone."

The very label Generation X is a negative one, implying uncertainty and anonymity.

The GenXers were supposed to be disillusioned and hopeless — the slackers, cynics and drifters. Typical GenXers were portrayed basically as hedonistic, concert-seeking, OK-Cola-swilling stoners, still living with their parents and with little hope of ever having a career or a life.

Coffee houses, pseudo-intellectuality and Janeane Garofalo became the new symbols of status and coolness, and knee-jerk irony became the new attitude.

However, typical GenXers of today are smart, hip, overeducated, underpaid poverty jet-setters. They may not have much money, but they manage to move around.

They put a high value on college and post-graduate education, and they take up causes. Fragmentation and eclecticism are 20-something hallmarks.

Today's young adults define themselves by sheer divergence.

So what happened to the disillusioned, lazy baby-busters who were

supposed to typify the new generation of knee-jerk irony and the pose of repose?

It's becoming clear that the first X-rays of Generation X were misunderstood and distorted.

The media caricature had it all wrong. Since the initial hype, something else has become clear — the 20-somethings are ambitious, creative get-aheads — much more so than their parents or grandparents.

Characterized as unfocused and confused, more and more GenXers lately are proving themselves to be confident, savvy, determined and independent.

What happened is that the 20-somethings have learned to cope.

If the 20-somethings entered the decade facing a floundering job market, did they deserve to be labeled dazed and confused?

Between 1979 and 1995, some 43 million American jobs were lost through corporate downsizing.

Newly created jobs paid less and offered far fewer benefits and less security. Sharp cutbacks in federal grants since 1981 mean that one of three students must work and attend school at the same time.

The challenge so many 20-somethings face is finding a job in a fragmenting workplace while avoiding being crushed by their college loan repayments.

GenXers are not just rejecting traditional American work ethics out of spite — traditional attitudes about the workplace are a useless hindrance in the modern workplace.

The sort of job security and career building of the past is gone. The corporations have "downsized" and now rely significantly on contracted employees or temporary workers in order to avoid paying for retirement and health care.

Manpower is now the largest private employer in the United States, and many of the people who devoted themselves to the firm have been booted out on the street without a pension.

More and more Americans have no choice but to work at lousy service jobs such as Wal-Mart or McDonald's just to support themselves.

Worrying about the future can now be a major source of stress. The job market is now in constant flux, making it difficult, if not impossible, to make long-range plans for the future.

So many opt out of the rat race entirely. What on the surface appears to be apathetic hedonism or laziness may actually represent a well-informed choice.

GenXers may see themselves as life-long job hoppers instead of company loyalists, but at the same time,

they profess far greater satisfaction from their work than their elders.

Instead of devoting their lives to their careers and the firm, wearing a coat and tie to work every day, 20-somethings live their lives more inventively.

They have become a generation of creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, utilizing new technologies and new forms of consumerism.

They're flocking to technology start-ups and founding successful small businesses that actually make good use of a fragmenting economy.

The GenXers might be viewed as the pioneers of a new economy, supporting themselves in ways that are less wasteful, more sustainable and more spiritually fulfilling.

It's summed up by the slogan on the Eddie Bauer shopping bags: "Never confuse having a career with having a life."

If GenXers are disillusioned, it's not without cause.

For starters, this generation experienced the toll of divorce — 40 percent of this generation's young adults have spent time in a single-parent home by the age of 16.

This is the generation that grew up in the Reagan/Bush years, with the very real threat of thermonuclear Armageddon. AIDS became a devastating national crisis as they were reaching adolescence.

This generation witnessed the space shuttle explosion, soaring national debt, bankrupt social security, urban deterioration, gangs, crack, junk bonds, holes in the ozone layer and Dan Quayle.

The 20-somethings grew up in a period of dynamically shifting social and economic structures; latchkey kids who could use computers before they could write in cursive.

Did the psychic toll of all this produce a generation of latchkey basket cases or a generation of survivors? Perhaps both.

But the members of Generation X are not exactly the slackers and losers they have been

characterized as.

They're taking control, much sooner than expected and much more creatively.

They're presenting us with a new skeptical pragmatism, doing battle with Starbucks, Barnes & Noble and the Gap.



JON FRANK/DN

Faculty members stand by department

The following opinion is from members of the political science department.

Your editorial about the political science department in the Daily Nebraskan (Tuesday) was terribly misguided and shows a nearly total misunderstanding of the facts.

The editorial suggested that members of the department were unaware of allegations of sexual harassment in the department and did nothing about them. This suggestion is absolutely false. Our department has a long track record of seriously addressing both formal and informal complaints of gender-related issues.

Our department has held up under scrutiny. We have been investigated and cleared by Amy Longo, an independent attorney who is a

specialist in discrimination law and is currently the chair of the Nebraska State Bar Association. There also have been other investigations clearing our department.

What several members of the department did tell Daily Nebraskan reporters was that we didn't know the content of the ARRC (Academic Rights and Responsibilities) Special Committee report. This is because the report is supposed to be confidential, and we are not allowed to see it since the department is not a party to the complaint.

What we do know is that the accusations of gender inequity by Professor Valerie Schwebach against the former chair of the department of political science were dismissed by the special committee. Schwebach lost her case. We regret that the Daily Nebraskan failed to report that.

In what strikes us as a gratuitous,

unsupported and improper act, however, the special committee apparently went on to recommend sanctions against the department of political science.

These recommendations were made even though no complaint against the department was before it, the department was never investigated by the committee, and the department was never allowed to defend itself, and indeed we cannot even be shown a copy of the very report that condemns us.

This reminds us of the Queen of Hearts in "Alice in Wonderland": "First the punishment, then the trial!" We're at the receiving end of the flagrant abuse of an ineptly managed process. The special committee's recommendations against the department are wrong, which is no surprise since the fundamentals of due process were completely

ignored.

If you are not accused of anything, how can you be found guilty? It is not that the department's due process rights were violated — the department was found guilty without any due process at all.

If a university committee can find departments or faculty guilty without an accusation, an investigation or a hearing — that is, without any concern for due process rights — then every department and faculty member on campus can potentially become a victim to an unjust process.

The university must ensure basic due process rights for all of its members. Fair and impartial investigations and hearings are an essential part of any fair judicial system. The university must not sanction a judicial process that lacks these basic elements of due process.

We stand by our department. No department is perfect, but we have dealt with the problems that have come to our attention in an appropriate and timely manner. An outside investigator has agreed that this is the case. The recommendations of the special committee are the product of a fatally flawed process, a process that needs to be changed to protect us all.

John Comer
chairman

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse
graduate chairwoman

John Hibbing
member, Executive Committee

Jeff Spinner-Halev
member, Executive Committee