

“It’s not how hard you work”

There is one approach to life that I have always tried to follow but only recently began to understand. And in order to explain it, I must first tell you a brief story of the man behind it, my grandfather Carlos Chameli.

My grandpa came to the U.S. from Puerto Rico at the age of seven to escape the Great Depression. He dropped out of school at the age of twelve when his mother died and he began shining shoes to help support his family. In his teens he worked as an auto mechanic, dreaming of driving the cars he fixed. He was able to momentarily escape the hardships of being an immigrant child by playing the drums, which he still does to this day. He married my grandmother in 1951 and worked as a painter. He would spend all day painting houses, briefly come home for dinner, and then go play at the jazz clubs with his band. Despite his grueling work schedule, my grandpa did not view it as such. He loved painting houses and loved music even more. More importantly, however, he loved his family and wanted to ensure they had a better life than he did.

Eventually, he teamed up with his older brother, Hector, to start Hector’s Hardware. Instead of painting houses and fixing cars to make a living, Carlos Chameli was now selling paint and all sorts of tools and construction supplies. For the first time in his life, he was his own boss.

My grandpa has told me this story, or rather bits and pieces of it, throughout my entire life. And he concludes the same way every time. “It’s not how hard you work, but how smart you work,” he says. “You need an education.”

I always took this to mean that I should do well in school to avoid the hardships my grandpa faced. Instead of painting houses before finally starting a business, I would get straight A’s in school and have a successful career for the rest of my life. I never once doubted the validity of my grandpa’s mantra. After all, he knew exactly how hard it was to scrape by, much less become successful, without an education. In addition, the fact that I now go to Harvard means that I have successfully heeded his wisdom.

Or so I thought.

Over the summer I helped my grandpa paint a door on the side of our house. Despite the fact that it was incredibly hot outside, the 85-year-old insisted on getting the job done and done well. We finished and, of course, he repeated his favorite phrase.

“It’s not how hard you work, but how smart you work.”

But then he went a step further. “Back then I could’ve worked as hard as I could at painting, but it would’ve gotten me nowhere. You always want to be the boss, not the worker,” he said with a laugh.

Slowly I realized that I had misinterpreted what my grandpa had always told me. I always thought it was because of his hard work that he eventually became successful and that I should get an education to avoid that type of physical labor. But it was in spite of hard work and because of his smarts that he found success. He could have been the best painter in the world and yet he would still just be a painter. It was his ability to think outside the box and his desire to improve his situation in life that led him to start his own business. Instead of slaving away all day to build

houses with little reward, he could now spend more time with his family, send his children to college, and drive the sports car he always dreamed owning.

Just because we're getting a Harvard education does not mean we're working smart. We can spend all night trying to write the perfect paper or ace an exam, but all we've really done is proven we're the best student in a particular class according to some professor. We are good at meeting a list of arbitrary requirements—after all, that's what got us here. If you follow the already established path, you'll end up with the already achieved result, no matter what you do or how hard you worked at it. Nobody ever became successful by creating the next Microsoft or the next Facebook. They became successful by creating Microsoft or by creating Facebook.

Whether you're worried about getting into medical school or are worried about where your English degree will get you, remember that if you work in a new and brilliant way, you'll become successful and achieve something unique.

Hard work may pay off, but smart work pays better.