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Plumbers make sacrifices to prosper

Travis Hessey didn't like factory life, so he changed his circumstances. He heard about a guy who needed help in his plumbing business and took the plunge. After several years of on-the-job training and classroom work, Hessey now owns his own plumbing business, Ace Plumbing and Drain Cleaning. He recently talked with Tribune correspondent Jennifer Ochstein about plumbing for a living.

How long have you been a plumber?

Twelve years.

How did you become interested in becoming a plumber?

I never was really interested in it, it just happened. It was a lucky career move. **How did you fall into plumbing?**

When I was a younger guy -- 18 or 19 -- I was doing factory work. I was stuck doing the same job over and over. But I heard about a guy who was hiring, and I called him.

What kind of education or experience is necessary to be a plumber?

At first, you need to do a four-year apprenticeship. The PHCC -- the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association -- sponsors a program. To be a licensed plumber, you have to attend a four-year accredited program under the direct supervision of a licensed plumber with so many hours of training and classroom work. You can sign up with the PHCC, and they can help you with the guidelines. **What types of personal skills are helpful to be a plumber?**

In my line -- I'm a service tech -- overall you'll need a lot of strength.

Why is that?

Because you'll be dealing with stuff that's not easy to take apart and equipment that's heavy. You need to be physically fit -- there's a lot of bending and reaching and lifting. **Are there any other skills that are necessary?**

The only way to develop the skills is through experience. The more you're in the field, the more skilled you become. Your skills develop over time, but starting right off you have to be strong.

What do you like best about being a plumber?

I'm always on the go. And even if I were in my own truck and working for someone else, I would have a boss, but it's like you don't have a boss because you make your own decisions while you're on the job. Basically, you're your own boss. **Why is that appealing to you?**

Because I'm in control. Even if I was a journeyman working for another guy, I can look at a job and say, "I did that." You could call him and get some advice, but you still have to make the decision. It's satisfying, and I don't have to answer to anyone else.

What's most challenging about what you do?

It's not the work. It's the customer service, and that goes for any plumber. You have to do things you don't want to do to please that one guy. It's customer relations -- that's the hardest part of the job because everybody's different. **Are there any misconceptions people have about what you do?**

The misconception -- we get a bad name because people think our labor rates are high. But it's the unknown -- that's why people think it costs too much. But we have to pay for the advertising that makes people call us. People think all the money goes in my pocket, but it's the cost of doing business, and the cost of materials is outrageous. That's the big misconception. What they pay out is a fair price, especially with the speed we get out to a job.

Do you have any advice for others who are considering plumbing as a career?

The big advice is that it's a good career move, and if you do it, deliberate, because it's not for everyone. It takes time to get to where other guys are and to step up the ladder and get the pay that you need. Doing it right takes sacrifice.

And be prepared to get dirty. When I hire someone, I ask them if they're afraid to get dirty. If they're afraid to get dirty, this is not the place for them.
