

DIRECTING YOUR FUTURE

Where will you be in five years?

You are the star in the story of your life.

Plan now for the grand opening of your blockbuster.

by Kay Daly

Imagine you've stepped into a theater. As you take your seat, the lights dim and the main attraction begins. It's a movie of your life over the next five years. Perhaps you know the whole plot and can imagine all the scenes. Maybe you see only fuzzy images—or even a blank screen. But whether you've already written the screenplay or just started to think about your starring role, you need to plan now to bring your future into sharp focus.

Get the Cameras Rolling

You might think it's too soon to start producing the "movie of your life." Not so, says Susan Thorngren, the career development coordinator of New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois. "You can start the exploration process as early as freshman year."

According to Thorngren, about 15 percent of high school students have a good idea of what they want to do—but even for them, the work is just beginning. "They need to forge ahead with the kinds of activities that will give them the experience they need," Thorngren explains, "things like volunteer activities, part-time jobs, and internships."

But what if you're not one of that lucky 15 percent? How do you start imagining your starring role? The good news is, you probably already have. "You're exploring what you like and what you're good at all the time—in the classes you choose, by joining clubs, and by doing the activities you enjoy,"

explains Cynthia Colon, director of career counseling at Marymount High School in Los Angeles, California.

So, to begin the process, go on a fact-finding mission about yourself:

- Make a list of your favorite activities. What kinds of activities make you lose all track of time?
- List your favorite classes and describe what you like about each.
- Take a poll of your family and friends. Ask what they think you enjoy and excel at.

Your school's career counselor can help you build on these insights with activities for career exploration and tests that measure your skills and interests. But don't expect any quick answers. "If you're going to use tests, take at least three; then discuss the results with your counselor, your parents, and your friends," Thorngren advises. "You'll always want to ask whether the outcome of the test makes sense to you."

Next, you'll want to make use of the resources around you: the adults you know who have already made the decision you're working on. A good place to start is with your parents, recommends Edward Morton, director of the Career Development Center at California State University, Long Beach. "Make an appointment to talk with them, and ask how they chose their career paths. You can learn a lot from the choices they made—and from their mistakes." You can do the same with family friends, your classmates' parents, and your teachers. "[Teachers] can suggest related careers and give you insights about the pros and cons of that field," Thorngren adds. ▶

Ready for Your Close-up?

Before you can play your leading role, you need to learn more about your star! Ask yourself these questions. The answers may surprise you.

1. Imagine you've won a lottery that will pay you a million dollars every year for the rest of your life. What would you do with your life if money were no object?

2. Think about how you make plans for the weekend with your friends. Do you play the leader, getting everyone involved? Or do you come up with creative ideas about things to do? Or are you the one who gets everyone organized by buying tickets or setting a time to meet? Describe the part you typically play.

3. A great painter is going to paint your portrait. She's told you that you can have five things included in your picture. They can be symbols, objects, books, people, animals—but there can only be five of them. What five things would you include to make a portrait of the real you? Explain your choices.

4. Not all your skills are graded on your report card. What kinds of things are you good at or enjoy doing that don't appear there? Check any that apply to you. Can you think of others? Write them down too.

- I like to make sure things are in good order so I can find them easily.
- I'm good at motivating and inspiring people.
- I'm good with my hands and like to build things, work on cars, garden, or cook.
- I have a good sense of spatial arrangement and can tell how things will fit together.
- I get along well with people; they find it easy to talk to me, and I feel I understand them.
- I love puzzles and am good at finding new solutions no one's ever thought of.

Once you've picked some favorite fields, it's time to learn more. Visit your school's career center for books and magazines, or go on-line at America's Career Infonet (www.acinet.org/) and at the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* site (www.bls.gov/ocof/). These resources can describe the education you'll need, as well as give you valuable information about working conditions and job prospects. Also be on the lookout for volunteer activities and part-time jobs that allow you to "test drive" your potential career. "You can try out teaching by volunteering as a tutor, or work in a nursing home to see what a career in health care might be like," Morton suggests.

Plan to participate in a "job shadow" program, as did Jennifer Witt, a junior at New Trier High School. "I had thought about becoming a doctor, but I didn't want to spend all those years in school," Jennifer explains. When a friend suggested physical therapy, she spoke with her counselor. Together they found a physical therapist who agreed to let Jennifer watch her as she worked. After a day of tagging along on house calls, Jennifer decided physical therapy could be her dream job. Using advice from the physical therapist, Jennifer has started researching colleges and hopes to find volunteer opportunities to help her work toward her goal.

Interviewing Your Teachers

Want to learn more about careers in the fields you enjoy? Try talking to your teachers about their subject areas. Here are some questions to get you started:

- How did you choose to go into this field?
- What kind of training does this field require?
- What do you like best about this field? What do you like least?
- What are some other career opportunities that relate to this field?
- Can you recommend other resources for me, such as publications, Web sites, or professional associations?

It's a Process

What Jennifer's experience shows is that your life movie will take some time to produce. "It's a process," Thorngren explains. "It's not about making a quick decision. It's about recognizing your interests and skills and learning about a variety of professions."

For Jorge Hadad, a senior in speech pathology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, treating the decision as a process has helped him find a career path that allows him to combine several interests. While still in high school, Jorge talked to his parents about their experiences, visited his high school counselor frequently, and kept his options open by working hard at academics and pursuing hobbies. "I taught swimming every summer, so I knew I wanted to be in a field where I would be helping kids," he recalls.

Raised in a bilingual household, Jorge was sensitive to variations in accent. His mother noticed this and suggested he look into a career in speech pathology. In college, Jorge pursued every opportunity to learn more about his prospective career, taking courses, talking to his professors, and attending guest lectures. He'll be graduating soon, and is researching graduate programs that will allow him to pursue work as a speech pathologist working with kids in a bilingual environment.


As Jorge knows, it can take years to find your career path—but taking your time can be a good thing. You

have more opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge you need to explore a wider range of possibilities.

Make a "You" Turn

When you take this approach, even things that seem like a wrong turn can end up being a right turn. "I started in biology and planned to go to med school," says Clare Juen, a senior at DePaul University in Chicago, "but I was terrible at chemistry. Because of that, I started looking at other courses." Now nearing graduation, she feels her psychology major fits her better. "I've really found my niche."

Danielle Knabjian Molina took a similar "wrong turn" in her undergraduate years. She toiled in science courses while majoring in geology at Northwestern University, but found her true path working in the campus residence halls and getting involved in student government. Because of those experiences, she pursued a career in higher education administration and has worked as associate director of residential life at Vassar College. As Colon explains, "Sometimes, finding out what you *don't* like is as important as finding what you *do* like."

So if your personal movie is still just a blur, start working toward the "big picture" now. And don't fret if you don't know what the final scene will be. You'll have plenty of time to write your own happy ending. 



You love sports. In high school, you join the football team.

In college, you become interested in sports therapy after a minor injury sidelines you briefly.

Today, you are a doctor specializing in sports medicine.