

# Finding the **WORK** You Love

The possibility of fulfillment in work doesn't have to be a luxury reserved for the charmed, the deluded, and the independently wealthy. But none of us can get there without looking for it and without taking a leap

By Tamsen Tillson

**P**enny Simmons wets a shaving brush, briskly lathers it up in a tin of saddle soap, then swirls it over the shoes of the businessman in the expensive suit who is seated above her. All day, businessmen and women who epitomize success come to Simmons' shoeshine stands in the heart of Toronto's financial district, and she takes care of their shoes. If you've come here to see people who have achieved professional fulfillment however, you might want to let your gaze slide downward, away from the man in the chair reading *Fortune Magazine*, and onto the woman shining his shoes. Simmons, a one-time stockbroker, started shining shoes two years ago. "I couldn't be happier," she says. "I'm sorry I didn't do this ten years ago."

Simmons' business, Penny Loafers, represents the culmination of a journey that has taken her two decades and a handful of careers to accomplish. "I look at shoeshine as a vehicle [for professional fulfillment]," she says. "We're in the feel-good business. We make everybody feel good — our customers and our employees."

And when you visit a Penny Loafers stand, the conviction behind her words show. Whether it's Simmons or one of her employees on the job, she sees to it that you get more than a shine for your fin. What Simmons calls the "art of shine" is a veritable performance, delivered with panache and genuine cheer. On this day, while she serves a never-ending queue, Simmons is talking about how she came to start up Penny Loafers and what the venture has brought her. As she polishes a well-dressed customer's shoes — he looks to be approaching retirement age — she asks him, "Is there a secret passion you'd rather be doing? Besides golf, I mean." His face takes on a sad, wistful look as he watches her work. "Yes," he says. Then he shrugs a little. "But I never pursued them. I've always worked in large corporations. It would be a major decision to break free. So I never did."

What is it that fulfills the shoeshine woman but not the affluent businessman sitting in the chair above her? It's obviously not money or prestige. And unless you're a foot fetishist, it's not shining shoes. Clearly, it is that Simmons loves her

work. She is savouring the reward of a journey that everyone would like to make.

Most of us see work as a necessary but unpleasant exchange. We do it because we have to: to pay our mortgage, feed our family, and put our kids through school. Our society, moreover, tells us that work is something to endure while earning a living: as one of Simmons' customers put it, "If it isn't work, they won't pay me for it." The concept of fulfillment through work strikes many of us as an oxymoron. It's a luxury reserved for the charmed, the deluded, and the independently wealthy. It would never occur to most of us to seek it out.

But Simmons, and others like her, show that work can offer rewards measurable not by tax bracket designation, titles or shares, but in spirit. And as the businessman who worked all his life for a corporation will also attest, none of us can get there without looking for what we need, without taking a leap.

Here, for the sampling, are the stories of three individuals' journeys to happiness in their work. We hope you'll see a bit of yourself in these stories, and that you'll draw something useful from them.

**P**enny Simmons admits that when she first heard about shoe shining, she turned her nose up at the idea. She had been looking to start her own business, something small that wouldn't require much capital, and in which she could marshal her strengths. Someone suggested a shoeshine stand. "I said, 'Yeah, right,'" and dismissed it out-of-hand. When the idea came up again a few months later she thought, "never say never," and set up two columns in her mind, one for shoe shining and one for the skills and strengths she'd identified in career counselling sessions. The two columns matched up perfectly.

It took Simmons years of soul searching and several careers' worth of trial and error to get to this point. What Simmons

thinks of as her struggle began when she was a teenager. A Toronto native, she doesn't have much formal education or training. "I guess I was raised to learn to type and then get married so someone would take care of me," she says. Despite that assumption, she sensed from a young age that no man was going to shield her from life's gritty realities, and she'd better learn to take care of herself. She worked for her father's business on and off, and the typing skills came in handy in a succession of dead-end jobs in the corporate setting — typing pool and reception desk positions, telephone sales, secretarial, and administrative jobs.

"I had been brought up with this constant pressure: go out and get a job. Just do it. And I did, but I kept thinking, I'm not happy."

In 1986, a stint at Toronto brokerage Nesbitt Burns changed all that. Because she was friendly, hard-working and dynamic, her bosses thought she'd make a good stockbroker. Despite the grooming they gave her, however, she had trouble picking it up. They kept her on for months, figuring that she'd catch on eventually. Simmons remembers the day that two of the firm's major producers took her aside, sat her in their area and promised to teach her the tricks of the trade. "I went home, and I looked at myself in the mirror and I said, 'I want to be a stockbroker.' My stomach went into a knot."

**S**immons' gut was telling her that selling stocks was not for her, and this time she listened. "I need to really believe in the product, and down the road I learned that the only product that I can really guarantee is me." Opportunity or not, she quit the business. It really did turn out to be her big break. She dropped her passive approach, and started trying to figure out what she really loved doing and where her aptitude lay.

It was a crucial shift in Simmons' attitude. She went to career counselling where

she totted up her likes, dislikes, skills, and ambitions, one at a time. When she decided to go ahead with the shoeshine idea she went to a consultant and a shoeshine franchise in the United States to learn "the art of shine," and in 1995 had a stand built at the Scotia Plaza bank tower in Toronto. She says that when she initially went looking for a location, every door in the city was shut in her face. One property manager told her to give up and get a real job. "I thought, do I listen to this person?... But I thought, no. It feels too right."

Plowing ahead has made Penny Loafers "the greatest experience of my life. I feel like I've finally flourished." She has grown from one location to an estimated six by the end of this year. "I really get to be me," says Simmons, "but the biggest buzz of all, the one they never told me about, is that I've created jobs for people." Where a year ago it was just Simmons and one part-time employee, she now has ten part-timers. She finds this ironic, because initially she was disconcerted to discover that she had managerial ability. "It was kind of hard to accept at the time. I thought, but I don't want to manage people." But she turned out to be an innovative boss. Instead of hourly wages, her employees take a cut of approximately 60–80 percent of the money their efforts bring in. All of them are niche-seekers in transition, like she used to be. As a result, she's got an uncommonly articulate, cheerful, and loyal bunch of shoe shiners working her stands. The first employee who left gave her three months notice.

"It took me 20 years of hitchhiking to learn," Simmons, age 41, says, "that I'm going to listen to my instincts." And while she plans to stick with Penny Loafers for a while, she doesn't see herself shining shoes forever. "It's a business that's provided an excellent fit for my skills, my strengths, and my personality, but who knows?" She wants to use her managerial strengths and contacts as a stepping stone to something else. She isn't sure what it will be; perhaps a personnel agency with some sort of twist to it.