

Melanie Handlon and I get together in the conference room at the church where her mother still works as secretary. (Melanie's mother does not want us to meet at the house because, she says, it's too messy.) A former high school cheerleader, Melanie is wearing skillfully applied makeup and is carefully groomed. Her crisp T-shirt and blue jeans look fresh and neat, her blond hair is smoothed back into a pony tail, her long fingernails are polished a brilliant red, and the glitzy flip-flops that adorn her feet reveal that she has matching red polish on her toenails. Her full makeup looks pretty, but it also makes her look older than her nineteen years. Melanie's smile is broad, and although her manner is reserved, she nevertheless seems confident. She lives at home and enjoys "the closeness that we have" in the family. "I mean I can talk to them about anything," she explains.

Schoolwork, a torment for Melanie when she was a fourth-grader, continued to be a challenge in middle and high school. She recalls seventh grade as "horrible." Whereas she has fond memories of grade-school teachers who tried to work with her, in middle school the "teacher situation" and rigid nature of assignments resulted in her receiving poor grades (mostly C's and D's) and an overall negative school experience. At the end of her seventh grade year, school officials recommended that she be retained. Though it was not easy for Ms. Handlon to refuse to follow the teachers' advice ("I come from a family of teachers"), in the end, that is what the Handlons did. (Ms. Handlon said, "I think she just needed to get out of that environment.") When she was in eighth grade, Melanie was diagnosed as having an Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) learning disability. She took special education classes in high school, but academic work was still quite difficult for her. Her grades were B's and C's, with an occasional D. She vacillated in her feelings about high school. At various points, she talked about dropping out. When her mother told her "[that] is not an option," Melanie talked about "running away." When she was selected to be a member of the 28-person cheerleading squad in her sophomore

year, though, she flourished. She “loved” cheerleading and became the squad captain her senior year. Ms. Handlon was “surprised and amazed” by her daughter’s interest in and ongoing commitment to cheerleading. Her duties with the squad had Melanie regularly performing in front of large numbers of strangers as well as all of her classmates. Consequently, both her teachers and her parents were perplexed when she vehemently refused to stand in front of a class and present her senior project. School staff tried to meet her needs. When conversations and coaxing failed, Melanie was allowed to give her senior project to an audience that consisted of one of her teachers. This accommodation enabled her to graduate.

When Melanie took the SAT (which she did without first taking advantage of her high school’s free SAT preparation course, despite encouragement from her mother to do so), she received a combined score of 1060 [1590].¹ She applied to Millersville, the four-year state university her older brother had attended. Although she was accepted, she felt that, at five hours away by car, the school was too far from home. In addition, she thought the prospects for a social life outside the classroom were dim: “There’s really nothing to do there. Like the biggest thing is a Wal-Mart.” After being turned down by the state college that was her first choice, Melanie decided to work rather than go to college. At the beginning of her senior year of high school she was planning to become a teacher, but after volunteering in a kindergarten classroom, “I decided that’s definitely not what I wanted to do because it’s just so much work.” She says (as does her mother, separately) that her father was extremely disappointed when she ruled out college. Mr. Handlon, by contrast, tells me that this was not a major issue for him (“College isn’t for everyone”). Melanie has had some work experience. During high school, she had earned money as a successful babysitter—she was even given a fourteen-year-old Chevy sedan by one family for whom she babysat. The summer after graduating, she was hired to work in a coffee shop. Her mother recalled, with some amusement,

Melanie's somewhat rapidly drawn conclusion that the world of work is not always fun and games: "After two weeks, she decided to go to community college." From Melanie's perspective, the job had two major drawbacks: she had to be at the coffee shop by 5 A.M., and she had no coworkers for company. Her mother helped her register at the community college. There were multiple problems, though, and Melanie's interest waned. On the basis of her screening test results, she was required to take non-credit remedial courses in English and math. The classes were "boring," she says. She stopped attending. The enrollment materials "vigorously" stressed the importance of formally withdrawing from a class (rather than simply ceasing to show up), and Melanie told her parents she had done so. During the interview, she tells me the same thing, "I basically went in and I said this isn't working for me . . . I want to drop this." She felt that college was not for her. (In a conversation I had later with Melanie's mother, Ms. Handlon told me that Melanie had not in fact formally withdrawn. Her parents learned this when a professor at the community college called the house at the end of the semester to discuss the matter.)

Melanie says that in a few weeks she plans to move to an isolated town dominated by a university that a friend of hers attends. She intends to live with the friend and thinks she might take one class.

In terms of the future, she says that "honestly" what she wants is "to be a stay-at-home mom until my kids are in school." She brightens as she speaks of her interest in having a partner and children of her own. In this realm, her hopes and dreams are clear. She would like to have four children, reasoning that "you can't have one because it'd be spoiled. You can't have two because it's like one is [for] one parent and one is [for] the other parent. Three it's just—it's always the oldest child and the youngest child, and then there's the middle child. [With] four . . . that way you can have a girl and you can have a boy and it just works out well whatever the other two are." (Melanie herself has two older brothers.) "I'm more of a family

person,” Melanie elaborates, “so I’d definitely rather be with my kids and my family rather than being out at a job.” She also reports, “I don’t want to wait till I’m thirty to get married. So hopefully I’ll find that one guy.” She has had some boyfriends but no serious contenders as yet.

After abandoning community college, Melanie spent the rest of the summer doing babysitting, going to the pool, and taking part in a church group. Her plans to move fell through in the end, in part because her father refused to cosign the lease for an apartment with a friend in a college town. She then decided to rent a room in the house where her friend lived, but that too did not work out. The arrangement her friend proposed seemed unfair to Melanie (her room would be in the basement, but she would have to pay the same amount of rent as others who shared the house). So she continued to live at home although her parents were threatening to charge her rent. (Her brother, Harry, who also lives at home, pays his parents \$400 per month though, unbeknownst to him they intend to return those monies to him when he moves to his own place; as Ms. Handlon explains, “This is just to show them what its going to cost to live outside of the house”). In 2004, Melanie began cosmetology school. The Handlons, who were thrilled with this career move, covered the full cost of the 15-month course (\$8,200). They report that Melanie really enjoyed the program. She now works at a salon in a low-cost hair-cutting chain. On a good day, she earns \$80 in tips, as well as a small paycheck. She hopes to open her own franchise very soon.