



Figure 1 Jeffrey Yu at his home in Endicott, N.Y., where he raises chickens with his father. He will attend Yale. Credit Chad Batka for The New York Times

Endicott, N.Y.

“My family is a matriarchy in a patriarchal community.”

Jeffrey C. Yu

Not all sons of doctors raise baby ducks and chickens in their kitchen. But I do. My dad taught me.

While my childhood was spent in a deteriorating industrial town, my dad was raised during the onset of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. After forgoing university so his sister could attend, my dad worked on a commune as a farmer. So while I grew up immersed in airy Beethoven melodies each morning, my dad grew up amid the earthy aromas of hay and livestock. Every time that I look between our grand piano and our baby chickens, I'm amazed by the stark differences between our childhoods, and how in raising livestock, my dad shares a piece of his own rural upbringing with me.

Embracing these differences, my dad has introduced me to diverse experiences, from molding statues out of toilet paper plaster to building greenhouses from the ground up. So you might be wondering: What does he do for a traditional 9-to-5 job? He's already captained a research vessel that's navigated across the Pacific, designed three patentable wind turbines and held every position imaginable, from sous chef to Motorola technician.

The answer? Nothing. He's actually a stay-at-home dad right now.

My family is a matriarchy in a patriarchal community. Accordingly, I'm greeted with astonishment whenever I try to explain my dad's financial status. “How lazy and unmotivated he must be!” Many try to hide their surprise, but their furtive glances say it all. In a society that places economic value at the forefront of worth, these assumptions might apply to other individuals, but not to my dad.

When I look at the media, whether it be the front cover of a newspaper or a featured story in a website article, I often see highlights of parents who work incredible hours and odd jobs to ensure their children receive a good upbringing. While those stories are certainly worthy of praise, they often overshadow the less visible, equally important actions of people like my dad.

I realize now that my dad has sacrificed his promising career and financial pride to ensure that his son would get all of the proper attention, care and moral upbringing he needed. Through his quiet, selfless actions, my dad has given me more than can be bought from a paycheck and redefined my understanding of how we, as people, can choose to live our lives.

I'm proud to say that my dad is the richest man I know — rich not in capital, but in character. Infused with the ingenuity to tear down complex physics and calculus problems, electrified with the vigor of a young entrepreneur (despite beginning his fledgling windmill start-up at the age of 50) and imbued with the kindness to shuttle his son to practices and rehearsals. At the end of the day, it's those traits in people that matter more to me than who they are on paper.

Stories like my dad's remind me that worth can come in forms other than a six-figure salary. He's an inspiration, reminding me that optimism, passion and creativity can make a difference in a life as young as mine. It's those unspoken virtues that define me. Whether it's when I fold napkin lotuses for my soup kitchen's Christmas dinner, or bake challah bread French toast sticks for my chemistry class, I'm aware that achievement doesn't have to be measured empirically. It's that entrepreneurial, self-driven determination to bring ideas to life that drives me. My dad lives life off the beaten path. I, too, hope to bring that unorthodox attitude to other people and communities.

All too often I'm left with the seemingly unanswerable question: “What does my dad do?” But the answer, all too simply, is that he does what he does best: Inspire his son.