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Jeremy Rifkin

MY FIRST JOB

JEREMY RIFKIN

Work That Matched The Moment

Jeremy Rifkin, 55, a technology gadfly and consultant who heads the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, has just published "The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life Is A Paid-for Experience" (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam).

I WORKED during high school for my father, who had a small business on the South Side of Chicago manufacturing plastic bags. He wanted me to take it over, which was supposedly why I went to the University of Pennsylvania to study at the Wharton School, but I had no intention of going back. It was 1963, and I became involved in civil rights and then the antiwar movement.

After graduate work at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, I got my first real job in

summer 1968, as a Vista volunteer. Most of the work involved helping people deal with the welfare system. I lived with Ernestine Royster, a welfare rights activist in Queens, and her eight children, then moved to an East Harlem apartment. It was firebombed, and my car was destroyed. My roommate and I never found out who did it. Vista moved us to Yonkers, and I was assigned to work in White Plains for the rest of my year.

I had grown up in a working class neighborhood with poor people. But I learned in Vista that you cannot really know what overwhelming poverty is like until you have lived with the people suffering it. I also learned that grass-roots organizing has its limits, although it took more time to appreciate them. You can get attention in the streets, and that's a prerequisite for change, but it's not enough. You also have to have real policy ideas and a national thrust.

I think a lot of life is determined by the historical moment you are caught in. If I were seven years older, I might well have ended up running the family business.



In 1967, at age 22.

Written with Barnaby J. Feder