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Stalled on the road to security

For Millennials, traditional markers of adulthood prove elusive

By Bonnie Miller Rubin, Tribune reporter

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Even though he's nearing his 30th birthday, Andy Gleeson's life is far from settled.

In June, the bookstore where he has worked for five years is scheduled to close. The lease on his Logan Square apartment will run out, and a long-term relationship has ended. So he is packing up his possessions and moving to New York, lured by nothing more than a buddy with an empty couch.

"I thought that by the time I reached 30, I'd be a lot further along in my career," said Gleeson, who has a marketing degree from University of Illinois Chicago. "But most of my friends are in the same situation."



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The class of 2010 is hearing lots of stirring speeches about the end of a journey. But for a wide swath of young people, earning a diploma or notching a 21st birthday won't be the culmination of anything. Their trajectories will stall — like Gleeson's — or go in reverse as they move home, propped up by parents.

But parents shouldn't look at their basement-dwellers and wonder where they went wrong. The transition to adulthood is a long and winding road that can stretch into the early 30s, say some of the country's most prominent researchers, who spent two years analyzing data on what it means to be a grown-up in modern America.

"The world has changed ... and it's just a lot more difficult to establish an independent household," said Mary Waters, a sociology professor at Harvard University and one of the contributors to the recently released "Transition to Adulthood," a collaboration of the Brookings Institution and Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had acquired certain traditional markers of maturity by age 30: leaving home, completing school, full-time employment, marriage and family. In 2005, the figure had plummeted to 27 and 39 percent, respectively, according to the MacArthur Research Network.

Given the economic realities, it can take up to age 34 to step into those adult roles, said Waters, citing the "ratcheting up of everything" — from academic requirements to the labor market to explain the lag. The provision in the new health care law extending coverage to children beyond age 22 is an example of

government addressing this revised timetable. Compared to some other countries, the United States invests little in this demographic

"We're in this period of rapid change...and institutions just haven't caught up," Waters said.

Gleeson may be living independently, but in every other way his life bears little resemblance to that of his mother, who married at 19, became a parent at 25 and, with just a high school diploma, landed a good job at State Farm Insurance in Bloomington – where she has been since.

Even so, there was never a question of continuing his post-secondary education – a message embraced by other Millennials.

The number of students who enrolled in college swelled from more than 5.9 million in 1965 to about 17.5 million in 2005, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In fall 2009, 70 percent of high school graduates were headed to campus, an all-time high.

But Gleeson has yet to reap many benefits. As a manager at Barbara's Bookstore in Oak Park, he earns less than \$30,000. He's survived, by living "really cheaply." He doesn't own property, a car or even a computer.

"A bachelor's degree just doesn't get you very far these days," he explained. "If I would have known all this was just a setup for graduate school, I would have done things differently...such as learning a specific skill."

In 1970, 1.03 million Americans continued their schooling beyond college versus almost 2.3 million in 2007, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But Asha Gray — also 29 — has discovered that an advanced degree is no ticket to financial security.

The Rogers Park resident received a master's degree in forensic psychology in 2009, on top of a bachelor's degree in animal science from the University of Illinois.

But she has yet to use her credentials on the job — make that three jobs. Gray has cobbled together a trio of part-time gigs, one as a nanny and two waiting tables, to cover expenses and student loans.

The psychology degree was supposed to lift her out of the wage cellar, but she finished just as Illinois slashed its mental health budget, forcing her to compete against laid-off employees with experience, said Gray, who estimates she has sent out 200 resumes in the last year.

"Honestly, I thought I'd have a job that paid enough to support a family and to afford a vacation once a year. It doesn't seem like that crazy of a desire ... but it's almost impossible to make happen right now."

Graduating in a recession doesn't just mean fewer opportunities, but smaller paychecks compared to peers who launch in a robust economy. The first 10 years of employment is when workers see 70 percent of their overall wage growth, reports the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The slow start penalizes twentysomethings whose families have limited resources, say the researchers. Not only have "real" jobs evaporated, but this group must often pass on unpaid internships and valuable training that might pry open doors.

When money gets tight, Gray doesn't even think of asking her parents. "They help me out when they can, but I have three younger siblings behind me ... so I try to pull my own weight."

Jennifer Park, 28, is grateful for her safety net. She recently jettisoned her dream of being an artist to pursue a degree in nursing. She has moved back home to Schaumburg, which has enabled her to cut expenses while picking up prerequisites at Harper Community College.

It's not the script she envisioned, but the stigma has faded. The job site CollegeGrad.com's online poll reports that 64 percent of 2009 college graduates are back in the nest.

Her U-turn isn't just about the bottom line. Park was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2007, and while she has fully recovered, exposure to dedicated practitioners also influenced what she calls her "much wiser" decision.

Because Park also holds down a full-time job at the Apple Store at Woodfield Mall, it will be awhile before she's in scrubs.

This is where government and institutions could offer a boost, conclude the researchers: from more "learning communities" at community colleges (keeping commuter students more engaged, reducing the drop-out rate) to expanding Pell Grants.

"Not only is it an investment in our future labor force," Waters said, "but it would also shift the high costs off families and onto society, which will ultimately benefit."

Until then, the additional buttressing will come from Mom and Dad. But when does assistance turn into enabling?

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a psychology professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., and author of "Emerging Adulthood," said that knowing when to cut off aid is more art than science. The key question: Is the support helpful or counterproductive?

"Look for a plausible plan on how your child plans to move themselves toward self-sufficiency," Arnett explained. If your rudderless child is intensely job-hunting, making contacts and searching Web sites it could be smarter than taking a minimum-wage job.

"But if they're not going anywhere, it's a drain on you and not good for them," said Arnett, who is working on an advice book for this phase, due out next year.

Whatever happens in the future, Park has learned that career plans are best written in pencil.

"I never would have thought I'd be where I'm at now. I thought I'd be doing art, and married. But we're all doing the best we can ... just trying to figure out life."

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