Where Are They Now? Models of Success
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Gold Standard: Survivor
Complications during surgery caused high-school student Karmin Ayres to not only lose the feeling in her legs, but also many recent memories. One thing she did retain: her drive to be a SkillsUSA national officer.

BY TOM KERCHEVAL

Where Are They Now?
Models of Success 2002-2012
SkillsUSA Champions only puts actual members on its cover, but for its 10 years in publication, the stories behind the faces have been a mystery. Until now. Catch up with these former students, who've led very eventful lives in the past decade.

BY CRAIG E. MOORE

Going Viral:
Their Work Saves Lives
Step behind the doors of a federal research facility where the most dangerous viruses reside. Your guides? Students who are interning there.

BY ANN P. SCHREIBER

On the Cover:
SkillsUSA Champion Artiqua Dubois of Burlington, Vt. Photo by Lloyd Wolf.
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In keeping with a tradition of respect for the individuality of our members and our role in workforce development, SkillsUSA strives to ensure inclusive participation in all of our programs, partnerships and employment opportunities.

SkillsUSA
Reflecting on the Future

Executive Director Tim Lawrence has known SkillsUSA as a student member, instructor, industry partner and state director. Got a question? He can help.

Q: When planning for the future, is dwelling on the past necessary?

Tim: There’s a saying in business, “An organization that doesn’t have a history may not have a future.” While I work daily to help keep SkillsUSA moving forward, there is much to be learned from our past. We stay true to our mission by looking backward and forward at the same time.

In 2002, we launched a new publication to serve SkillsUSA members. We didn’t want it to be like other association magazines, full of newsy snippets that would be meaningless in a few months. Instead, our talented publications staff focused on building a magazine rich with personal stories: real lives and successes, problems faced and overcome, the greatness and the humanness that connects us. These stories are timeless and inspiring, and you can go online to read every single issue published.

To reflect this 10-year milestone, our staff sought out the SkillsUSA members who’ve appeared on the magazine’s covers. Our first model, Megan Barnes Vissari, served in Afghanistan before returning home to her original classroom. Others, like Ed Soto, have traveled the world. All who were interviewed felt their SkillsUSA experience made a difference in their lives. You could be a cover model, too, if you volunteer to be photographed at our national conference. It’s that simple.

If you are 18 today, you were 8 years old when this magazine began. It’s been around longer than Facebook (2004), the iPhone (2005) and the iPad (2008). What will the next 10 years bring? SkillsUSA has implemented Vision 2020, a long-range plan to: reach 1 million students and teachers annually; have 100,000 alumni members; connect through a partnership network that benefits education and industry and delivers superior services to members; and continue to be a thought leader in workforce education.

As many of you know from the goal-setting exercises in SkillsUSA’s Professional Development Program (PDP), you can’t achieve a goal unless you can frame it out, talk about it, and then work your plan until it becomes a reality. That’s what we’ve been doing for several years to position SkillsUSA for the future.

I hope you are positioning your own future and developing a plan for where you will be in 10 years. Write down what you want to accomplish. Begin to work toward those goals. Remember your own rich history and what you have learned along the way. It will serve you well.

Got questions about SkillsUSA or other topics? Email anyinfo@skillsusa.org or send a letter to the address on the facing page. Put “Ask Tim” in the subject line or mail address.
SkillsUSA All-Stars

Set to Swing For the Fences

Summer is a time for all-stars in Kansas City, Mo., and not just those playing in Major League Baseball’s All-Star Game in July. SkillsUSA’s heavy hitters will be there, too, for June’s 48th annual National Leadership and Skills Conference.

To accommodate preparations for the game, SkillsUSA shifted its conference schedule (June 23-27) back two days, but if you’re one of the lucky many to attend, you’ll realize it’s not the name of the day that matters, but what the day holds. Trust us, conference week will be filled with (cue bad baseball pun) a “mound” of emotions.

From the frenzied excitement of the Opening Ceremony to the awe of the SkillsUSA Championships, from the pride of the national community service event to the so-happy-you’ll-cry joy of the Awards Ceremony, the NLSC is the home run that clears the park. For more, visit: www.skillsusa.org/events/nlsc.shtml.

It’s another record membership year for SkillsUSA, and a record national conference turnout is expected, too, with an estimated 15,000 attendees. Will you be one of them?

Best of the Best Honored

Representing all the amazing SkillsUSA advisors across the nation, the regional winners for the Advisor of the Year award have been announced. The “Fantastic Five” are: James Berman (Region 1), Delcastle Technical High School, Wilmington, Del.; Debra Peabody (Region 2), Union Grove High School, McDonough, Ga.; Angela Haley (Region 3), Oakland Technical Campus Northeast, Pontiac, Mich.; Larry Batson (Region 4), Tulsa Technology Center (Okla.); and Donald Runyan (Region 5), Cleveland High School, Reseda, Calif.

One will be chosen as top advisor at SkillsUSA’s national conference. Visit: www.skillsusa.org/educators/aoy.shtml.
SkillsUSA wasn’t founded back in 1965 just for competitions and the development of technical skills, as important as those things are. It was also founded to help students become leaders and give back to their communities. That’s why each May, SkillsUSA holds its National Week of Service, inviting all chapters to conduct or promote a community service project to commemorate SkillsUSA’s founding. This year’s event is May 6-12. Visit www.skillsusa.org/events/service.shtml for a wealth of resources to help you plan. The first 50 chapters to submit a project report will receive a gift from SkillsUSA.

SkillsUSA offers a relationship that lasts for life

Stay in touch and involved with SkillsUSA is a great incentive to join our Alumni and Friends Association, but here’s another: For every five members an advisor gets to join the alumni group, he or she will be entered into a drawing for a VISA gift card. Every student who registers will be automatically entered into a gift-card drawing, too.

To officially enter, advisors must register students online (it’s free) at: www.skillsusa.org/supporters/alumni.shtml. Advisors must then email a message to alumni development manager Niki Clausen (nclausen@skillsusa.org) with their name, school, state and the names of the students being registered. The deadline is June 1, so start recruiting. Questions? Email Clausen at the address above.

Litwin, SkillsUSA executive director Tim Lawrence and SkillsUSA North Carolina’s president, Lance Atkinson, at the presidential address (inset: Litwin meets President Obama)
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An Old Life Stripped Away Uncovers a New Strength

When it rained, it didn’t just pour for Karmen Ayres: less than a year ago, her life was rocked by a hurricane of unrelenting health challenges. Her unrelenting will to fight was stronger.

Ten years ago, at age 7, Karmen Ayres watched helplessly as her active life ground to a halt.

“I was so ill that I lost all this weight and basically became nothing,” says the native of Aberdeen, Wash. Doctors discovered an egg-sized growth on her left kidney that was causing severe reflux, a condition in which fluids are forced back into the kidney instead of through the bladder. Ayres lost the kidney, but, almost miraculously, the dangerous growth disappeared.

“That’s why I’m here today,” she adds. “My dad calls me ‘Little Miss Magic.’”

For the next eight years, Ayres’ life seemed back on track. In ninth grade, she joined Aberdeen High School’s SkillsUSA chapter. “I love talking, so I joined the audio broadcasting program,” she says.

“My advisor, Mr. [Chuck] Veloni, is my inspiration. He pushed me to run for state, national office, everything.”

After becoming a SkillsUSA state officer, Ayres began preparing for a national campaign. Then the fainting spells began.

“The reflux came back in my right kidney,” she explains. “I was in serious pain, passing six kidney stones at a time.” Her emergency surgery seemed a total success — until she woke up.

“I didn’t know where I was or why,” Ayres says. “My mom tried to comfort me, and I started crying and told her to leave me alone. I didn’t know who she was.”

In another cruel turn, Ayres had lost all feeling in her legs due to a nerve being nicked during surgery.

Some might have raised a white flag at this point, but Ayres, still remembering her goal to become a national officer, launched a counter-offensive. With her parents’ help, memories and partial feeling in her legs began to return. She willed herself to walk again, much sooner than her doctors expected.

Incredibly, Ayres made it to SkillsUSA’s national conference, although campaigning on legs that sometimes collapsed. It was a victory in itself that she chose to keep secret. “I didn’t want that sympathy vote,” she explains. “I wanted them to vote for me because I was deserving.”

On the night of the Awards Ceremony, Ayres got her wish: she was the new high-school vice president. “I heard my name and just stood there. Everyone started hugging me, and I started bawling. I’d never felt so proud,” she adds.

Today, Ayres’ health prognosis is good, and “Little Miss Magic” is planning to become a nurse practitioner specializing in pediatrics.

“SkillsUSA taught me there are no limits in life,” she says. “It’s not just ‘the sky’s the limit.’ There is no limit.”

By Tom Kercheval
Ever since its launch 10 years ago, SkillsUSA Champions magazine has only put actual student members on the cover. And to support the firm belief that all our members are champions themselves, just the models’ names and hometowns have been revealed — until now.

Our second issue’s cover model, Ed Soto (Fall 2002), earned a bachelor’s degree in international business and finance from Johnson and Wales University in Denver. He received a master’s in business administration from Chatham University in Pittsburgh. Soto now works in corporate development for Bayer MaterialScience (aka BMS), a subgroup of Bayer that’s in the petrochemical business, headquartered in Germany. Soto says the experience has been great. “It’s quite beautiful here, and to be able to work in a different country, speak a different language and learn about different cultures is really amazing. I’ve been able to do a great deal of traveling. I’ve been to about 15 different countries!”
Megan Barnes Vissari (Summer 2002) was not only our first cover model, she was also featured in a story about her school’s top-rated program in culinary, baking and pastry arts. Since that debut issue, Vissari has gone from being a teaching assistant to soldier to mother. A lot can happen in 10 years. Her first career started at Mayfield Middle School in Columbia, Md., as a teaching assistant for children with special needs. Vissari spent a few years there before enlisting in the U.S. Air Force, where she was deployed to Afghanistan.

“I did armaments. I was a weapons specialist,” she says. Working on an HN-Warthog aircraft, her specialty was the GUA-8, a 30mm gun. “It’s about the size of two-and-a-half Volkswagen bugs. I can turn one out, with inspection, in about two days.”

After five years serving her country, Vissari found herself in a familiar location: the Center for Applied Technology North in Severn, Md. Her former instructors, Bruce Davis and Peter Ackerboom, needed a teaching assistant.

It made sense to return. The two teachers had a tremendous influence on her, and she had other fond memories of the school, having met her husband there. Vissari has since left teaching to tackle her next adventure: motherhood. Her daughter is 15 months old.

A silver medalist in Commercial Baking at the 2001 SkillsUSA Championships, she still bakes custom cakes for weddings and other events. “Have fun,” Vissari advises, “because if you don’t enjoy the competitions, you won’t enjoy your career.”
Lauren Sabatka (Summer 2003) has worked as a cosmetologist and esthetician in her home state of Ohio as well as New Jersey. After receiving an instructor’s license for cosmetology in Ohio, she’s eager to share her enthusiasm for the field as well as for career and technical education.

Brooke McLemore (Summer 2008) played softball for Georgia Southwestern State University for two years before returning home. She is in her senior year in the education program at Columbus State University. McLemore will begin student teaching in the fall and graduate in December.

Ramon Rincon (Spring 2003) earned a degree in economics from Rutgers University. While a freshman, he began volunteering as a mentor for HOPE Worldwide in Patterson, N.J. Rincon has continued to give his time while working in the world of finance. Now his volunteer work has ranged from the Philippines to the Dominican Republic. “I had the opportunity to teach inner-city youths everything from math to the merengue [form of dance],” he says. Rincon and his wife (pictured with children they met on a HOPE trip) now live in Philadelphia, where he is putting together a curriculum to teach inner-city youths and adults the basics of personal finance, banking and investments.
Channel Thomas Benjamin (Summer 2009) left the U.S. Virgin Islands to attend Inter-American University of Puerto Rico’s Metropolitan Campus in San Juan. After earning a bachelor’s degree in nursing, Benjamin (pictured above at her graduation) relocated to Wimauma, Fla., where she resides with her husband of two years. “We are very proud to be young homeowners,” she says. That doesn’t mean she’s going to be sitting around the house, however. “I am now studying to take the NCLEX (National Council Licensure Examination) to become a registered nurse in the state of Florida,” the student adds.

Sheila Vasquez (Summer 2006) served as SkillsUSA’s Region 1 vice president in the 2005-06 school year. Afterward, she moved from Rhode Island to attend Johnson and Wales University’s campus in North Miami, Fla. Vasquez graduated summa cum laude, with an associate’s degree in food and beverage management — and a bachelor’s degree in hospitality with a concentration in sales and meeting management. Whew! As if that isn’t enough, Vasquez is back in school. She’s attending Florida A&M University College of Law in Orlando. “I’m pursuing my juris doctorate degree,” she explains, planning to become an attorney and eventually a judge.

Vasquez says SkillsUSA played a big part in what she’s accomplished so far. “Because the organization has developed me into who I am today, SkillsUSA will always and forever have a special place in my heart.”

Matthew Ranucci (Spring 2004) studied criminal justice at Fitchburg (Mass.) State College. In fall 2006, he grew interested in global commerce and accepted a job with UPS. Now co-chair of the Comprehensive Health and Safety Program at the UPS center in Nashua, N.H., Ranucci continues to draw from his SkillsUSA experience. He believes his life was set in motion by a Lou Holtz quote heard in state officer training: “Ability is what you’re capable of doing, motivation determines what you do, and attitude determines how well you do it.”
Kim Benitez Alvarado (Winter 2004) attended the University of Texas at Dallas, graduating with honors. She and her husband serve as youth pastors in McKinney, Texas. Her work with teens has inspired her to pursue a law degree beginning this fall.

Brittany Austin (Summer 2004) is pursuing a degree in psychology at the University of Cincinnati, hoping to be a social worker. A medical coordinator for a company that serves those with developmental disabilities, she says the “love of her life” is daughter Brielle, 2.

John Abreu (Fall 2004) went to Stony Brook (N.Y.) University before joining Merrill Lynch as a financial advisor. Fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, he holds several professional registrations. Abreu is on the business advisory board of Suffolk County Community College and on the committee of Long Island Cares.

Holly Petersen (Winter 2008) is at Concordia University in Seward, Neb., where she’ll get a degree in exercise science. Having toured nine times with school choirs, Petersen says SkillsUSA helped her “adapt a spirit of flexibility in the challenges I encounter.”

Tanya Quinn (Winter 2009) graduated from Utah Valley University’s culinary program. When not busy with her young son, she can be found catering luncheons, weddings and film productions. Quinn also does improv comedy. SkillsUSA opened the door to her being offered a faculty position at UVU, she says.

Lowell Rose (Fall 2009) studies broadcast meteorology at Mississippi State University in Starkville. He works part time as assistant to the university’s associate director of housing. The Richmond, Va., native made local TV news after appearing on our cover.

Paul Satyanathan (Spring 2010) is a full-time student at the University of Findlay in Ohio. He is currently working on a degree in physical therapy. While in school, he has a part-time job at a restaurant in nearby Tiffin.
Going Viral

Their Work Saves Lives

By Ann P. Schreiber

Angela Camargo loves doing gel electrophoresis. *Hub?*

“You use a gel, and it has a matrix,” the high-school student begins, “and you put your DNA into a well. The DNA travels down because you put it into a buffer that has electrical current. DNA is negatively charged, so it tends to go to the positive end of the gel. The DNA moves down, and as it moves down, smaller strands separate from bigger strands. The larger strands stay up higher, and the smaller ones go lower.”

Camargo applies this technique in her internship at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Frederick, Md. “If you’re looking for a gene or a specific type of fragment of DNA that you need, you’ll be able to identify it based on the size of the DNA,” she explains.

Even if the technique isn’t completely understood by those without scientific training, the importance of the work is. Since 1969, USAMRIID has spearheaded research for medical solutions — vaccines, drugs, diagnostics and information — to protect military service members from biological threats. At the facility, which includes Biosafety Level (BSL) 3 and 4 laboratories, Camargo works with the proteins of the Lassa virus, a BSL-4 virus that can cause viral hemorrhagic fever.

ON THE WEB

- Learn more about the Frederick Career and Technology Center’s biomedical sciences program at: [http://ctc.sites.fcps.org/biomedical](http://ctc.sites.fcps.org/biomedical)
- Resources to help teachers expand options for women and girls in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) can be found at: [www.stemequitypipeline.org/Resources/Default.aspx](http://www.stemequitypipeline.org/Resources/Default.aspx)
Camargo, a senior in the biomedical sciences program at Frederick Career and Technology Center (CTC), is one of many students who’ve had internships either at USAMRIID or at the National Cancer Institute, which is also nearby.

Instructor Kathy Koops says “these internships allow the students to put the skills and concepts they have learned in ‘biomed’ into practice in a real-life setting. They are able to refine their skills, broaden their knowledge and see how these concepts apply to real life. Also, they have the opportunity to work with first-class scientist mentors, who influence them tremendously.

“This program is very rigorous and is an elective,” adds Koops, who uses curricula from Project Lead the Way. “They could take ceramics or weight lifting and get the same credit. They are willing to work hard because they love what they are learning and they are goal oriented. They see this program as a stepping stone toward their ultimate goal of becoming a health-care provider or research scientist.”

Meagan Parker’s interest was sparked by her eighth-grade science teacher, whom she says was her all-time favorite. She learned about the biomedical sciences program during a presentation by CTC students at her middle school and decided to visit the technology center.

“I came in and they were working with the skeletons that are used to put the body systems on as we learn,” she says. “It really caught my interest. I loved it. I’ve always loved science, so that’s how I got here.”

Now a junior, she’s making the same presentations to middle-school students — and is eager to get started on her internship, which involves working over summer breaks as well as during the school year.

“I applied this year [for an internship] to the National Cancer Institute. I'm not old enough to apply to USAMRIID, unfortunately, but I'm really excited,” Parker adds.

SkillsUSA has improved her communications skills, she says, and “that should help me in this area.

“I will do research on anything. I love science. I don’t really have a specific topic of interest. I like learning everything we learn in biomed, so [I’ll go] anywhere they want to put me.”

Senior Megan Toms says she, too, loves being in the biomedical sciences program.

“I was discouraged by my guidance counselor to come here, but I knew that this type of program was exactly what I wanted to do. I am very proud to be a CTC student.”

“T’m really shy,” Toms adds, “but SkillsUSA taught me that even if you’re really shy, you can become a leader. I participated in two fall leadership conferences, and I earned my statesman and

“SkillsUSA shows that I have involvement in my school and leadership opportunities. I definitely think that’s had a role in getting accepted for college.”

— Megan Toms

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advanced statesman degrees. That helped me a lot in learning the professionalism to go on to the workplace and making a résumé and a portfolio. Even colleges are asking for résumés now.”

Toms competed in SkillsUSA’s Promotional Bulletin Board event, which “really helped me to come out of my shell, because I had to practice my speech in front of teachers and other students,” she remembers. “It really helped me to become a better public speaker and to be more confident in my abilities.”

She adds that SkillsUSA’s Health Occupations Knowledge Bowl competition was a great way for her to learn how to interact on a team.

“I’m very serious about my life and my career and my education. SkillsUSA shows that I have involvement in my school and leadership opportunities. I definitely think that’s had a role in getting accepted for college.” Toms plans to attend Stevenson University in Owings Mills, Md., where she’s earned a Presidential Scholarship, the school’s highest award.

The three are passionate about their internship opportunities and not fazed by the biohazards they may be facing. Because of the involvement of their scientist mentors and the safety precautions in place, they feel safe being in these labs. And, they find the work meaningful.

As Camargo says, “Having the opportunity to work with that bacteria or whatever it is and being able find something that can kill it, but not kill the person in the process, that’s really rewarding. I know for the Lassa virus, there is no cure.

“They have treatment, but not a cure. It’s a hemorrhagic fever, and it causes organ failure and bleeding from every orifice in your body. It’s really horrible, kind of like Ebola. I get the opportunity to work with something without a cure, and I could eventually be one of the people who finds a cure. To help the soldiers overseas and maybe the natives of that area who also get infected by the virus, I think that’s really rewarding.”

Parker is a bit awestruck by the possibility of being involved in finding a cure for cancer, among other things. “You have to set goals for yourself,” she points out. “I think that’s what’s great about working in science: you could be putting something out there that could lead to a cure. Science definitely is my passion. It’s what I want to pursue in my life.”

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Reputation’s on the Line Anytime You Post Online

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter rule the cyber highways, but it’s not just your friends who are interested in browsing your timeline. Businesses are increasingly checking these sites to learn about job candidates.

As a class, divide into two groups. In one, talk about what you and your friends usually post and share on social networking sites. In the other, pretend you’re a business about to research a potential hire and discuss what sorts of things you might find online that would negatively affect your decision to hire that person. Come together as a class and compare the lists to see where there’s crossover. Discuss ways to preserve your rep online. Is just making everything “private” enough?

For more, look for SkillsUSA’s Leveraging Your Leadership with Effective Communication booklet. The booklet will be unveiled at this year’s national conference and will be available online this summer at: www.skillsusa.org/store/.

A good reputation is more valuable than money.

— Publilius Syrus

Find the photo, win a prize

No, the picture on the left isn’t abstract art. It’s actually a distorted part of another photo in this issue. Find the original photo and send us the page number where it appears to win a SkillsUSA sport duffel bag (first prize) or travel mug (second prize). To enter, email your answer, name, address and phone number to: anyinfo@skillsusa.org (include “Photo Contest” in the subject line). Or, send to: SkillsUSA Photo Contest, 14001 SkillsUSA Way, Leesburg, VA 20176. One first- and one second-prize winner will be drawn at random from the correct entries. Entries must be received by Aug. 1.

Congratulations to last issue’s winners: Richard Loehnig of Santa Ana, Calif., and Jessica Reed of Clarksville, Ohio.
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TEACHING KIDS HOW TO MEASURE FOR SUCCESS

Students at Bethlehem (Pa.) Area Vocational-Technical School have developed The Big Inch Project. It teaches younger students how to read inches on a ruler, down to one-sixteenth of an inch.

The vo-tech students travel to different elementary schools and use interactive tools to teach how to read and understand the markings on tape measures and rulers. They’ve developed props, a downloadable lesson plan and a tutorial video, which can be viewed at: www.bethlehemavts.org/BIGINCHWEBSITE/resources.html.

Tricycles for ‘TOTs’

Waubonsie Valley and Metea Valley high-school SkillsUSA chapters in Illinois recently joined Project Lead The Way (PLTW) classes in assembling special tricycles for the Therapy Oriented Tricycle (TOT) program.

Students from these Aurora-area schools joined the TOT project founders, Gordon and Connie Hankins, to fill back orders of tricycles for children who need rehabilitation.

PLTW students assisted in redesigning parts to cut costs and speed assembly time. SkillsUSA at Waubonsie Valley High put together 39 tricycles in three hours. Metea Valley High’s chapter held an assembly day and completed more than 20 tricycles.

Funds flock toward scarecrows

Finding a unique fundraiser can be like grasping at straws, but not at Franklin County Career and Technology Center in Chambersburg, Pa. To support the Cumberland Valley Breast Care Alliance, SkillsUSA students built scarecrows to represent their trade areas. The figure to the right was created by the diesel students, and others included likenesses of three school administrators built from plumbing equipment. A scarecrow in a chef’s jacket cooked a skeleton in a pot. Landscaping and horticulture students made the face for their scarecrow out of flowers, and the engineering program created theirs with moving parts. By charging people to vote on a favorite design, the students raised more than $1,000.
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SkillsUSA Champions features our members’ photography. We’re looking for images of SkillsUSA chapters in action, or ones that show individual members’ concentration or perseverance. For details, email thall@skillsusa.org (put “Image Photo” in the subject header) or write SkillsUSA Champions, 14001 SkillsUSA Way, Leesburg, VA 20176. The photographer’s chapter is awarded $150.

SkillsUSA will forever have a special place in my heart. It was a great honor to participate in the competition and a real thrill to be included in the magazine!

Former cover model Tanya Quinn of Utah, now a caterer on movie sets.

I am very aware of the important work SkillsUSA is doing to ensure we will have a skilled, highly trained workforce that will help us continue to be a driving force in the global economy.

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