Tough times in Clark County

STARTING OVER

“They are saying, ‘Now is the chance to find out what I want to do.’”

— Katharine Keane, Clark College Career Center, on people considering retraining

Dena Corby: changing careers

At 52, Vancouver woman in college with goal of being a registered nurse

By KATHIE DURBIN
Columbian staff writer

Six months ago, Dena Corby of Vancouver had a $45,000-a-year job in sales and project management at a small software marketing company. She didn’t expect to be launching a new career at 52.

But these aren’t normal times.

Now she’s a pre-nursing student at Clark College. Her day starts with a 7 a.m. kickboxing class, followed by algebra and expository writing, then

Dena Corby, 52, lost her job selling software when the economy tanked. She’s at Clark College now, taking prerequisite courses to become a nursing student and a kickboxing class to stay in shape.

STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

INSIDE: With jobs scarce, young mom returns to school

Page A5
With jobs scarce, young mom returns to school

She wants to be able to afford things for her 3 kids

By LAURA MCVICER
Columbian reporter

Cheitlara Weidemann is glad her kids aren’t old enough to understand the difference between new and used. That way they can’t raise their eyebrows when she buys them $2 shirts at Goodwill. An unemployed former living on food stamps, her life runs on a razor-thin budget.

She has enough to purchase clothes for her children at thrift stores, but not department stores. She has enough to buy food, but not toys.

When gas prices go up, extras go down. When food stamps run out, so do nutritious meals.

Out of work for three years, Weidemann has had increasing difficulty finding even a lead on a job, more retail and food services businesses — which fit her job experience — scale back. Competition for open positions continues to be fierce.

"Since the whole recession thing, it’s been tough," she said. "After awhile it really makes you discouraged."

The 27-year-old Vancouver woman decided this spring to enroll at Clark College to pursue a degree in early childhood education, and is among a growing number of nontraditional students seeking higher education as a refuge from a fruitless job search.

It’s also a better plan for her kids, Laylah, 7; Shano, 6; and Audrey, 3, who are counting more by the minute and wanting common luxuries, such as a trip to Disneyland.

"I’m scared that if I don’t find a good job now, I won’t be able to afford things later," Weidemann said.

After Weidemann split from her children’s father three years ago, she quit her job at a Portland restaurant. Figuring it would be easy to find a new job, she moved from Portland to Vancouver.

Her timing couldn’t have been worse. At first, job interviews came frequently. ly, though a job offer never materialized. Then, even interviews were sparse. Weidemann commuted the Westfield Vancouver mall and restaurants and found fewer and fewer “Now Hiring” signs.

Charlotte Weidemann, center, prepares for an English class at Clark College with classmates and friend Crystal Hooper at Hooper’s apartment. Weidemann’s daughter Audrey, 3, right, and her two siblings, Shano and Laylah, stay with Hooper’s boyfriend while the women attend class.

Algebra is one of the classes. Dona Corby will need to pass to gain admittance to Clark College’s nursing program. She figures it will take at least five years to earn her RN license.

Starting over:

From Page A1

her new goal — to become a registered nurse — is at least four years away. She won’t complete her prerequisites until Fall 2012. And, that she can expect a three-term wait to get into nursing courses in Clark College’s popular three-year program.

Clark College has experienced the forward edge of the rapidly restructuring economy. Enrollment for this program is up by 16 percent.

Katherine Keane, director of the Clark College Career Center, says Chicagoans see three basic attitudes in the people who show up at her office:

“We’re seeing a lot of people come in and see they are here to sharpen their skills, improve their resume, make themselves more marketable for the future.”

“Others say, ‘Lost my job. I don’t get it. I worked there for 35 years.’ It feels like they did something wrong, but they really didn’t.”

In the past six months, Weidemann also noticed that more businesses were laying people off.

After she began volunteering in her children’s day care class, Weidemann discovered a passion for working with young children.

“I always wanted to go back to school, but I didn’t know what to do,” she said.

Her coursework is paid for by federal grants for low-income students. She expects to graduate in four years.

Now, she splits her time among class, taking her children to and from day care and being a single mom. Weidemann expects to continue living lean when she eventually does secure a full-time job.

When she had work, she admittedly overindulged in frivolous expenses, such as new clothes, to feel better about herself.

“I’ve looked back and when things were cheaper, I was a shopaholic,” she said. “Between buying that myself and for my kids, I had too much (stuff).”

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