

**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



Surviving the recession

A five-part series

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Starting Over: New Horizons



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

**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.**

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



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# With jobs scarce, young mom returns to school

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

By LAURA McVICKER  
Columbian staff writer

Charlotte 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 mother 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, as more

retail and food services businesses — which fit with her job experience — scale back. Competition for open positions continues to be fierce.

"Since the whole recession thing, it's been tougher," 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 reprieve from a fruitless job search.

It's also a better plan for her kids, Laylah, 7, Shane, 6, and Audrey, 3, who are costing 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 her mom's house in Vancouver.

Her timing couldn't have been worse. At first, job interviews came frequent-



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

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

ly, though a job offer never materialized. Then, even interviews were sparse. Weidemann canvassed the Westfield

Vancouver mall and restaurants and found fewer and fewer "Now Hiring" signs.

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 doing that for myself and for my kids, I had too much (stuff)."

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hours of homework.

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

Clark College has experienced the forward edge of the rapidly restructuring economy. Enrollment in worker retraining programs this summer is up by 58 percent.

Katharine Keane, director of the Clark College Career Center, says she's noticed three basic attitudes in the people who show up at her office:

"We're seeing a lot of people come in and say they are here to sharpen their skills, improve their résumé, make themselves more marketable for the future.

"Others say, 'I lost my job. I don't get it. I worked there for 25 years.' It feels like they did something wrong, but they really didn't."



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Algebra is one of the classes Dena 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's license.

Then there are the Dena Corbys, who are using the economic downturn as an opportunity to re-examine their priorities. "They are saying, 'Now is the chance to find out what I want to do,'" Keane said.

With just \$6,000 in savings, and no unemployment checks coming now that she's enrolled in college, Corby is not sure how she'll pay the bills while she learns a new profession.

Yet she is feeling good about her new direction.

Until mid-March, Corby worked for Gateway Solutions in Portland. The small company sells business-to-business software that allows companies

to track customers, suppliers, sales and personnel data.

Fifteen months ago, Gateway had lots of projects in the works. But when the economy tanked, that changed.

The company's software package represents a big investment for a mid-sized company, Corby said. "You could be looking at spending \$15,000 to \$50,000 just to get your (software) licenses." Customization of the software for individual business clients can run as high as \$100,000.

"As the economy started going down and down, people were holding off on implementation," she said. "They were saying, 'Maybe next quarter.' When the

economy turns down, upgrading your software is not a necessity. People will put it off to another time."

At Gateway Solutions, "There was still money coming in from service work, but the new projects paid my salary," Corby said. "And no one was buying."

She was laid off March 15.

And she asked herself what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

She decided she'd spent enough time shackled to a computer. "I want to be working with people. At Gateway, there would be times I would not see anyone for hours a day."

At a career seminar, she learned that health care is a growth industry. She decided to

set her sights on nursing.

The Oregon Employment Division paid for her to take a monthlong certified nursing assistant course, which qualifies her to work in nursing homes. She plans to work part-time while she attends school full-time at Clark. Eventually, she hopes to earn a four-year degree and to use her technology skills in the nursing profession. Someday, she might want to teach.

For now, though, she's lugging heavy textbooks and immersing herself in the basics.

Corby makes mortgage payments on a three-bedroom townhouse in Hazel Dell. Her car is paid for. She has given up just about every nonessential expense: meals out, alcoholic

beverages, movies, foreign travel. She buys potatoes and carrots in bulk. She has cut back on driving. She plans to get a roommate.

What she's not willing to relinquish — aside from her two cats — is her health club membership, which costs \$35 a month.

"I can't give up my gym," she says. "It keeps me sane. I go there three or four times a week. Otherwise I would have more health problems."

Corby will be in her mid-50s before she begins her career as a nurse. That doesn't worry her; she figures she'll work well past retirement age.

"Given the economy," she said, "I will probably have to work until at least age 70."