

## Tales of the job seekers

### Experienced workers ride out a tough labor market

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Doreen Capasso has been laid off several times in her marketing career. It's the nature of the field, she said. But this time around, it's worse.

She lost her job through downsizing 15 months ago, and she is still not employed in the field where she spent more than 15 years honing her skills.

To make ends meet, she cobbles together whatever she can. She cleans houses. She works as a barista on the early shift at Starbucks coffee shop miles away from her Oak Park home. The hourly rate, she said, is pitiful, but the saving grace is that the job comes with health insurance. She has been a spokeswoman for a sausage company, traveling to grocery stores with a cook to offer samples and extol the product's virtues to shoppers.

Meanwhile, she tries to do as much freelance marketing work as she can to keep herself connected and in practice.

"Even though I am considered a professional executive, there is still nothing that I won't do," Capasso said. "Nothing is beneath me. I work about 50 hours a week. It is all about survival. But I've never been so tired in my life."

As the economy struggles to get back on its feet, women across the Chicago area who have been laid off are working hard to stay balanced--financially. To cover the bills, many have taken on multiple part-time jobs. Others spend their days sending out countless resumes. Still others pray that the job market will pick up and turn around soon.

Although the unemployment rate for adult women held steady in March at 5 percent, it's up from January's 4.7 percent. And many experts say the economy's position remains precarious.

Amid the economic turmoil, the service sector has been hit hard, and "a lot of women hold service sector jobs," said Susan Lambert, associate professor in the University of Chicago's School of Social Service, who has studied how corporations structure jobs in

hospitality, retail, banking and package delivery services.

In those areas "employers pass variations in consumer demand onto lower-level workers to absorb it," Lambert said. "There are full-time and part-time jobs, but how they play out, especially in retail, is that full-time workers are regularly shorted hours. You're just not guaranteed you're going to have a particular income."

Chicagoan Amada Pangborn, a front desk agent at a downtown hotel, would love to be able to count on a 40-hour workweek.

Pangborn's hours depend on the hotel's occupancy rate; sometimes she only is able to work a three-day week. Coincidentally, after a period of unemployment, Pangborn's initial interview for the job was on Sept. 11, 2001.

Her mother also was affected by the downturn in airline travel. She lost her job as a food service worker at O'Hare International Airport when one of the food service companies closed.

"We're trying to survive this," said Pangborn, 37, the mother of a 4-year old daughter. "I live with my parents, fortunately; we all kind of share the little bills here."

Pangborn's marriage also was a casualty of the economy. When her husband couldn't find a job as a purchasing agent in Chicago, he went to Michigan to work with his brother. Upon his return, there was friction with her parents and the couple separated.

Pangborn has considered trying to find a part-time job to supplement her hotel income, but she said it would prevent her from picking up her daughter at school.

"It's challenging for low-income women, in particular, to have more than one job because of the demands of employment as well as child-care and school demands," said Rose Karasti senior policy associate at Chicago Jobs Council, a coalition of about 100 community groups that help the disadvantaged find jobs.

Losing a job can be a drawn-out process.

Miriam Vargas was anxious for months as she watched orders slowing and the workload diminishing at the small trophy-manufacturing company where she worked for 10 years as a "girl Friday," an all around go-to person who shifted easily from office to factory.

Her boss kept her on the payroll until the bitter end, when the company went out of business almost a year ago. Vargas still has not found comparable office work.

"This is the worst job market I've ever seen," said Vargas, a 50-year-old mother of three. "I've worked since I was 16, through high school, through my pregnancies. I've always worked."

"Now companies are falling like dominoes, especially the mom-and-pop businesses, and the ones still open are all downsizing and they're giving 10 jobs to one person. An extra person raises their payroll, so they just overwork the one they have and don't worry about anyone else."

Vargas still has two children living at home in the Belmont Cragin area, while they attend school, and she cares for her 96-year-old father, an invalid. Her 29-year-old son helps Vargas with the bills, while she continues to apply for jobs and takes classes at Strive Employment Service in Humboldt Park to get tips on improving her presentation to potential employers.

"I feel like a failure," she said. "It's very rough out there for everyone, but as a woman I think it's rougher. They look at you as if you're not qualified or capable of doing things. Still."

Harriet Byrd Scanlon, 48, lost her job as a computer consultant in August. Other than a job as a store clerk during the holidays, she has not even been able to find a part-time job.

Separated from her husband, Scanlon, who lives in Beverly, said income from some property she owns helped for a while, but her tenants aren't doing well either.

"Some of them don't pay the rent like they should, and it's becoming hard to pay the utility bills. Just looking at the heating bill brought me to tears.

"I got an extension of unemployment [compensation] but that will be over in a few months. It's really scary."

Andrea Thames, 29, of Chicago, has been laid off twice, mostly recently in July 2000. A computer systems analyst with more than one college degree and a license to sell financial securities, she has been making ends meet through temporary jobs, usually as an executive assistant to CEOs, managers and lawyers.

The pay, she said, is usually at the "low end, not what I was used to making," but she's making ends meet.

The job search, she said, is a headache. "Even as you take the time to interview with a company, you don't even get a response, saying 'we've enjoyed you but you're not a good fit.'

"With my set of skills, the excuse I'm often given is that I'm overqualified, that I'll be bored and won't stay in the job long."

Lack of courtesy on the part of prospective employers is a theme running through almost every conversation with women looking for work.

Maxine Bickart, 29, of Calumet City said she has applied for 100 to 125 jobs in her field,

human resources. She has received two responses.

"These are big companies," she said. "As a professional, it's only common courtesy to return a phone call, send a thanks-but-no-thanks card."

Capasso agreed.

"The employers out there make you feel like they have a job and then [it turns out] they're just shopping, because they know they can," she said. "I have been through umpteen interviews, psychological testing, IQ testing, and no one has ever called me again."

While Bickart continues to look for a job, hoping she finds it before unemployment compensation and her savings run out, she is working on a master's degree to enhance her skills.

Linda Darragh, vice president of the Women's Business Development Center in Chicago, said that the center's classes are more filled than ever and that two-thirds of those in classes about starting a business are unemployed.

Rhonda Finklea, 31, of Oak Park, was one of them. The mother of a 9-year-old daughter, Finklea was laid off after 13 years in a job as a project manager at a large advertising agency. She would like to avoid returning to "the corporate environment."

Instead, she plans to open a day spa geared to girls 8 to 18 by summer. She is confident about her concept and her marketing research, but she said, "It's scary. I'm taking a big risk because I'm using everything I have to start this."

Pangborn might have been speaking for all the unemployed and underemployed when she said: "We're hoping for a better future. We pray every day."

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