

PURSUING A DREAM

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Pushed in a new direction

By Ted Siefer, Globe Correspondent | May 10, 2009

If you were recently laid off, you've probably heard enough about "blessings in disguise" and "silver linings."

But for some people, these aren't just platitudes. Consider the banker who became a foreclosure prevention counselor. Or the marketing executive who now heads a catering department. Or the investment analyst making a career from his true passion: model trains. For them, a job loss was just the jolt they needed to set off on a more fulfilling - if not necessarily more lucrative - path.

To be sure, starting over after a layoff is not for everyone. It involves time, energy, lengthy training, and a lot of reflection.

But for people who have long nourished visions of more satisfying jobs, losing a job can be a catalyst, said Dan King, who heads Career Planning and Management Inc. in downtown Boston.

"Sometimes a layoff gives people just the push they need to change their reality," said King. "If you were just waiting for the right time, now you have the incentive to do it."

Just don't expect it to be easy.

Finance to food

For Deb Flohr, the decision to go to culinary school meant spending the better part of a year living out of her car and sleeping on friends' couches. The lifestyle was a far cry from the one she had before August of 2006, when she lost a high-paying sales job at a financial services company.

Flohr's decision to ditch 15 years of spreadsheets and pantsuits for dough and bakers' whites came suddenly, when she strolled past the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, and saw a sign for an orientation session.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm going to apply and figure out a way to go,'" she said. "My boyfriend said I was crazy."

Flohr said the move was about reclaiming the career she was meant to have, as opposed to the one she fell into. Her parents owned a hotel and restaurant in Killington, Vt., and in her final years of college, she worked in event planning. She had hoped to make a career of it, but took a job out of college at a financial services company, and one thing led to another.

"You get the financial responsibilities and you feel like you can't leave," she said. "I was miserable and looking for something else. Then [my company] started to lay people off, and I decided it's time to take that leap of faith."

After completing the year-long program at the culinary school in 2007, Flohr worked at restaurants on Cape Cod and in Savannah, Ga. Then responding to an ad, she took an hourly job with Wolfgang Puck at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, a job that in December led to her promotion to director of catering.

Flohr has hefty student loans, topping \$20,000, as well as a mortgage. She estimates she's taking a 75 percent pay cut this year, compared with what she was making in financial services. But she doesn't regret her decision for a moment. "I've finally figured out what I want to be when I grow up," she said.

Banker turned counselor

Over a 30-year career in banking, Joe Madaio has taken his share of knocks. He was laid off during the banking crisis of the early 1990s, and a couple years ago, parted ways with a South Shore credit union that was experiencing financial problems. Now, he works for a nonprofit in Brockton as a foreclosure counselor, and when people ask, he says he's doing well. "Foreclosures are a growth industry in Brockton," he quips.

It may seem like an unlikely transition, from representing banks to helping people keep banks off their backs. But even before getting laid off, Madaio was involved in a local initiative that brought together housing advocates and business leaders to address foreclosures, which have hit Brockton as hard as any community in the state. After he lost his job, these contacts helped lead to his position with Neighborhood Housing Services of the South Shore.

In addition to his banking experience, Madaio's own bouts with unemployment allow him to empathize with homeowners struggling with job loss.

At 60, Madaio has no illusions of getting rich from his new career. But there are other rewards, including the feeling that he's serving a greater purpose than a company's bottom line.

"You're not in the pressure cooker the way you are in private industry," he said. "I wanted to do something to give back to the community. Certainly that's the case in this role here."

Writing about a hobby

When Barry Lewis was recently laid off from his job at Boston mutual fund company Fidelity Investments, he turned to model trains. Now, he's writing marketing copy for a company that makes the miniature locomotives that Lewis has collected since he was a kid.

Lewis had written occasionally for the model train company MTH Electric Trains of Maryland for several years, but since losing his job he has cranked up his output. MTH, Lewis says, is the main competitor to the company synonymous with model trains, Lionel, of Chesterfield, Mich.

He expects this year to write about eight product catalogs, in which he highlights the specifications and historical significance of the dozens of train lines the company makes. He also writes a weekly newsletter for train collectors, and he's hoping the company will let him revamp its website, complete with a blog that would showcase MTH's products.

Lewis, 60, recognizes that making a living from model trains will be a challenge, so he hopes to cobble together other freelance writing gigs. But like "The Little Engine that Could," he's motivated and determined, which career advisers say is crucial to a successful professional transition.

For Lewis, who studied filmmaking in college, the work for MTH is a return to his creative roots after 15 years of writing financial reports for Fidelity. Lewis says he's still not earning nearly as much as he did before he was laid off, but the work is far more satisfying - and fun.

"All the boring stuff from your 401(k) that you throw away, that's the stuff I would write," Lewis said. "But with these catalogs, people stop and say, 'Hey, I like what you did there.' "

Learning to build homes

Jack Witherington was laid off twice in one day. It was the late 1990s, just as the bubble was beginning to deflate. Two heavy equipment manufacturing companies that make engines and trucks and employed Witherington as a sales agent informed him that they would cancel his contract.

With a wife, a child, and a baby on the way at the time, Witherington didn't take his next move lightly. He decided to haul himself from the Philadelphia area up to the Berkshires to go to the Heartwood School, an intensive program in timber-frame construction, which uses traditional beam building techniques and requires a high level of carpentry skills. This college-educated son of an executive at a small manufacturing company wanted to build houses.

"Since I was a little boy I've loved to work with my hands," Witherington said. "I wanted to build houses and

homes that were special and part of the next generation of buildings that would be preserved with reverence in a 100-plus years."

Witherington, 42, said losing his job - or jobs - gave him the chance to seriously consider what he wanted to do.

Timber-frame construction appealed to Witherington because he would be building homes with a level of quality and craftsmanship not common in most suburban construction. He decided on Heartwood because it had a good reputation and because it was an intensive program. He figured he would be able to quickly get back into the working world.

He served as an apprentice at Heartwood over a summer while completing the courses, and then he began working for Bensonwood, an established timber-frame builder in New Hampshire. Witherington returned to the Philadelphia area, where his family lives, and in 2003, he started his own company, the Methods & Materials Building Co.

The company has steadily grown, although Witherington says business has slowed considerably since the housing market tanked.

But he's confident things will turn around, and in the meantime, the company is getting by doing smaller-scale jobs.

For Witherington, getting laid off truly proved a blessing in disguise as he chased a dream of building high-quality homes.

"I figured that was my chance to do it," he said. "You only regret the things you never try." ■