

# Workers face tough transition when local jobs fold

WENATCHEE, Wash. (AP) — The walk across a college campus is a bit awkward when you're a 58-year-old student, and Gary Moog will tell you all about it.

His classmates could be his grandchildren. The paperwork to get settled could bury him.

"I thought college was long behind me," Moog said. "I think the older you are, the scarier it gets."

With retirement four years away, Moog was laid off from the sanitation crew at the Tree Top juicing plant in January. That day, his old, comfortable world stopped.

So one foot after the other, Moog returned to school recently at Wenatchee Valley College (WVC) to pursue a new life as an accountant.

He's not alone. About 17 former Tree Top workers enrolled at WVC, and eight are pursuing a commercial truck driver's license at Big Bend Community College. The other 35 either found jobs, relocated to other juicing plants or may still be looking, said Lane Horner, spokesman for Teamsters Local 760.

The road from layoff to another career is a winding one, littered with obstacles and paperwork. While workers wrestle with life decisions and loss, an uneasy question looms over the process: What will become of you?

Former Longview Fibre employees know the feeling. More than 100 people lost their jobs December 2006, a year before Tree Top shut down. About 23 have gone back to college.

Tree Top workers gathered in the lunchroom in December, about 25 per shift, for a meeting that employment agencies call "rapid response." Representatives from WVC, the state Employment Security Department, SkillSource, WorkSource and the Teamsters Union 760 were called to talk about options.

The transition started with a stack of paperwork. First, the application for unemployment insurance. Workers then enrolled in SkillSource workshops to find a new career and learn computer skills, job searches, resumes and interviews.

Going back to college requires another stack of paperwork: a financial aid application, worker retraining application, unemployment verification, an application for extended unemployment benefits, an admissions application, assessment test, class schedules, buying books and photo identification, said Kristin Munn, an academic adviser at WVC.

"The problem was if we quit, we weren't eligible for any of the programs at the end," said Wells, a former Longview employee. "You had to ride it out until they laid you off. We had two-and-a-half weeks to make a life decision to get all the paperwork done and get into winter quarter last year when we started."

On one hand, going to college is intimidating. On the other hand, the low unemployment rate makes for an easier job search, although the available jobs don't all pay the same.

Relocation is an option, especially in the timber industry.

"Mills are so ephemeral, they come and go," said former Longview employee Alex Riggs, who enrolled in WVC's nursing program. "I could have found a job as a saw filer somewhere else, but how long before that mill closes?"

Age is another factor. At least six at Tree Top and several Longview employees were within a year of retirement.

"When the plant closed I started looking for jobs and the only thing I could find was \$8 an hour jobs at mini-marts," Moog said. "Of course they can't say this, but I could tell they weren't looking for someone 58 years old."

Unemployment covers about half to 75 percent of their pre-layoff income, several former employees said. It will also cover living expenses for 26 weeks, although workers must still look for jobs while in college.

College can't happen without financial help for most. Enter the state Worker Retraining program, which pays full tuition and books, a bill that could top \$2,000 depending on the program and number of credits, Munn said.

"The idea is to help students back into the workplace with occupation-specific skills as soon as possible," said Carolyn Cummins, a policy associate for the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. "We've found through employer surveys there are considerable gaps in education between workers who have less than a bachelor's degree but more than a high school diploma."

If Worker Retraining won't cover it all, other sources of funding kick in, such as SkillSource financial aid or the federal Trade Act fund, for which workers must prove they're leaving a dying profession to study for a high-demand job, or they were pushed out of their job by global trade.

Other programs, called commissioner approved training and extended training benefits, will grant 26 more weeks of unemployment and exempt students from conducting three job searches a week as required by unemployment insurance.

Several workers said approval is hard to secure for aid beyond Worker Retraining.

Former Longview employee Frank Campbell's Trade Act paperwork was denied twice after he'd already enrolled at WVC, he said. Campbell won both appeals.

"Besides trying to go to class, we're developing all this paperwork to prove that we should be there," Campbell said.

Jason Boswell, a former Tree Top employee, had been enrolled at WVC for two quarters when he was nearly forced into taking a job at a packing shed. He is working through local legislators and union representatives to help convince unemployment officials that his commissioner-approved training exempted him from mandatory job searches.

"It's been a nightmare, we've had to fight tooth and nail," said his wife, Katie Boswell. "Here we were so excited for him to get done with college so he can hopefully get a job. The process really seems to keep honest workers from rising above."