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Job losses in Great Recession spur North Texans to reinvent themselves

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With nearly 13 million people out of work nationwide, including about 1 million Texans, frustrations and unpaid bills run high.

Many North Texans whose jobs fell prey to the Great Recession have given up the search, but others have found a new way to help support themselves and their families.

The most resilient and resourceful among them took a deep breath and bounced back, reinventing themselves in a new profession.

For some the journey is just beginning. Some have decided to return to school to learn new skills or to train for a new vocation. Others have chosen to start their own business, a risky proposition that comes with no guarantees. About half of all new businesses fail in five years and two-thirds fail in 10 years.

Still, they're far from alone. More than half of all job openings nationally are being filled by people who didn't previously work in that industry or occupation, according to a recent report by Bart Hobijn, a researcher at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

Here are the stories of six North Texas residents who have reinvented themselves, or are in the process of finding their second act.



Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

Yvette Blair Lavallais, who was once in communications and public relations, is now a seminarian at Perkins School of Theology at SMU.

Not about the money

Yvette Blair-Lavallais was making \$65,000 a year as a marketing and communications executive at the American Heart Association back in 2010. Like most companies in the private sector, nonprofits were trimming their staffs — and the AHA was no exception.

“It was a very tough time,” recalled Blair-Lavallais, who grew up in Duncanville and Dallas. “I watched colleagues being at work one day and being eliminated the next day.”

Surveying the economic landscape in the summer of 2010, she figured more job cuts were coming soon. As a single person with no children, she was positioned to make a pre-emptive move. So she went to her bosses with a proposition.

“I gave up my job with the hope that it would save a job on my team,” she said. “I was starting to offer spiritual direction to my team, and I realized God was wholeheartedly calling me to the ministry.”

It was not an easy decision. She had devoted 23 years to the marketing and communications field and was positioned to earn a greater salary on the executive track.

Still, Blair-Lavallais took the plunge and enrolled at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology. She says she accumulated \$15,000 in student loans to pay for school, but notes the figure would have been higher without the grants and scholarships she received.

Blair-Lavallais said she had saved money over the years. But the lost income meant cutbacks and strict adherence to a monthly budget — no extra money for Starbucks or shopping the sale racks for bargains. All available funds went to pay bills. The situation eased somewhat when she got married last year.

“When God calls you to do something, God provides for you,” she said.

Today, at age 43, Blair-Lavallais is scheduled to graduate from Perkins in May. Her goal is to become a pastor in the United Methodist Church — starting pay of \$35,000 to \$45,000, she estimates. After obtaining another degree, master of divinity, she will qualify to become an “ordained elder,” or senior pastor and then will qualify for a housing allowance.

But for Blair-Lavallais, it isn't about the money.

“What excites me the most is preaching God's word in such a way that it brings people into a closer relationship with him.”

Scott K. Parks

DJ learns to work to the beat



Louis DeLuca/Staff Photographer

Dax Gonzalez of Carrollton lost his job as an executive recruiter in March and recently became DJ Dax. Here, he jams while running the music for a karaoke session at The Quarter Bar & Grill in Addison.

It took Dax Gonzalez three months to transform into a karaoke king called DJ Dax.

The executive recruiter was laid off from AppleOne in Richardson in March. He sent out about 80 résumés and landed a few job interviews.

“I found myself getting stressed,” said Gonzalez, 34. “You hear the phones ringing and people on the phones. It's go-go-go. Man, I thought, I do not want to go back into this environment.”

A regular at The Quarter Bar & Grill in Addison, Gonzalez got to know DJ Chowda, a.k.a. David Berkowitz. He hired Gonzalez to help expand his Musical Mayhem business.

Gonzalez brushed up on his musical knowledge, built a music library on Pandora and began learning the mixing board.

“My first concern was the mixing board, with all these knobs and buttons,” he said. “It turns out it’s pretty easy.”

Getting used to a sleep schedule after working into the wee hours of the morning has been more difficult, Gonzalez said.

He estimates he’ll make half of what he earned in his old job. A bachelor, he saves money by renting a room in a friend’s Carrollton house for \$500 a month.

Gonzalez has determined that having a job he likes and a flexible schedule is more important than money.

“I love being a DJ,” said Gonzalez, who used to sing in a rock cover band called Murphy’s Law. “I like being in front of people. I’ll do it for as long as I can, but there’s no guarantee. The idea is to turn it into my own business someday.”

Sheryl Jean

Mastering social media



Lara Solt/Staff Photographer

Amber Freeland, who was a teacher and is now earning a master's degree in public relations, cuddles her 2-week-old, Morgan Dean Freeland.

Amber Freeland graduated from Texas Tech and spent eight years teaching English and coaching cheerleaders in middle school and high school. Dealing with teenagers and cheerleader moms was not always easy, but she loved her job.

As the end of school neared in 2010, Freeland’s principal called her into the office and told her that she would not be rehired because of budget cuts. It shattered her illusion of job security.

“My first thought was to get another teaching job, but the situation was so bad I couldn’t get a job anywhere,” she said.

Freeland set about enrolling in graduate school to get a master's degree in education. Then, she had an epiphany.

"If I couldn't get a job after eight years of experience, a master's degree was not gonna change that," she said.

Freeland decided to pursue a new career in public relations, but realized that she was ill-prepared to deal with the world of social media that had developed since she left college in 2000.

The University of North Texas master's degree program in strategic communications wanted to accept her, but she needed to take some remedial courses to qualify. She was an intern at the American Heart Association's office in Dallas and learned a lot about Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and other programs.

Last semester, she earned an "A" in a social media class and is scheduled to start the graduate program this fall. Freeland, 35, lives with her husband and their new baby in Rockwall. She is reassessing her goals after confronting many challenges during the last two years, but she still thinks corporate communications is in her future.

"I loved the nonprofit sector," she said, "but I am very aware of the salary limitations in that sector as well."

Scott K. Parks

Work ethic rules



Photo: Stewart F. House/Special Contributor

John Reas picks peppers from the plot he maintains at the Plano Community Garden.

As French telecommunications giant Alcatel-Lucent consolidated operations and cut thousands of jobs worldwide, the shock waves were felt by John Reas in Plano.

He was laid off from his job as a project manager in late March after 17 years at the company.

Reas estimates he applied for 154 full-time jobs with companies ranging from retailer 7-Eleven to Internet security firm McAfee. He took a part-time job unloading trucks at 5 a.m. at a Michaels craft store.

With more free time, he was able to increase his community involvement: volunteering at his daughter's high school, judging science fairs, teaching environmental classes and adopting two plots at Plano Community Garden, which helps stock local food banks. Severance pay of \$24,600 and his wife's full-time job helped with household bills.

"I wanted to earn some money and the hours were early enough that I could still look for work and continue to volunteer," Reas explained. "I'm 51 years old, and really want to live my life to the max."

Then in May, Bank of America hired him to review home mortgages for modifications and foreclosure alternatives.

"I would never have expected the banking world, but I'm learning a lot," Reas said. "My number one priority is getting my kids [daughters 18 and 20] through college."

His \$100,000-a-year salary isn't far below his former pay. One of the best perks is that Reas works flexible hours at home, allowing him to continue devoting time to his volunteer efforts.

Sheryl Jean

Teaching math felt like logical next step



Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

John Rimmer, a former engineer, is heading into his fourth year as a high school math teacher at Faith Family Academy in Oak Cliff.

John Rimmer's career as a process engineer ended on Jan. 27, 2009, when he and 3,500 other Texas Instruments employees were laid off. He was 45.

"I knew the economy was not good, and I didn't see myself scrambling for another job in engineering," he said.

After 26 years at TI, Rimmer had come to enjoy training and mentoring younger workers. So, his thoughts turned to teaching. With only a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering on his résumé, he knew he needed to obtain the necessary training and licensing before he could enter the classroom.

Rimmer has just begun his fourth year as a ninth-grade algebra teacher at Faith Family Academy, a charter school on Kiest Boulevard in Oak Cliff. He enjoyed the machines and manufacturing at TI, but teaching is different, he said.

"At TI, I loved my job," he said. "With teaching, you love who you're working for — the students."

Rimmer estimates he earns \$40,000 a year less than he made at TI. His wife no longer stays home with their two daughters, and works as a teacher's assistant.

And he earns extra money teaching guitar lessons at night.

"I found what inspires me, and there has been no looking back," he said.

Scott K. Parks

Addison woman realizes her dream



Brad Loper/Staff Photographer

Audra Cooper (center right) talks with customer Ashlee Johnson at her kiosk Naturally Divine Beauty at Grapevine Mills mall.

Audra Cooper landed her dream job as human resources manager at a local consumer products company in late 2010, earning a six-figure salary.

She was excited, but it didn't work out. Six months later, she was out of a job.

Cooper had dreamed of being an entrepreneur for years and decided that was her chance.

In February, she launched the Naturally Divine Beauty website and kiosk at Grapevine Mills mall to sell hair care products — from combs to coconut oil. She caters to people with naturally curly hair.

"I've been looking to understand how to style my own hair," the 41-year-old Addison resident said. "It just grew into a hobby and now a business."

An accounting degree and MBA have come in handy. Cooper conducted market research and turned to the Dallas Small Business Development Center for help developing a business plan.

And 15 years of HR experience helps her handle retail's high turnover: She's already gone through 12 employees.

Next month, she plans to move from the small kiosk to a 1,400-square-foot store near Forest and Marsh lanes in Dallas, adding more products and a salon.

Cooper estimates she's invested \$40,000 in the business, including a \$15,000 loan, but might need to pursue more funding for the new store. She declined to disclose sales.

"I felt if it didn't do this now, I wasn't going to," she said about starting a business.

Sheryl Jean

Plano couple getting a fresh start



Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

Darrell Hale of Plano left his job in July after he saw half of his department laid off. He and his wife, Marie, invested in a Fresh Coat Painters franchise.

Darrell and Marie Hale just wrapped their Honda Element in a rainbow, signifying a fresh start for the couple.

Darrell, 40, left his business development job at Samsung in early July, a couple of months after his department was cut in half. Marie, 38, has been a stay-at-home mom for six years.

"I kind of saw the writing on the wall," said Darrell, who was laid off from other companies in 2001 and 2003. "Rather than waiting for it to happen again, I decided to take charge."

He had become dissatisfied after 15 years in telecom. He wanted to be his own boss, create something with Marie and not travel as much as his children — three daughters ages 8, 5 and 3, with a fourth due next month — grow up.

The Hales had researched franchise ideas — from stand-alone ice machines to flip-flop shops — for a few years. They wanted a recession-resistant business with good profit margins and flexible hours.

Last month, they opened a Fresh Coat Painters franchise in their Plano home after completing franchise training in Cincinnati and hiring painting contractors. They invested about \$75,000 — from savings, an inheritance and a \$29,000 small business loan — in the venture.

“It’s a change, but I’m excited,” said Darrell, who is in charge of sales and marketing. “You get to claim all the victories and all the defeats.”

He expects \$250,000 in revenue in the first year. At Samsung, he earned about \$150,000 with benefits.

“It’s a scary venture for us,” said Marie, who handles day-to-day operations. “But it gives me something that’s outside of raising our children.”

Sheryl Jean

Salesman sold himself on chiropractor career



Photograph: Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor

Darrell Hale of Plano left his job in July after he saw half of his department laid off. He and his wife, Marie, invested in a Fresh Coat Painters franchise.

Josh Wilson’s life sounds like an anecdote in one of those motivational speeches a salesperson uses to pump up his spirits during a slump.

Wilson, 31, graduated from college with a bachelor degree in business just as the recession began sinking its teeth in the U.S. economy in 2007. He wanted to be a salesman and landed a job selling siding, insulation and other building materials.

With the construction industry poised to go over a cliff, it was not the best timing. Wilson got laid off in March 2008. After six weeks of unemployment, he found a job selling storm gutters. He lost that job in September 2008.

“Being the last person hired, I was the first one to be let go,” said Wilson, who is married with two children.

To make matters worse, his wife’s specialty gift shop cratered and then closed. They were facing serious financial problems.

Wilson began thinking about new directions. He had been a personal trainer after high school and had enjoyed the challenges of helping clients buff up their bodies.

One of his mentors was a chiropractor, who made good money and seemed consistently happy.

Wilson found Parker University in Dallas and enrolled in a three-year program to become a chiropractor. He said he incurred about \$175,000 in student loan debt to get his chiropractor degree.

"In a matter of months, my family and I went from a six-figure income to zero and depending upon student loans to live," Wilson said. "It was real tough on us."

Wilson, who now lives in Edmond, Okla., is renovating a building there and plans to open his new clinic in November. His goal is to earn gross revenue of \$350,000 the first year. He said Pinnacle Management Group, a company that provides consulting services for chiropractors, has told him that figure is realistic.

"That old saying about getting knocked down not being important compared to how you pick yourself up is really true," he said.

Scott K. Parks