

# Retirement

## Program aids seniors who want new careers

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

AUBURN — In spring of 1997, Dorothy Parsons had a folder full of failed job applications and rejected resumes.

A former insurance claims appraiser, Parsons had been downsized from her job and was looking for work. However — although none of her prospective employers ever said it — she's convinced the fact she was in her 60s was working against her.

"They never called back, or they said I was overqualified," Parsons recalled. "I think they don't like to take the time to train you because they don't think you're going to stay very long."

Ironically, though, it was precisely because Parsons was sick of *not* working that she kept looking for a job at a time when many people would rather retire for good.

"I just got bored of being at home," she said during an interview. "And, of course, the money always comes in handy."

Then Parsons read about the Cayuga County 55+ Employment Program in a local newspaper. The program, which has existed for well over a decade in Cayuga County, is operated by the Auburn satellite office of Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes, based in Geneva.

The 55+ program matches low-income workers who are Cayuga County residents ages 55 and older with employers. The program is funded by the county employment office, the federal government and the Cayuga/Cortland Private Industries Council. According to Catholic Charities, the 55+ program offers job training, placement assistance and job information, free of charge, to qualified appli-

cants.

Through the program, Parsons met Nancy Annibale, a Catholic Charities caseworker who recently stepped down from heading the 55+ program. Annibale's replacement is Don Lawler, who has headed the program since Feb. 1.

Annibale walked Parsons through a skills and life assessment process to find out what type of job Parsons would like. The process included face-to-face discussions as well as written tests that measured Parsons' math, writing and reading skills, Annibale said.

In August last year, Annibale learned that Auburn's Meals on Wheels program, operated by the Cayuga Health Association Inc., was looking for a director's assistant. Parsons interviewed for the position, and got the job.

Her current boss, Ken Knight, the association's director, said the position was not a perfect fit at first for Parsons. In addition to pushing paper, he noted, Parsons had to learn to do things like package meals for delivery to Meals on Wheels' 230 clients. Somewhat daunted by the job's challenges, Parsons considered quitting, she and Knight recalled. However, Knight prevailed upon her to stay.

"I said 'Please, Dot, please!'" Knight remembered, folding his hands in a mock begging gesture.

Fortunately for Knight, Parsons decided to stick with her new job, and he now raves about how well she balances her administrative and physical duties. As for Parsons, she said she has grown to love her job at Meals on Wheels.

"It's a lot less stressful than it was working for the insurance company," she said. "It just gets easier the longer you do it."



Greg Francis/Staff Photographer

Dorothy Parsons loads hot food for Meals on Wheels recipients at the Cayuga Health Association Inc. building in Auburn March 18.

That's precisely the kind of comment Annibale said she loves to hear.

"We don't care if we employ a million people," she said. "If we employ 10 a year, and the match is as successful as this one has been, that's what we want to do."

Annibale added that, for the 2½ years she ran the program, she was always striving to do more than just be a job bank for retirees. On numerous occasions, she said, she's bent her ear to listen to the woes of seniors as well as encourage the dreams of people who came to her office.

"We want to help the whole person," she said. "We're not just here to look at the employment aspect of their lives. We need to look at where they are in their lives."

She added that many elderly people need advice on how to adapt to today's ever-changing labor market. Some seniors

have held only one or two jobs all their lives, she said, while others — especially women who stayed at home — may have no idea how to act in an interview.

"Sometimes, you have to very gently tell people 'You need to change,'" she said. "There's nothing wrong with them, but if you want to swing into the work world, you have to make little changes."

Although the 55+ program is tailored to low-income individuals, Annibale stressed that she has also informally helped people who don't qualify for the program's services. Oftentimes, it can be just a matter of listening to an older worker bare his or her soul about their jobless plight, she said.

"Sometimes people need to tell you how they got where they are," Annibale said. "It's almost like God really wants you to come into their life."



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