



Jobless but not hopeless: Cheryl finds spiritual strength, meaningful work through parish group

by Paul R. Kopenkoskey | Photography by Holly Dolci

After working for nearly 30 years at a multinational food and drink company, Cheryl Barbera found herself needing to navigate the bewildering maze of unemployment. Compounding her anguish was the death of her father, William Winkleff, about a month before her account manager job was eliminated in March 2017.

Another concern: Cheryl was 61 when she found herself unemployed. She wasn't ready to retire. But were there employers willing to hire her?

“Emptiness” is how Cheryl recalls those days. “I needed some spiritual guidance.”

She would find support and guidance at her parish of 30 years, St. Robert of Newminster in Ada. She participated in the Employment and Resource Network (EaRN), which meets every other Wednesday from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. at the parish. EaRN also is known as the St. Robert's Roundtable, according to its coordinator, Bill Weitzel.

The St. Robert's group is affiliated with a nondenominational EaRN ministry founded by Ken Soper, a certified career counselor with the National Career Development Association and the National Board of Certified Counselors.

At St. Robert's, Cheryl found both the spiritual and practical support she needed. With help from volunteer coaches, she learned how to write a resume that would grab attention, verbally summarize the high points in three minutes or less, succeed at an interview and network effectively.



Cheryl appreciates that each EaRN session begins with prayer.

“I prayed for strength,” says Cheryl, who turns to God in times of turmoil or crisis. “I needed mental strength because my father was always a sounding board for me, always my biggest supporter.”

Cheryl smiles. About three months after she lost her job, she was hired as a sales and marketing consultant for Byron Center-based Diocesan (Publications). Her sales territory includes Michigan, Indiana and Illinois.

She remembers feeling pangs of nervousness before interviewing with Diocesan, since this was her first job interview in many years. But her qualms were soon replaced by serenity.

“I walked into that office and they had these beautiful banners and this cross on the wall,” recalls Cheryl. “It was like this calm came over me. I was really relaxed. All the anxiety and anxiousness left me. I had a big smile when I left. This was where I needed to be.”

Her travels allow her to encounter the faithfulness of Catholics throughout the Midwest.

“I love going to some of the historical churches every week,” says Cheryl. “I love seeing some of the architecture of 150 years ago. They just don’t make them like that anymore.”

Having someone to walk beside a job seeker is invaluable, says Shawn Weiss Thompson, a St. Robert parishioner who has been a volunteer coach for eight years.

“It’s really helpful when going through any transition to have somebody to talk to, to help you through it,” says Shawn. “We don’t find a job for people, we help them find a job that fits them. Cheryl has a ton of energy and enthusiasm to do the hard work to get her to where she is today.”

Ken Soper likens finding a new job to answering one’s calling in life, and sees churches as a natural ally in this spiritual quest.

“Calling implies a caller - that caller is God and God has revealed to us most directly in the person of Jesus Christ,” says Ken. “Jesus says to take up your cross and follow me. Vocation involves a sense of meaning and purpose.”

At St. Robert, the EaRN group tempers the cold splash of reality unemployment throws at job seekers with encouragement. “A key part of the support group is dealing with the stress of the upheaval,” says Bill, a licensed clinical social worker.

But EaRN is more than a support group. The organization provides strategies, tips and networking opportunities to help participants find not just any job, but something that fits their skills and interests.

“We try to help people realize getting a job is a job. Once you deal with the emotional, social, spiritual and financial, you have to get people geared up to spend 35 to 40 hours a week in the employment search process,” says Bill.

Faith, prayer and pastoral counsel also are vital, says Bill. “When many people lose their jobs they often lose a sense of belonging and belief in themselves,” he says. “We try to reflect on their God-given gifts and ask them to have faith that something will appear. We suggest prayer, reflection and exploration of how others have dealt with loss and challenges.”

Cheryl took that advice to heart, never losing faith during the difficult days and asking God to “guide me to a new path.” For her and for others, EaRN has been an answer to that prayer.

What to expect

Successfully landing a new job requires a strategy. The Employment and Resource Network’s (EaRN) offers:

- Stress management
- Career goal-setting
- Identifying potential employers
- Understanding how to market yourself
- Networking
- How to conduct a successful job interview
- Written and “verbal” resumes

Looking for work?

The Employment and Resource Network (EaRN) offers work search roundtables at two locations:

St. Robert of Newminster Parish

5477 Ada Drive, Ada

When: 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. every other Wednesday

Contact: Bill Weitzel at bill@weitzelmsw.com

Westminster Presbyterian Church

47 Jefferson St. SE, Grand Rapids

When: 9 to 11 a.m. every other Monday

Contact: Ken Soper at ksoper@earn-network.org