

New JTPA program offers opportunity

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For some single parents, children of welfare-dependent parents or people that are just at a low point in their lives, opportunity is seen as just a word.

Many times they're counted among unskilled workers, with earnings only slightly above minimum wage.

And worse than the low pay is the reality that their benefits are cut once they do begin work, actually making it more profitable to stay home.

At Western Piedmont Community College, an effort is underway to break this tragic cycle.

Brian Moses, 20, Sue Smith, 30, and Donna Steinhilber, 23, are among nine people participating in a new Job Training Partnership Act program recently started at WPCC.

The three say they have found new hope as a result of the six-month program which is designed to help the disadvantaged receive job training so they can become qualified for better paying jobs as machine operators.

In February they hope to be the first graduating class and be able to get a good job at good wages and break the welfare cycle.

"I could go out and work for minimum wage somewhere, but that's not going to pay my bills or feed my two boys," Smith said. "I could not find a good job with the skills I had.

"Before I started this program I didn't like myself. No self-confidence. No direction. Nobody likes to be on welfare.

"I was really beginning to worry about where me and my two boys would be in five years, even two years," she said. "It was dark. There was no light at the end of the rainbow like people say. That's bad, real bad. It's a scary feeling.

"I'm doing this for me, but I'm also doing it for my two boys. They don't like being on welfare," Smith said. "There are things you have to do. Nobody's there for my boys — only me. I want to do it, but I have to do it — for them."

The JTPA money the nine students receive helps pay their tuition and school expenses, but also helps them get over some of the barriers that would have held them back, said Helen Keller, the program's coordinator.

"One of the key things for poor people to be able to come to school is how they are going to get here and how they are going to take care of their children at home," Keller said.

"It's not that they don't want to come to school, but do they have the money to pay for child care, tuition, books, transportation?

"With this program we're able to say, 'You come here and work hard, and we'll help you get over the barriers that may be holding you back'."

Steinhilber was earning \$4.25 an hour working in the restaurant of a local hotel. But she has two young daughters that needed care. She said it got to the point where it was either work to pay for child care, and have benefits cut or stay at home and receive more benefits.

"When I was working my food stamps were cut down, my AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) was cut and my baby sitting bill was \$70 a week," she said. "It's hard to work at \$4.25 an hour and have two children, two-and-three-years-old, to feed and meet your bills all at the same time.

"When you work, your food stamps and AFDC is cut more than the extra money you're bringing in. I had to say, 'If I don't get any more AFDC money, my children will starve'," she said. "I had to quit and go to AFDC full-time."

Steinhilber said when she quit her restaurant job she planned on going to school, and because of the program, she can.

"We all want to work and better ourselves and get off this AFDC stuff. We want to support ourselves. When we got on welfare, we had all hit a low point in our lives, but we're now all trying to help ourselves. You can't be a failure if you try, and that's what we're doing — we're trying.

"I'm determined to make it through this. I have to. My children are counting on me. They're all the motivation I need," she said.

"This program is a turning point in my life. I may have screwed up the first part of my life, but I'm learning," Steinhilber said. "This is definitely going to benefit me and my children in the long run."

Moses dropped out of school in the ninth grade.

At 14, he just wanted to "party." He said he didn't think of the type of work he'd be able to get.

He lives with his mother, who gets AFDC, and two younger brothers. He is now working on his General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and said he needs to complete this program and earn a good wage to support them.

"I want to be in this program for my future," he said. "I still live at home with my mother and two younger brothers, so it's not just for my future, but their's also. When you live at home, you see everyday how tough it is for them to pay bills. You know you have to do something," he said.

"Me trying to get my GED is what started it for me. Helen Keller told me about this class because I am unskilled, and one of the reasons I have never gotten a good job is because I am unskilled" he said.

"I know a lot of people without a future, no job, no education — I don't want to be like that. It's a very unhappy time to be without a good job," Moses said.

"A lot of people say you can't wait for opportunity to knock on your door — it never will. I hope that people out there who are waiting for opportunity to knock will get up and open the door with this program," he said.

"Three months ago I was down-and-out. The harder I tried, the worse things got. I just didn't know what to do. When the classes came along, I dedicated myself to start continuing my education.

"Things look a lot better now," Moses said.

A new class will begin in November. Interested persons should contact the Burke County Department of Social Services or call Helen Keller at 437-8688.

