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Remaking the Work Force, One Student at a Time

The stories of 4 workers who left the assembly line to go to college



Jason Miller for The Chronicle

Michael D. Dempsey, who took a buyout from Ford's assembly line to attend classes in preservation carpentry, repairs window trim with century-old tools in a workshop in Lorain County, Ohio.

By Elyse Ashburn

(Editor's Note: In 2006, *The Chronicle* met with 18 Ford workers who had just accepted buyouts and enrolled at Lorain County Community College. We checked back in with four of them.)

Back in 2006, when buyouts were still more common than layoffs, Ford Motor Company made a generous offer to employees: Agree to leave the assembly line, and the company would cover college tuition for four years, pay 50 percent of their salaries, and cover their health-care insurance. All the employees had to do was give up the best-paying jobs they'd ever had.

In Lorain County, Ohio, 18 younger workers—most in their 20s and 30s—took the deal and enrolled at the local community college. For some, the decision to swap the assembly line for the classroom had been agonizing. For others, like Ivette Barrison, the choice was obvious.

"I took that chance," she says. "But it really didn't take me that long to think about it."

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That June she left Ford's Ohio Assembly Plant, in Avon Lake, after 15 years. Her husband had lost his job in December, when Ford had closed its nearby Lorain Assembly Plant, but he had quickly found work at a trucking company. Ms. Barrison's first semesters, taking general-education courses at Lorain County Community

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Lisa DeJong for The Chronicle

Christopher Kerlin chose a job at Ford over college but changed his mind to learn to be a nuclear-medicine technician.

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Lisa DeJong for The Chronicle

Christopher Kerlin struggled through his first semester at Lorain County Community College. Now he is about to earn a bachelor's degree from Youngstown State U. and hopes to get a master's to qualify for health-care management jobs.

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Jason Miller for The Chronicle

Michael Dempsey learned carpentry restoration at a college in Boston. Now back in Ohio, he plans to study at Lorain County Community College to learn how to run a small business—his own.

College, were easy enough. Then, in January, she started courses in nursing.

"There were times when I cried," she says. "There were times when I thought, What did I do? I could have been getting up every day and making a car and just going home."

Nearly three years later, graduation still sounds far away: December 2010.

The stories of Ms. Barrison and her former co-workers offer a glimpse at life after Ford. They also illustrate the tough road ahead as American colleges try to meet President Obama's goal of drastically increasing the proportion of Americans with college degrees by 2020 as the economy continues to shed jobs.

Since the recession began, in December 2007, the national unemployment rate has risen from 4.9 percent to 9.7 percent last month. This year Congress passed a sweeping economic-stimulus bill, in which \$3-billion was directed toward worker-retraining efforts under the Workforce Investment Act. Many community colleges, including Lorain, participate in such programs (see [related article](#)).

Places like Lorain County, where fewer than 20 percent of adults have bachelor's degrees or higher, are linchpins in the sprawling effort to remake America's work force. Of the 18 men and women who left Ford and started at Lorain in 2006, eight are still working toward degrees, five graduated or transferred, and five left, according to the college. On the whole, the students in the Lorain group have been more successful than many other adult students have.

The former Ford workers, of course, have much better financial support than most people who find themselves suddenly out of work. About 32,000 employees took the 2006 buyout offer. Ford does not say how many people took a lump-sum payout versus one of the educational packages—either two years' tuition, up to \$15,000

annually, and 70-percent pay or the same tuition benefits for four years and 50-percent pay. To remain eligible, workers had to attend college full time and maintain at least a C average.

Mary B. Murphy, manager of adult transitions at Lorain, says the students who have done best had attended college before, even if they didn't graduate. "Every one of these folks who persevered knew what they were getting into," she says. "There was one guy who hadn't had any college, and he didn't make it through the first semester."

Even for the successful students, though, getting a two-year degree has taken much longer than two years. They've doubted. They've been put on wait lists. They've changed plans.

In short, it's been a long process.

2 Broken Knuckles

Christopher Kerlin went to college for a few semesters right out of high school. Then he got a job at Ford. "I thought I'd still go to school," he says. "But then I started getting those paychecks."

Mr. Kerlin's journey back to college began when he broke two of his knuckles in 2004. The X-rays couldn't pick up the hairline fractures, so he had to have a bone scan. The medical staff put his hand on "this big machine," and a pixelated version of its structure began to form. He was

fascinated.

Two years later, when Ford began offering buyout packages at the Ohio Assembly Plant, Mr. Kerlin remembered that experience with the positron emission tomography machine. He decided to take the four years' tuition and learn how to use it in the nuclear-medicine program at Lorain.

He worked his last day at Ford on June 3, 2006, and started class three days later. Immediately he wanted his job back. "I sat on my couch, and 'regret' isn't even a strong enough word," he says.

At 28, he was not the oldest person in his classes, but he still felt out of place. He'd spent eight years on the line trying to take his mind off the work in front of him. Now he had to be engaged, ask questions, solve problems. And he had no idea how to study.

Mr. Kerlin struggled through his first semester but wasn't sure how to get tutoring. "I was too proud to go and ask for help," he says. "I didn't want to fit the stereotype of the dumb factory worker."

In his second semester, though, Mr. Kerlin started to get a handle on how to study. He also decided it wouldn't hurt to work with mathematics and science tutors at the college. His brother, who later joined him at Lorain, had to take a college-skills course that outlined the services at the college and taught students how to study and manage their time. A class like that, Mr. Kerlin says, probably would have helped him, but he was exempt from the requirement because he already had college credits.

"I know other people who took the buyout to go to school, and they couldn't make it," he says. "Everybody I know is trying to get back into Ford."

Mr. Kerlin went on to graduate from Lorain with a 3.6 grade-point average, then did one year of intensive training in nuclear technology at the University of Findlay, which has a partnership with Lorain. He is close to earning a bachelor's degree in applied science from Youngstown State University, and hopes to get a master's to qualify him for higher-level management positions in the health-care field.

He is already working two jobs: one running the nuclear-medicine department at a local primary-care facility and another, part time, on call at an acute-care center. He expects to make about \$90,000 this year, including the \$30,000 he'll get from Ford. And, unlike at Ford, there is room for his responsibility, and his pay, to grow.

The whole experience, Mr. Kerlin says, has rewired him. He doesn't struggle in social situations anymore, and his interests have broadened. "I was mentally dull," he says. "I wasn't open to new ideas, or I wasn't able to process them."

Preserving a Dream

After years working in construction and two years on the line at Ford, Michael D. Dempsey knew what made him tick. "I would never be happy unless the hammer was in my hand," he says.

And as he sat in class for two semesters at Lorain, he started to have a nagging feeling. With luck, he'd earn his bachelor's degree in construction engineering and find a good job helping create plans for other people to turn into buildings. The future, he thought, looked dull.

In the spring of 2007, his wife asked a simple question: Where would you go to college if you could choose anywhere? His answer, the North Bennet Street School, was a 670-mile drive away, in Boston. The school, which trains fine craftsmen in jewelry making, carpentry, book binding, and the like, enrolls only about 170 students at a time.

"I said I'd go there if I had my choice, which typically I don't," Mr. Dempsey says.

He had a house, a wife, and five young children in Amherst, Ohio. But North Bennet was accredited and met other requirements for Ford to cover most of the tuition, so he applied to the preservation-carpentry program. And, after several rounds of interviews, he got in. A friend of a friend helped him find a place on the south side of Boston where he could live essentially rent-free in exchange for being the on-call handyman. Still, he and his wife knew they would dip into their savings over the next two years.

During his time at school, he became the go-to guy for odd jobs in his Boston neighborhood. He

fell in love with restoring and reproducing historic windows and doors (they're finicky and have a lot of complex joinery). He watched his 1-year-old baby boy grow into a 3-year-old on monthly visits and through a Webcam. And he collected about 80 large hand planes, 200 small ones, dozens of chisels, and a passel of hand drills and other boring machines.

"I'm a natural-born horse trader," he says.

Mr. Dempsey's proudest moment was when he built a "humongous mahogany door" for a building in Boston's historic Back Bay section. He worked on a lot of houses there and quickly discovered that legal parking was impossible to find in the upscale area. So, he started adding parking tickets into his bills. He learned a lot about the carpentry trade—from his professors, fellow students, and local craftsmen who were eager to share their tricks even though he was potential competition.

"It's rewarding work," he says. "It's something a little more important than putting up vinyl siding on a house."

Mr. Dempsey graduated in June, and packed up his hand planes, chisels, and boring machines for the drive home to Amherst. He plans to study business at Lorain for two semesters to learn how to run a small business, to keep his Ford benefits until they run out, in June, and to buy a little time to figure out how best to make a living. Now armed with a network of contacts, he has leads on potential jobs in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and on the East Coast.

But there is, he says, still a lot to figure out.

More Than Money

What constitutes a worthwhile payoff, of course, depends on who you are. Ms. Barrison, the nursing student, can expect to make upward of \$40,000 a year once she graduates, in the fall of 2010, and takes the state board examinations. Her Ford benefits will end in June. She will have been in college full time for more than four years.

She felt overwhelmed at first, but met another student about her age while still doing her pre-requirements for nursing. They were instant study partners. "She can pick up things that I don't," Ms. Barrison says. "We just feed off of each other."

They have gone through the nursing program together and take as many of the same classes as possible. It's made all the difference—helping her keep a 3.5 grade-point average and make Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society for two-year colleges.

Ms. Barrison's husband, Shawn, now earns about \$80,000 a year as a shipping manager at U.S. Steel. So in a year's time, the couple could be making about what they were in 2005, when both of them worked at Ford. But their responsibilities have changed. They have a daughter who will turn 5 in November, and another daughter, now in her teens, who loves soccer and made her high school's flag corps. Ms. Barrison also has a son who is a junior at the University of Akron and hopes to go to law school.

"I'm glad I made the decision" to leave Ford, she says. "I didn't like the auto industry. I just didn't like the work."

For Robert L. Kenska, too, leaving Ford was as much about work quality as job security. He'd taken a job on the line because he thought the pay and benefits would be good for his family. The money was good, but his 5-p.m.-to-2:30-a.m. shift wasn't. "Growing up, I didn't have a father who was around, because he was working crazy shifts," Mr. Kenska says. "And I told myself I wasn't going to be that kind of father."

Although he had taken a "few classes here and there," going to college full time was a big adjustment. But Mr. Kenska maintained a B average at Lorain and expects to graduate in May with an associate degree in radiologic technology.

If he can find a full-time job, it should pay in the mid-\$30,000's plus benefits. But "jobs are tough right now," he says. Of the 20 or so students who graduated ahead of him in his program, he knows of only three or four who have full-time jobs in the field.

For now he's simply focused on the next few months. Mr. Kenska has all-day clinical-training sessions at a local hospital three days a week. He does a lot of chest X-rays and sees his share of

spinal injuries and broken pelvises.

He is busy but has plenty of time to spend with his 8-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son. He coaches baseball, basketball, and football.

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