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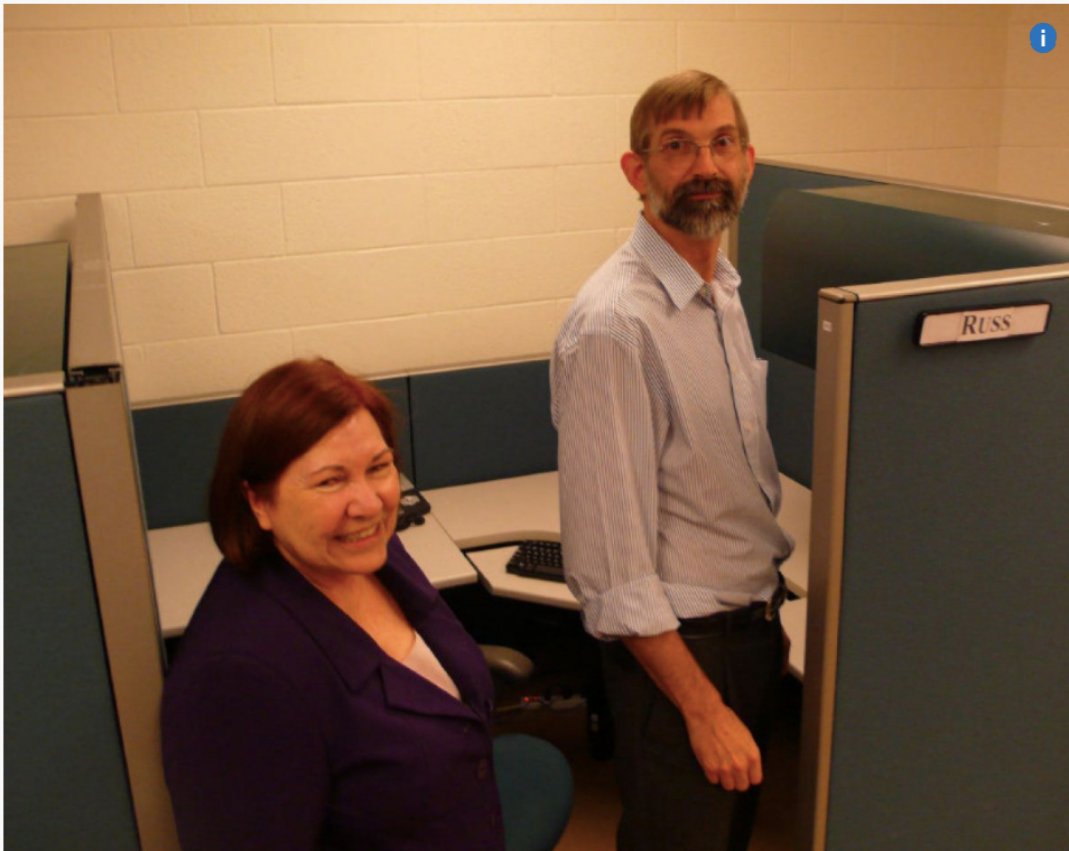
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United Way: Jamestown service hub offers way into workforce

SB

By Sarah-Taissir Bencharif

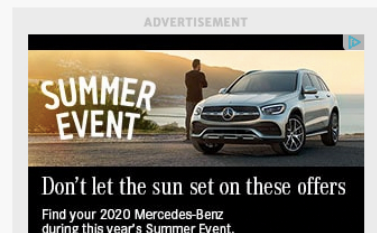
Fri., Sept. 14, 2012 | 4 min. read



A few weeks ago, Mary Jane Caranto got the call about the opening at the food prep factory. The pay: below minimum wage.

She immediately said yes.

Caranto, 43, was a registered nurse in the Philippines before immigrating to Toronto's Jamestown with her husband and two sons on June 27. She had no Canadian accreditation and was adjusting to a new country and culture. She



needed the money.

To transition from this survival job to one in her field, Caranto looked to the United Way's newest community service hub in Jamestown. The hub on Panorama Court is a collection of free community services for the city-designated priority neighbourhood.

"It's really a web of services all under one roof," said Hazel Webb, director of community programs at the hub's Microskills, a group focused on giving people the required skills and direction for employment.

Jamestown has a 10 per cent unemployment rate, higher than the city's 7 per cent. Webb said this is in part because jobs traditionally taken by youth, like in the food service industry, are taken by adults who were also unemployed.

For Caranto and her family, finding work will mean they can move out of the one bedroom the four are sharing in her relatives' apartment. It will also help them support family in the Philippines.

Caranto's factory job is on an on-call basis, sometimes overnight from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. She is paid below the provincial minimum wage. It's not enough to get their own place yet, but it's a start.

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The couple came to Canada through the skilled workers program and while neither is working in their field — her husband, a sales engineer in the Philippines, works in a lumber factory in Bolton — Caranto has found the resources to help her build that future.

Caranto is refreshing her English skills at the hub's free classes twice a week. Staff at the hub will also help have her credentials assessed. She is attending job fairs at the hub and learning how to write a resume and cover letter, both of which differ in style and format from what she used in the Philippines.

For service users with young children, there is free childcare at the hub. For the youth, there are media technology programs, critical in a neighbourhood with a 30 per cent high school drop out rate, according to Webb, and where nearly 20 per cent of youth are unemployed.

"This is the advantage of being in the hub," said Webb.

"We coordinate our services so there's a seamless delivery."

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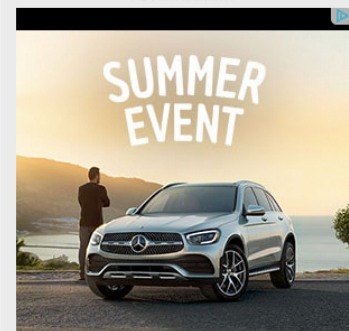
So far, the United Way has four fully functioning community hubs in the city. Though the Jamestown hub is offering some services already, it has not yet officially opened its doors.

A hub's value to the community is best seen in the more established ones like the one in Victoria Village which opened in 2007, said Caitlin Stidwill, communications manager for United Way.

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“The first thing we did is we went out and talked to people,” said Luanne Rayvals, Victoria Village hub’s manager. There, too, the priority was employment.

The hub focuses on both finding jobs and developing pre-employment skills. At the hub, there are driver’s manuals so residents can get their license. There are computer classes, some of which focus on the use of Excel and word processors. They offer kitchen management and food handling classes leading up to a certificate recognized by industry employers. Some find jobs managing community kitchens, said Rayvals, and others find jobs with food handling companies.

Since December 2010, 32 people have gained employment as a result of their involvement with the Victoria Village hub, 12 of which have found jobs at the hub itself.

Both hubs also provide a unique opportunity often leading to employment: volunteering. Lacking the elusive Canadian experience required on many jobs, those seeking employment often participate in volunteer activities at the hub, said Rayvals. At the Village, there are 79 volunteers looking for work.


“They are gaining skills relevant to whatever field they are trying to get to,” said Rayvals. “We give them meaningful referrals.”

Some volunteers help out with pre-existing programs. Others start their own. They want to contribute, said Rayvals. Residents in Victoria Village have organized knitting and sewing clubs, language exchange groups, Chinese seniors’ help group, yoga classes and kids’ cooking classes.

The opportunity to develop these programs, free for all participants, is afforded by United Way’s Resident Action Grants ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000. They provide a sense of community to participants while giving experience to job-seekers. Since many newcomers come with education and skills from their home country but are awaiting accreditation here in Canada, these opportunities allow them to hone their skills in a Canadian setting.

For Webb, the Jamestown hub is about more than helping people find work. It’s about giving them the resources they need to keep their dreams alive.

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“(It’s so) they don’t lose hope,” she said.

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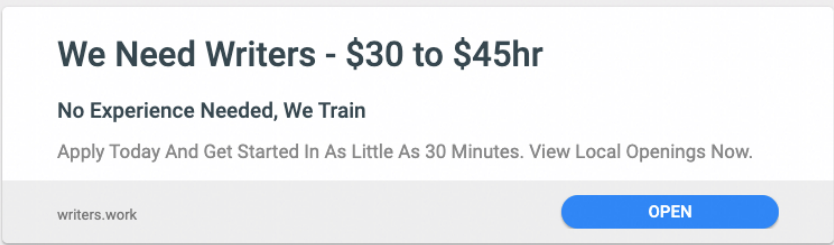
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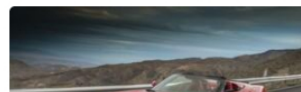
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