



Northwest Arkansas Workers Cope With Unemployment

By John Henley Jr.

May 2, 2009

Doug Acuff sat for about 30 minutes in his white 2001 Nissan Altima in a random parking lot. It was a Thursday in December and Doug had no idea what he would do on Friday; or any other day thereafter.

“I realized that, for the first time since I left college, I don’t have a place to go,” said the 42-year-old business analyst who was laid off from Master Lock.

Losing a job is more than not collecting a paycheck at the end of every pay period. It is more than not going to the same place at the same time several days out of every week.

“It can mean losing ones identity, ones pride and ones self-respect,” said David Roth, executive director of WorkMatters, a nonprofit organization active in workplace ministry.

“The hardest thing I believe I’ve ever done is walk into the house to tell my wife I was laid off,” said Butch Scruggs, 56, whose job as a plant manager at Superior Industries was eliminated in August.

“I don’t even remember driving home that day,” he said. Sharon Scruggs didn’t need to hear the bad news. “She guessed what was wrong by the look on my face, and all I had to do was nod my head, which was good because I probably couldn’t have done much else,” he said.

She told me not to worry, that everything would be OK, and then we sat down and talked about how we were going to handle it.

Doug left a message on his wife’s cell phone. Then he panicked. “I did that thing where you start calling everybody, but no one’s available because they don’t know what’s going on and they don’t feel your sense of urgency and panic,” Doug said.

I call it panic networking: It’s looking for connections for jobs and, at the same time, not wanting to be alone. It’s actually a little bit of both. Sheri Acuff called her husband back a short time later. “I told him it was going to be all right, that everything would be OK,” she recalled.

“Speaking with someone who has lost his job is like speaking with someone who has lost a loved one,” said Jackie Chesnutt, the pastor of Southside Church of Christ in Rogers. I feel terribly

inadequate in situations like that. “People expect me to say something wise, and I just don’t know that much,” Chesnutt said.

“These things generally will pass, there’s always a solution, but the problem is living in the present,” he said.

Butch and Doug both received generous severance packages. Neither was out on the street, but both have struggled with being unemployed for the first time in their adult lives.

Reinventing Oneself

Doug can find humor in even the most mundane of situations. He sits at the table in Mad Pizza, his plate to the side with a few napkins and the salad bowl piled atop a few leftover pizza crusts.

The card signaling servers that Doug does not want any more pizza is in the appropriate place, but all the previous servers didn’t notice it. As another server approaches, Doug moves the sign to face the server, as he’s done a half a dozen times, but to no avail. “Would you like some cinnamon sticks?” the server asks. “No, thank you,” Doug says. He smiles and laughs as the server walks away.

At age 40, Doug did what few dare do: He went back to school and charted a new career path. Doug worked in school fundraising for 10 years. The first eight years were great, but during the last two, it was harder to make ends meet.

“It was 100 percent commission, and if you didn’t make enough to pay off your salary, you owed them money,” he said.

Doug set about reinventing himself in 2006. He quit the school fundraising gig and enrolled in the marketing analyst program at Northwest Arkansas Community College.

He took a job at Quizno’s in order to support his family. Doug finished the marketing program a year later and began an internship with Master Lock, making \$8 per hour, about a quarter of what he made doing school fundraising.

“It was humbling,” Doug said, “but it was something I knew I needed to do for the long term. I was actually one of the lucky ones. Some people didn’t get paid internships.”

He continued working at Quizno’s and his wife began teaching full-time at Shiloh Christian School. Six months after he graduated, Doug was hired full-time at Master Lock and quit Quizno’s. He was laid off a little more than a year later.

“I knew it was a business, and I understood that, but it was still in shock,” he said.

Doug was very matter-of-fact as he described what happened on Dec. 4 and displayed no ill will toward his former employer or supervisor, who attends church at First Baptist Church of Springdale, as does Doug and his family.

However, Sheri admitted there were moments of anger, confusion and frustration for both her and Doug, not necessarily at anyone, but at the situation.

Reality Check

If Doug found it humbling going from a \$32.00 an hour job to an \$8.00 an hour job, being laid off was even worse.

Doug and Sheri spoke with their children that night about the situation. Doug joked it was similar to when Jack Butler (Michael Keaton) came home after being laid off in the movie, *Mr. Mom*.

“What’s going to happen to us?” and “Are we going to have to move?” were just a few of the questions fielded by Doug and his wife that night.

“At first, I was hesitant to tell people I’d been laid off,” Doug said. “You know, you don’t want people to think you’re weak. Your first tendency is to hide. And that is the absolute worst thing you can do, because you will get depressed. You have to get out of the house,” he said.

Doug volunteered at his children’s school as a watchdog dad. He also signed up to work as a substitute teacher.

“Some people don’t hide from the fact they’ve lost their job, but neither do they advertise it,” Chesnutt said.

“Sometimes we hear third- or fourth-hand that someone has lost their job,” Chesnutt said.

Chesnutt said he will go and speak to people if he hears of an issue or crisis. Occasionally, people resist his approach, but not often. And even then, it isn’t out of anger, Chesnutt said.

Doug told some friends what happened and asked them to pray for his situation. A week later, he was hired to work for Servpro, a fire and water cleanup and restoration company. One of his friends knew the owner and knew Servpro needed a salesman.

It wasn’t what he was looking for, and he makes less than he did at Master Lock, but Doug said he still was thankful to go back to work so quickly after being laid off. “It gave me a reason to get up in the morning.”

Doug now works three days a week as a part-time contract employee for the Ghirardelli Chocolate Co. and two days for Servpro. The Ghirardelli job may turn into something permanent, but Doug said he isn’t worried about it.

“If it doesn’t work out, something else will come along.”

Onward, Upward

Doug and Sheri have modified their lifestyle. “We don’t go to the movies and eat out anymore,” Doug said. “Now, we rent a movie and cook pizza at our house. But the hardest part was what we’ve had to cut back on with regard to the kids,” Doug said.

He and Sheri have four children: one son, Forrest, 16; and three daughters, Callie, 13, Mattie, 10, and Becca, 8.

“We tell our kids they can go to the mall with their friends, but they can’t eat there. If they go to a friend’s birthday party, they may have to take a smaller, less expensive gift,” Doug said.

When Doug went back to school, he and Sheri told Forrest they couldn’t afford to pay for his cell phone. Forrest responded by getting a job at Chick-Fil-A, which is helping him learn responsibility, Doug said. Callie, 13, the oldest daughter, is trying to get baby-sitting gigs.

“The oldest kids are at that age where they care about how they dress and what they wear,” Doug said. “So, we tell them, This is how much we pay for X. We’ll give you that much and you can put some of your money with it if you want something that costs more.”

Never Prepared

Butch sits down at the table. He is dressed casually in a button-down shirt and slacks, and his collar is open. But that’s only half the story. His shirt is pressed and starched, and doesn’t display a wrinkle. There is a sharp crease down the front of his slacks and not a hair on his head appears out of place. His clothes fit as though they are tailor-made.

Butch was the plant manager for 13 years at Superior Industries; Fayetteville chrome-plating plant. His job was eliminated on Aug. 20.

He is soft but well-spoken. One can imagine his plants were as orderly as his dress, his speech and his manner. Business was down and the company reorganized. But, still.

“You’re never fully prepared for when the human resources person walks into your office, closes the door and says, ‘This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,’” Butch said.

The Pragmatist

“When someone loses a job, it tends to affect the person almost like death with its five stages of grief,” said Roth of WorkMatters.

But Butch is much too pragmatic to be conventional. He said he was never in denial about what was happening. Never one for anger, Butch said he was more hurt than mad, even though he had a gut feeling it was coming.

“Production had fallen from about 30,000 wheels per week in 2005 to about 5,000 per week in 2006,” Butch said. A portion of the plant had already shut down.

Butch completely bypassed the bargaining stage of grief. “I’d been on the other side of that situation too many times,” he said, “I knew there was no going back. They’d made their decision.”

And while he could have crash landed in depression, Butch and his wife moved on to acceptance. They spoke at length that night about Butch’s situation and reviewed their options, which didn’t include leaving Northwest Arkansas, they decided. Butch awoke the next morning, if not refreshed and renewed, at the very least, committed.

He said one of the better decisions he’s made since being laid off was getting up at 4:45 a.m. on Thursday, Aug. 21, just like he did on Aug. 20 and all of the days prior.

“I think it’s so important to keep your routine,” he said. “Sleeping in late would be a very easy habit to get into.”

Unemployment Reality

Butch has yet to find another job. He’s had a few callbacks, but nothing solid.

“If I were willing to relocate, I would probably already have another job like what I had,” he said.

But Butch doesn’t want something like what he had. He still wants to be in business management, but not manufacturing.

“If Aug. 20 rolls around, and I still don’t have something, then, I’ll start to worry,” he said.

Butch doesn’t sit idly by the window in a chair, gazing out at the lawn.

“You can either let the negative thoughts fester and take hold of you, or you can go out and do something positive.” He decided to devote his time working with Roth on The Joseph Project.

“It keeps me active, doing stuff so I don’t get depressed,” he said.

The hardest part is the loss of his buying freedom.

“There are things I would normally just buy if I saw them and wanted them, but I don’t do that anymore. I now go through a process: Do I need this? Can I justify buying it?” he said.

Butch tells a story about a 1963 Oldsmobile convertible, his dream car. He was going to restore it, but never did. He eventually sold the car to someone in Colorado.

A few months ago, Butch found one for sale for, which he said was a good deal. “Before being laid off, I would have just bought it. But now, I have to go through that process: Do I need...” He didn’t buy the car.

The Joseph Project

The Joseph Project is an extension of Work Matters and is a support group for people who’ve lost their jobs. The project is broken into smaller groups that meet in Bentonville, Fayetteville and Rogers. Roth said the idea is to keep each of the groups to less than 20 people in order to maintain intimacy.

The project also sponsors monthly events that feature a speaker and training in skills that some in the room may have forgotten, like resume writing.

The project also can be a powerful networking tool. That’s how Doug Acuff got the Ghirardelli job.

“Most of the jobs filled in Northwest Arkansas are filled through networking, not through a ‘Monster.com’ or any of the other job Web sites,” Butch said.

People who have jobs come and encourage those without.

“I try to be an encourager to people who’ve lost their jobs,” Doug said. I tell them, “You still have to get up in the morning. The world doesn’t end tomorrow. You still need to get out and do something.”

The Joseph Project

Weekly Meetings

All weekly meetings begin at 6:30 a.m.

Monday at America’s Car-Mart Corporate Office, 802 SE Plaza in Bentonville

Tuesday at The Church at Pinnacle Hills, 2448 Pinnacle Hills Parkway in Rogers

Wednesday at NorthStar Partnering Group, 2458 E. Joyce Blvd. in Fayetteville

The Joseph Project Web Watch:

<http://www.josephprojectinfo.org>

Unemployment Benefits

Anyone who’s laid off can file for unemployment benefits with the Arkansas Department Of Workforce Services once his severance package runs out.

People filing for unemployment currently had to have worked during two quarters of 2008 to be eligible for benefits.

How much someone receives in unemployment benefits is based upon his earnings during the base period.

The most anyone can receive in unemployment benefits is \$431.00 per week, although there is currently an additional \$25.00 per week available through the federal stimulus package.

Laid-off workers would ordinarily be eligible for 26 weeks of unemployment, but there are programs that will allow people to extend their benefits.

SOURCE: Doyce Hill, manager of the Workforce Services office in Rogers