

Programs empower job seekers with hope, guidance

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By Amy White

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Looking for a new job can be difficult and confusing, not to mention demoralizing; but the helpful guidance of informed mentors can make all the difference in the process, St. Jude parishioner Richard Panko said.

“It helps to have someone who is honest and objective that you can go to and talk to about the job search,” he shared, “because it is a very stressful timeframe.”

Panko is a volunteer for the St. Jude Career Alliance, a faith-based program hosted quarterly at St. Jude Catholic Church in Allen to empower job seekers with the tools to succeed. The program was founded in 2009 under the recommendation of the late Father Timothy Church, who noted the need for employment support in the wake of a devastating economic downturn.

At its genesis, SJCA hosted weekly meetings to provide networking and education opportunities for job seekers. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the program transitioned to a more formal job search workshop held once a quarter. In January of this year, the program underwent change once again, this time with the presentation of a new curriculum — an update overseen by volunteers Devina Valent and Kevin Almeida. This revamped curriculum is designed to more closely align with the reality of the current job market, Valent said, and includes additional information on building a strong LinkedIn profile and utilizing artificial intelligence in the job search process.

The current program focuses on four key areas.

“It starts with the foundation, which is really understanding your strengths, both your hard skills and your soft skills, so that you can communicate clearly about them and also increase your confidence,” Greg Mechler, an Our Lady of Angels Catholic Church parishioner who volunteers with the group, said. The other areas of focus are resume building, networking, and interviewing. The workshop spends about an hour and a half with each of the major sections, Mechler said, and includes presentations, demonstrations, and hands-on exercises.

Last year, SJCA also developed the St. Jude Career Alliance Job Search Support Group as a follow-on program to the workshop. The support group — conceptualized and led by Panko — is designed to offer workshop attendees continued support and encouragement once the workshop is over. On a weekly basis, Panko assists former workshop attendees as they build resumes, polish LinkedIn profiles, develop job search strategies, and discover their STAR (Situation, Task, Action, and Results) stories to tell during interviews. His goal is to help job seekers “keep pace” during their search, despite the at times exhausting process of pursuing employment.

“You’re responsible for your own momentum in a job search, which is not a very ego-friendly environment, because there are many more ‘nos’ and closed doors than there are ‘attaboys’ or ‘come on in’ kind of things,” Panko said. “I try to be a person that is challenging them every week to make sure that their activity level is high. If they run into a stumbling block, they can always reach out to me.”

As someone who experienced his own run-in with the job seeking process after a layoff about 20 years ago, Panko can empathize with the difficulty of being thrust into the employment search environment.

“You are thrown out of your normal life cycle when something like this happens,” he said; but despite the stress of unemployment, job seekers should remember that “you do have purpose; you do have strengths; and you do have some value to provide.”

Valent echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the inherent value of each person, regardless of employment status.

“You are not your job,” she said. “God has a plan... All you have to do is your part, do the work that you can control to get there. Let Him do the rest.”