

Finding a career, not just a job

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Since it's summer, here's a story about turning a lemon of a situation into learning how to make lemonade.

Heston Stokes of Elgin was second-shift floor supervisor of the molding department at SKF Sealing Solutions (formerly Chicago Rawhide) in Elgin, where he worked for five years.

"From the time I got into manufacturing at SKF, it was unstable. Some weeks we would work only four days. Other times, you'd be asked if you wanted to leave 15 to 20 minutes into your shift. Then they would tell us to call to see if there would be work available the next week or not to come in at all," Stokes said.

Then the layoffs began.

"Our plant was like the flagship. The first layoff was shocking. The second layoff came and we thought, 'maybe they're done.' By the third layoff, my department was done for," said Stokes, who got the axe in March.

The molding department did a lot of the work for GM, Ford and Chrysler. Stokes said SKF split it in half, sending some of the work to South Dakota and the rest to Guadalajara.

"They still use the Elgin facility for training engineers from all over the country. The aerospace department is still there, but it's a small department. They serve Boeing, the military and the government," he said.

So Stokes, 31, and a married father of five, figured it was time to pursue a dream.

"I've always wanted to go back to school to get a degree in criminal justice," said Stokes, who has family in law enforcement.

And he landed a Career Stimulus Scholarship at Northwestern College in Naperville. The two-year school started the program to help people who find themselves without work. It's good for up to \$4,800 and open to those who qualify who lost their jobs between Sept. 1, 2008, and Aug. 31 of this year.

"I'm using the scholarship to pay for school. My former employer applied for a government grant for retraining employees in different professions, and I should be receiving that soon," Stokes said.

Stokes' wife works full-time at Verizon in Elgin and he has been looking for part-time work, but hasn't found anything yet, because "there is a lot of competition out there," he said.

As for being on campus, "it's scary, because I'm an older student and haven't set foot in a classroom for a long time. Plus, I need to make sure my responsibilities at home are taken care of, and I need to make time to study," Stokes noted.

This summer he's taking two classes and attends three days a week. In the fall, he will be at the college four days a week, with three classes every day.

Stokes' is enjoying "the personal interaction at Northwestern College. Everyone wants to help you. The staff has been great. The instructors make sure you understand the material before you leave for the day," he said.

"Sometimes I think, why am I doing this? I should just find a job. But knowing I'm working toward a new career makes me feel really good about my decision," Stokes said.