

The Struggles of the Unemployed Worker



2003 BRYAN FELLOW

Landis Wofford

HOMETOWN: Catawba Valley, NC

EXPECTED DEGREE: Class of 2007

PROJECT TITLE: The Struggles of an Unemployed Worker: What Displaced Workers Need to Get Back to Productive Work

FACULTY MENTOR: Rachel Willis, Department of American Studies

COMMUNITY PARTNERS:
Hosiery Technology Center,
Catawba Valley
Community College

PROJECT LOCATION:
Catawba County

“Interviewing the displaced workers in Hickory was a wonderful experience. Even though their interviews were not on a positive issue, I felt honored that they let me into their lives to hear their stories of disappointment and struggles. The people I met were so courageous and had been through so much. They have a spirit about them that enables them to overcome their problems and work toward a better future.”

The inspiration for the Bryan Fellowship project came from my experiences growing up in the Catawba Valley. My father was involved in the hosiery industry and the effects of the changing global economy in my hometown have been drastic. Workers are constantly being displaced and are struggling to support their families and retrain for other jobs.

Project Goals

- Document the impact of job displacement and retraining needs due to the changing global economy in a North Carolina community.
- Learn about what job search services and retraining options are obtainable through local available resources.

One of the main purposes for my project was to give the displaced workers a public voice. I conducted twenty-three interviews of displaced workers from hosiery mills, furniture plants, fiber optic plants and small businesses that sold equipment to the first three.

One interview on the first day stands out in my memory. The worker spoke about retraining and about having to learn how to read again. This was something I had never thought about. The person had performed the same task in a hosiery mill for 20 years, which did not require any reading skills. Examples like this show how courageous, determined, and strong these workers in the Catawba Valley are.

I discussed many things with the workers such as their personal experiences, the help they did and did not receive, and also any advice they would give to the community or other workers that had been displaced. Below are some quotes from the interviews:



the highest. Within just a couple of years time we saw both ends of the spectrum. And I think that areas that are hit like that really need to be looked at a little bit more.

...

“You’ve got to move fast, don’t lay around and ... keep at it, keep digging. It’s either sink or swim and every 6 months you’ll have a new set of problems.”

...

“If people are thinking about changing from their line of work, they really need to research what they want to do because what we’re seeing now is there’s a large number of people that are availing themselves of the possibility of training and going back to school to get trained. ... Are we going to see surpluses of trained people in different occupations? ... A lot of people right now are scratching their heads saying ‘what do you train for?’”

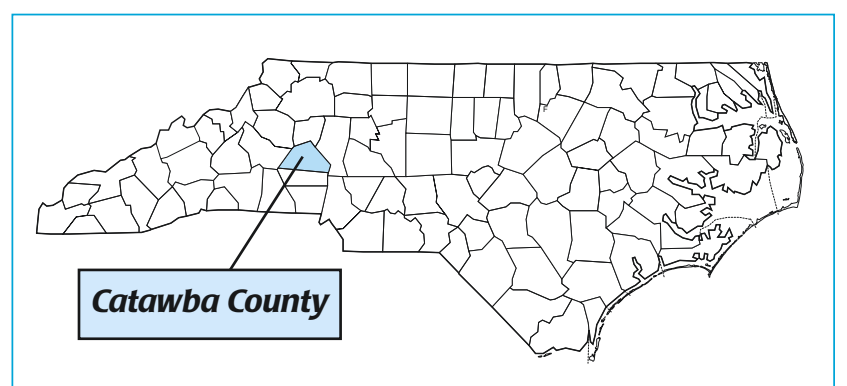
“I mean, basically corporate America has sold herself to the devil and they’re doing what they want ... they’re not thinking about community anymore, and that’s the biggest thing.”

...

“I think it was about 3 or 4 years ago, Hickory had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country and a little over a year ago Hickory had one of

After the interviews were transcribed and the workers’ concerns and questions were researched, I created a website that gives voice to the workers’ stories and provides valuable links and answers to their questions.

www.unc.edu/~lwofford/AMST98



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