



Opportunity Changes Everything

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Working Solutions: They Shall Overcome



Vincent Jiménez, Irene Vargas and Liudmila Carrera Borrego

In Cuba she was a professor of math. When she arrived in the United States a year and a half ago, she wasn't. Liudmila Carrera Borrego recalls it as a time of great disorientation during which everything was mysterious: the language, the banking system, computers. It's difficult for most to imagine: being removed from your life, everything with which you are familiar, and landing in a strange place where a language is spoken that you don't understand, where the way of things is unclear.

Hers is one of many stories – good people who lose their jobs, lose their support system, lose their way – that have added a new chapter thanks to Working Solutions, an MDC program of Florida's Displaced Homemaker Trust Fund that provides computer training, clerical skills, job-search techniques.

Created through the state Agency for Workforce Innovation, the program is housed at the Wolfson Campus and specializes in helping homemakers over age 35 find work. Funding comes from marriage and divorce filing fees.

This summer, 90 students graduated from Working Solutions after having completed personal-finance training, or three or more classes offered by the program.

"People come in and they're scared, nervous; they feel like they don't have options," says Linda Scharf, the program director. "Here they get the support to reach their goals. They become empowered."

There's more to it than using the program's many resources to land a job. "Clients come in who face foreclosures, who are behind in the rent," Scharf says. "People with health and legal problems. We

have to clarify those problems first, sometimes through counseling or support groups.

Many of those who use the program lack basic computer skills essential for almost any job nowadays. Others have been on some form of government assistance. Most, though, are "your classic homemaker who's had a change in marital status and has to re-enter the workforce," Scharf explains. "They often don't perceive themselves as having job skills, but when we help them with their résumés, they see that they actually do."

The program is supported by an advisory council. Business consultant Vincent Jiménez, who has sat on the council for about three years, is a believer. "They are doing a tremendous job serving people, helping them to reinvent their lives," he says. "We all have the old concept of welfare services, but these are people who have to do it on their own. Working Solutions is onto something."

Eleven years ago Lilliam López created the South Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and also sits on the advisory council. "This is a wonderful program for women," she says. "It's scary if you haven't been out there in the real world, so you need encouragement. For me it's really gratifying to work with such a marvelous program."