

Courses for a new life course

Philip Morris' tuition-reimbursement plan helps laid-off workers

By Adam Bell
abell@charlotteobserver.com

CONCORD

Henry Wehner likes to plan things out. When he began working for Philip Morris USA in early 2006, he had a vision for the next decade.

He would advance at his good-paying job at the cigarette factory in Concord and use some of his salary to help buy a house while stashing money away for his kids' college funds.

But that path was upended in mid-2007 when the company announced it would close the plant and consolidate operations into its Richmond, Va., facility, in part because of falling U.S. cigarette sales. About 2,460 people worked at the Concord plant at the time.

Like others who worked at Philip Morris, Wehner hopes to rebound by using the company's tuition reimbursement to take classes and change careers. The plant ended production in July, about a year earlier than initially planned.

Between June 2007 and last month, more than 400 employees took nearly 1,600 courses that were reimbursed by the company, spokeswoman Paige Magness said.

Classes include art, catering, business administration, computer technology and massage therapy. They can be taken at trade schools, community colleges, universities or other institutions.

The company does not place a limit on the number of courses people may take, Magness said, and most hourly workers will be able to access those benefits for up to three years from the time of separation from the company.

Between January and June, Philip Morris spent \$495,000 covering reimbursement for classes, according to Magness.

After Philip Morris announced its closing plans, Wehner started taking heating, air conditioning and refrigeration repair classes at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College despite not knowing anything about the work. At Philip Morris, he applied flavoring to tobacco.



Henry Wehner, practices along with Fred Loving, Lead Instructor of Air Conditioning, Heat and Refrigerator Department at the Cabarrus Business and Technology Center on Monday August 17, 2009. Henry Wehner, who is a single dad with 3 kids and is taking HVAC classes to help change careers. _JESSICA ROTKIEWICZ - jrotkiewicz@charlotteobserver.com

He also considered going into radiology but figured he could get his degree in the HVAC field sooner, in December 2010.

Wehner is a 31-year-old single father who lives in Charlotte and shares custody of his three children. He said he cuts back wherever he can to save money. That means more trips to the park or other free sites, as well as eating out less and looking for coupons before he and the kids go to a place like Chuck E. Cheese.

His 29 weeks of severance should last until February; he declined to discuss the amount. Thanks to additional savings, he doesn't think he'll need to get a full-time job until next April. But Wehner will try to pick up some retail work around the holidays this winter.

He takes four classes now. One of his instructors, Fred Loving, said Wehner has a great attitude and strong work ethic. Philip Morris workers seem to have a lot of transferable skills, and they are flocking to HVAC classes, said Loving, lead instructor of RCCC's air conditioning, heating and refrigeration department.



Henry Wehner, who is a single dad with 3 kids and is taking HVAC classes to help change careers after leaving Philip Morris. —JESSICA ROTKIEWICZ - jrotkiewicz@charlotteobserver.com

Other popular courses with former Philip Morris workers are small business and entrepreneurship, biotech and medical programs, said Keri Allman-Young. She's the site director of the R3 Center, an adult career development center run by RCCC. The center has seen about 200 Philip Morris workers since the plant closed.

Wehner was among the group of workers who attended an R3 session in Concord soon after production ended. He said his experiences with the plant closing have taught him that keeping a positive attitude and looking to be prepared for other work can take you a long way.

Eventually, he wants to open his own HVAC company. "I want to be my own boss for the self-gratification, and it would be something my kids could look at and be proud of, and inspire them to be successful," he said.

And in case HVAC jobs aren't readily available when he needs them, Wehner is looking to take pharmacy technician classes on Wednesdays – the one day he doesn't already have classes.

"The more things I'm able to do, the better the chances I'll find work," he said. "You just never know where life is going to go....I'm excited to see what life has to offer."