

By Mark Wineka

Many people walk in the front door of the R3 center in Kannapolis and say, "I want a job over there."

They point across the street toward the North Carolina Research Campus, where the dome of the Core Laboratory is visible.

But the R3 Center, built on "refocus," "retrain" and "re-employ" principles, doesn't do job placement. Rather, it tries to develop a career path for unemployed or looking-for-something-better clients and give them the skills and proper expectations to be successful.

It might lead them to the research campus.

It might not.

One of the R3 Center's most popular workshops is called "NC Research Campus Careers 101."

People wanting to attend must call ahead for reserved seating. Always packed, the workshop tries to address questions on a lot of local residents' minds today, five years after Pillowtex closed.

What type of employers will be at the research campus? Where do non-scientific careers fit into the biotechnology mission of the campus? How does someone make a career path that will lead him or her to the campus?

Keri Allman-Young, director of Rowan-Cabarrus Community College's R3 Center, says the research campus is supposed to have a lot of jobs that are not "whitecoat-related."

If you believe numbers promoted from the beginning, the campus will create 5,000 scientific jobs and 30,000 non-scientific jobs (not necessarily on the campus) by the year 2030.

But what happened with former Pillowtex workers after the plant closings on July 30, 2003?

First, some general numbers:

- The number of Cabarrus County residents laid off from Pillowtex — 2,592.

- The number of Rowan County residents — 1,392.

The N.C. Department of Commerce compiled aggregate data for all former Pillowtex employees in the state by the end of 2005, two years after the closing.

Of 4,820 who had received unemployment insurance benefits or applied for Trade Readjustment Assistance, 2,730 were employed, or 56.6 percent. It should be noted that 28 percent of the former workers were 55 or older.

The most prevalent sectors for re-employment were manufacturing jobs, 28.8 percent; trade, transportation and utilities, 24.5 percent; education and health services, 20.8 percent; and professional and business services, 17.9 percent.

Only 3.3 percent found construction jobs, for example. Only 5.1 percent of those finding jobs ended up in the leisure and hospitality field.

Some 45 workers who were 50 and older and re-employed were able to take advantage of the Alternative Trade Assistance program, which provided a wage supplement (half of the difference in wages between the old and new jobs) for a maximum of two years, or \$10,000.

The program paid out \$282,989 as of June 2006.

The re-employment of Pillowtex workers showed a steady increase, quarter by quarter, growing from 1,986 in the third quarter of 2004 to the 2,730 figure by the end of 2005.

Government income support payments to Pillowtex workers by then amounted to more than \$67 million.

Payments toward retraining totaled approximately \$7.5 million, and 1,145 workers had applied to the Health Coverage Tax Credit program, which assisted the dislocated workers in paying 65 percent of their health insurance premiums.

Close to 2,000 sought retraining and basic education at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, one of the many shining stars among the community support agencies that assisted the unemployed after Pillowtex shut down.

From fall 2003 through fall 2005, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College enrolled 1,921, or 52 percent, of the Pillowtex eligible workers from the two counties.

The college staff also provided some kind of direct service to 3,432 former Pillowtex employees, or 92 percent of the population.

As of May 2006, 428 Pillowtex students had received certificates, diplomas or degrees, with 152 students completing more than one.

College officials learned that, as a group, the former Pillowtex workers were weak academically and required significant instruction in reading, math, English usage and technical skills. They also required what the college described as a "very supportive, up front environment" to help them with the transition to becoming college students.

But once many of the former mill workers made the transition, they were committed and successful.

In a survey of employers who hired four or more former Pillowtex employees, the new bosses said the workers demonstrated a strong work ethic, were loyal, punctual and dedicated but lacked some of the technical (often computer) skills sometimes needed.

As of June 22, 2006, 1,436 of the former Pillowtex workers in North Carolina still had less than a high school education, while 2,474 had only a high school diploma. Together they accounted for more than 80 percent of the displaced workers.

While helping Pillowtex employees, Lou Adkins of the Salisbury Community Development Corp. says she saw several blessings in disguise. Some bright, dedicated, retrained workers found better jobs after they were able to survive the period when they had no income and faced mortgage, car and medical payments.

The Community Development Corp. was able to provide 20 loans to Pillowtex workers through the Home Pilot Protection Plan. The loans covered their mortgages from six to 18 months, while they went back to school or searched for new jobs.

Through church and United Way donations, the agency also provided 70 one-time mortgage payments for Pillowtex employees trying to avoid foreclosures. Now the CDC is immersed in helping laid-off employees from Freightliner meet their mortgage obligations.

Today, Allman-Young says, the R3 Center rarely sees former Pillowtex workers who haven't had a job since the closing. Many of the new clients, in fact, are people who have lost their jobs at Freightliner and Philip Morris.

Allman-Young says her staff wants their clients at the career development center to be polished and shining like diamonds when they leave and embark on new career paths, whatever they are. The center helps with assessments, interview skills, resumes and identifying extra training or education they might need for the career paths they've chosen.

Allman-Young has a millworker's DNA herself. Her grandfather worked at Plant No. 4 in Kannapolis for 50 years.

"I think he missed three days," she says.

Allman-Young and her staff ask clients to fill out employment family trees, and it often shows their strong connections first to textiles, and before that, to farming.

It simply reflects what the college knew about the former Pillowtex workforce — clients usually have a strong stamina and work ethic already established in their own DNA. It helps to be reminded of that.

"We learn a lot from that tree," Allman-Young says.