

# The people of the recession are out of work and working on a new life

by [Tony Brown/Plain Dealer Reporter](#)  
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From the moment the human resources guy showed up at her office door on that dreary day in February, Terri Menser knew.

He was weeping. She offered him a tissue. She told him it would be all right. And then he laid her off.

That drama played out at Sprinkfab, a Barberton-based manufacturer of fire-protection sprinkler systems.

It was but one of hundreds like it that play out every workday across the country and right here in Greater Cleveland, where a worldwide economic meltdown marked by failing banks, plummeting stocks, tanking 401(k)'s and a credit crunch has hit hard at the workplace.

The unemployment rate in Ohio went up again in March to 9.7 percent, according to figures released Friday. Another 37,500 jobs gone. That's worse than the national jobless rate, and the worst we've seen in 25 years. Since the beginning of the recession in December 2007, Ohio has lost 261,500 jobs, more than two-thirds of them since last fall's financial crisis was revealed. Nationally, an average of more than 150,000 Americans a week

have been kicked to the curb since the start of November.

But the numbers, dreadful though they are, don't begin to tell the financial and emotional toll the global economic situation has wrought upon the workers of our country, our state, our region, our city.

Over the past two months, The Plain Dealer and online partner [cleveland.com](#) have begun a massive effort to interview, photograph and video 88 Northeast Ohioans whose jobs were swallowed by the cratering economy.

Today we launch the first of many installments over the coming months of a multimedia project chronicling their trials and their joys.

It's called "Help Wanted." They want work. But they need help.

What kind of help? Jose Morales, a 24-year-old who moved to Cleveland from Puerto Rico and worked in a factory until he was laid off in February, has a two-word answer: "*Necesito trabajo.*" "I need a job."

Together, they constitute a group of people that belies the stereotypes associated with the word "unemployed." They're largely educated, able-bodied

and motivated, willing to work and to work hard.

Individually, this diverse group might include your next-door neighbor, a fellow congregant in your place of worship, a former co-worker, perhaps even you.

Menser -- a 46-year-old operations director who hasn't had to look for a job since the 1980s -- served two terms as president of the Wadsworth Rotary Club. Now she's in school trying to improve her future.

So are some of the others who are profiled in today's newspaper and whose heart-wrenching videos and blogs can be seen online.

But many are having a hard time believing there is a future.

Of the five people in Menser's MBA class at Walsh University, for example, three have been laid off during their studies.

Darcy Ballew, on the other hand, has a happier story.

She's a theater publicist whose legacy in Cleveland stretches back to the 1970s and the rescue of the historic theaters in PlayhouseSquare.

After losing her marketing director gig in January at the

Cleveland Play House, Ballew, 56, agreed to participate in this project. But she, like more than a half-dozen other lucky volunteers for "Help Wanted," found a job, at a theater in Florida, before we could tell her story.

### **Every person has a story**

The very different people here have very different narratives. Single, divorced, married (sometimes to other unemployed people), childless, parents, grandparents.

It's an equal-opportunity recession.

But common threads of hardship, despair and hope run throughout, starting with that initial shock:

*Why me?*

It doesn't take long after that first blow for the aftershocks to set in.

*How am I and my family going to live?*

Near the top of the list of non-negotiable needs is housing.

Those coping with both unemployment and housing issues include Sue Ann Robak, once a well-paid sports anchor and reporter for WEWS Channel 5. She had to move in with a friend in Chicago, a situation she dislikes.

And they include Mick Adkins, a former forklift operator in Warren.

Adkins, 51, earned only about \$1,300 a month. For three years after a back injury forced him out of work, he and his wife

subsisted on the \$800 to \$1,100 she brings home from Wal-Mart. Finally, last month, he began drawing nearly \$1,000 a month in disability pay from Social Security.

The Adkinses are stuck with an adjustable rate mortgage that soared from \$471 a month, which they could barely handle, to \$900, which they can't.

They're more than \$3,000 in arrears, and they're getting foreclosure notices in the mail. In a final insult, they found out they owe more on the house than it is worth in today's depressed market, making refinancing difficult.

Health care and medical insurance are also big concerns.

Unemployed workers who once took benefits for granted find themselves studying the intricacies of COBRA, the federal Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act that allows workers to keep their former employer's health insurance.

Clevelanders Brett Chabe can't afford that.

When the 29-year-old lost his \$35,000-a-year accounting job at Life Settlement Insights in Solon in December, he couldn't pay to continue his coverage because he suffers from a pre-existing condition, diabetes. That jacks up the price.

But without insurance, the cost of his four prescriptions leapt from \$110 for a three-month supply to \$1,200 per month. So now he takes the medications

only when he's so sluggish he can't get out of bed.

He's down to a week's supply of drugs, but he has an appointment with his doctor -- the first since he was laid off, and possible only because his mom is paying -- and he hopes to get less expensive meds.

To housing and health, add utilities, clothing, food, transportation, job-hunting, and watch those rainy-day funds evaporate.

"You've just got to take it day by day," said Brook Park's Mark Pogue, 46, who lost a \$22,000-a-year mailroom job. "There are times I'm wondering if our gas or lights are going to be on that day, but we've managed to keep them happy. Sometimes you just sweat it out."

He's cut out everything nonessential, including phone service, forcing prospective employers to call his mother's cell phone. "I don't think she's enjoying the experience."

### **Plunging into a flooded pool**

As job hunts drag on, a realization settles in:  
*This could take awhile.*

"It's harder looking for a job than it is actually working," said Tom Hasson, a 54-year-old father of two from North Royalton who made a comfortable living as a salesman.

With unemployment so high, employers are flooded with resumes.

"I often wonder whether they just collect resumes and never

actually look at them," Pogue said. "I just get frustrated. What am I submitting this for? Nobody knows me. They just know me as a piece of paper."

And many of those pieces of paper belong to highly qualified applicants.

"I know CEOs looking for jobs, heads of IT, marketing," said Tom Truax, 40, a former credit analyst from North Olmsted.

"All you need is a product and a building and you could fill it with people you know who would make it a successful company."

**Some of the "Help Wanted" participants have gone back to school to bolster their chances, or at least their hopes, including Liz Gockel of University Heights.**

**The youthful 60-year-old started taking spreadsheet-software classes at Fairhill Center for Aging only two days after she lost her secretarial job.**

**"Today I took my first session of Excel, a six-week course," Gockel wrote in an e-mail. "I love it. I'm amazed at how much fun it is! I'm not a 'numbers' person, but I think I could really get hooked on this. See? It's never too late to learn new things!"**

But classes cost money, as Jermaine Perry found out.

The Cleveland manufacturing worker, who turns 32 this week, had some schooling in electronics and information technology. Free from his job, he wanted to continue his

training in a field that is still in demand.

"Student loans caught up with me," Perry said. "Now, the only way I could go to school is pay cash, and now there's not any way I can do that."

### **Losing self along with a job**

The long job searches too often bear little fruit, fomenting debilitating feelings of inadequacy, losing one's identity, being a nonentity.

*My life is over.*

"The feeling of being lost," said Edna Fabray, a food-service employee from Maple Heights who will be 55 on Thursday. "That's how it feels watching everyone else in the apartment building go to work. Even on the bus, you hear them talking. They're either going to work or coming home from work. When am I going to get my turn?"

Some of the "Help Wanted" participants said they couldn't help blaming themselves even though they knew they didn't do anything wrong. More admitted they were angry at workers who didn't get laid off and at a system they believe no longer functions.

"I'm sitting on a lot of anger about the economy and the bank bailouts," said Richard Yarmusch, 62, of Parma. He was anticipating a nice retirement in four years after a career as a sales analyst.

"I did everything correct for 40 years. I served my country. My wife and I lived conservatively. Now someone else has reached into my yard and

destroyed my plans. I'm angry that people in the [banking] industry and the government have allowed this to happen."

Saddled with these frustrations, some people are not coping well.

Nancy Theodosion, a 53-year-old factory worker from Newbury, said she was surprised by "how I can cry every day sometimes."

Others heal with laughter.

Truax's wife, for instance, works as a paralegal for a divorce lawyer. "She can divorce me for free. It's part of her benefits package. But what's she going to take? She says, 'I can't afford to divorce you.'"

A few fortunate souls have had epiphanies about their lives. They enjoy spending more time with their kids, realize they amount to more than their jobs, and see that as bad as things are, they could be worse.

Brooke Cowdin, a 31-year-old cancer survivor and financial analyst from Brook Park, likes to say that when she's "not dying," life's other tragedies fall into perspective.

"There are moments when I'm mad at the world when I can't buy a new pair of shoes. But given that at several points in my life I was told I was dying, it could be worse. If it comes down to the fact that I can't pay my bills, so what? I got laid off. It happens to a lot of people."

Corey Haines, 36, taught himself calculus at 15 after dropping out of high school and

went on to earn as much as \$140,000 a year writing computer code for Progressive Insurance, where he irked some of the suits by wearing Birkenstocks to the office.

He gave up the corporate profile to join a small start-up company, which laid him off in September. Now he's reinventing himself as a freelance computer programmer, working at his own pace, making less money but finding more satisfaction and wearing the shoes he pleases.

His mission, he said, is "to become an Amish carpenter in an Ikea world."

"Last year I broke up with my girlfriend of seven years," Haines said. "I lost my job. It sounds terrible, but it's an opportunity."

### **Moving on to something better**

Terri Menser, the woman who showed such grace when she was laid off in February, said she went through job-loss nightmares until she had her own epiphany.

She dreamed her office at Sprinkfab suddenly moved. She dreamed she yelled at the people in charge. She dreamed it over and over for weeks.

Then one morning she opened a cupboard and a coffee mug fell out, shattering on the floor.

It was her work mug. An omen.

"It was something that told me to let go," Menser said. "I now believe there is something better for me out there."

When she finds it, "Help Wanted" will help her share it with you.

Follow these "help wanted" stories in the Special section of the Plain Dealer, on Cleveland.com at <http://www.cleveland.com/specialreports/> or on WCPN at <http://www.wcpn.org/index.php/WCPN/highlight/25861>