

North Suburban Career and Networking Center started off on right feet

By Chip Marshall

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Bill Landwehr and Carolyn Cram have walked a mile in the shoes of their Northbrook neighbors, friends and relatives dealing with employment loss and job transition. Both have suffered through layoffs during their own professional careers.

Eager to lend a helping hand with today's job searches, Landwehr and Cram have teamed up with a host of other volunteers and community business owners to start up the non-profit North Suburban Career & Networking Center. The group's collaborative effort was unveiled to the public recently during its "Open House" and "Job Networking For Results" events.

More than 70 job seekers signed up for membership during the two-hour Open House at the North Suburban YMCA in Northbrook, where space has been donated by Executive Director/CEO Howard Schultz to house the NSC&NC. Another 50-plus showed up for the networking seminar at the Northbrook Village Hall. Attendees came from as far as West suburban Brookfield and downtown Chicago.

Conversations roared during both events and the energy levels matched the enthusiasm of Landwehr, Cram and the other community leaders involved, several of whom are looking to find work themselves.

"This is great," said Northbrook resident Mary Knipp, a 53-year-old wife and mother of four who was laid off from a large insurance company in the area after 28 years of work. "(North Suburban YMCA CEO) Howard Schultz called me about this. It's wonderful that him and all of the people involved in getting this going have banded together in the community to help those of us who have lost jobs. It's going to be a welcome help to a lot of people in Northbrook, Glenview and all of the towns around here."

Ed Stauber, whose job as regional credit manager at Ryerson (Steel), Inc., in Chicago was eliminated last September, drove from his home in west suburban Brookfield to take part in the initial event. Like Knipp, he is receiving unemployment checks and participates in various career and networking groups during the work week.

"I go to about four to six meetings like this a week and a person I network with suggested I go to the Northbrook events," said Stauber, a husband and father of two children, ages 7 and 11. "The energy level here was very, very high. It's nice to come to one of these networking events where people are very enthusiastic."

With its “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” motto of service, the NSC&NC will provide expert assistance and structure to empower the area’s unemployed. It has affiliated itself with 40 area faith-based organizations and 30 other area employment/career centers. Initially, the NSC&NC is asking for a \$95 annual membership fee. In return, job seekers will be provided a Job Search & Networking Guide, professional counseling through a Six-Step Career Transformation Process, career assessments, job search planning, resume reviews, interviewing techniques and networking assistance as well as workshops - all put together by the staff.

Brad Fields of Winnetka welcomes the career center’s support.

“I have just started going to networking events,” noted the 28-year-old Fields, who lost his finance job at Caterpillar in Peoria earlier this year and moved back home and into his parents’ house – along with his wife. “The energy level with this group is encouraging. There’s a lot of buzz here. Northbrook is close by and I need to build up my network.”

Landwehr, who will serve as the career center’s Executive Director, has 25 years of global management experience and his expertise is in business strategy and human capital management. He recently went through his own period of unemployment and heard similar stories in the local men’s group he meets with each week.

“People should not have to go through what I went through – what seemed to be a long, endless, wilderness experience,” he noted. “I had to drive all the way out to Barrington or Naperville for assistance.”

Plus, Landwehr was not one to ask for help.

“Job search planning, career assessments, writing resumes, networking interviewing . . . this is not something any of us have experience with,” said Landwehr. “Its funny. We’ll seek out landscaping services, but not job search assistance. Go figure!”

Cram, who will serve as Director of the NSC&NC, is a management consultant with more than 16 years experience working for organizations such as area companies KPMG, Baxter, Kraft and Abbott. She was laid off at Baxter in the 1990s and used its outplacement service. She has a passion for personal growth and wants to help people get a jump start on their job searches.

“There is great value in utilizing the services provided for outplacement,” Cram pointed out, “but in today’s job market that is often not enough. You need to have a job search plan and you need to network.”

Knowing that, Cram and Landwehr recruited acquaintance and networking expert April M. Williams of CyberLife Tutors to present at the career center's initial networking meeting. Williams was laid off twice during her previous career before reinventing herself.

"The power of networking is amazing," Williams preached to her audience. "Networking is the art of building mutually beneficial collaborative relationships through people and groups of people. Connecting with others is the key to finding jobs. You can network at trade association meetings, at your child's events, during community volunteer "clean-up" days, with social or religious groups, with neighbors, while shopping or waiting in lines. There are a lot of people out there who have jobs and can help you get a job by building collaborative, trusting relationships.

"Networking is like planting seeds," Williams added. "You need to maintain and cultivate the seeds. You will be 'awarded' a job depending on how you played the (networking) game."

Igor Sulpoar, a 32-year-old Web Developer from Evanston, is happy to network a little closer to home.

"It's nice," said Sulpoar, who just recently was laid off. "It's a similar format to what I've seen and participated in, but having one located much closer than the others will entice me to utilize its services. Perhaps some people can find someone to help them here and perhaps I can help someone."

Cram wants to help and she spoke with nearly every attendee. One driver in her role at NSC&NC is her familiarity with the job search process and her understanding of the importance of staying focused and connected through career transitions.

"There is a lot of pain and a high level of need in our community to help those seeking new employment," noted Cram, a married mother of two teenagers. "We are not a placement firm; rather we will help equip you to be the best you can be in this market, which will open doors to opportunities."

During the center's opening events, Cram heard first-hand the struggles of those seeking employment. She was encouraged by what she heard from the job seekers on hand.

"Comments like, 'I feel reinvigorated for the job search'; 'I'm considering new options and ways to network'; 'I found today's networking session very productive'; 'I came back home with a handful of contacts I could have a mutually beneficial relationship with.'" Cram noted.

The current recession catapulted Landwehr into action.

"This is like a tornado is going through the North Suburbs and has not left. There are hundreds of homes in foreclosure and unemployment soaring over 50% the past 12 months in every Northern suburb."

When Landwehr found out there were a few in his men's group out of work and struggling, he developed a career transition guidebook for them. He also provided counseling, expanding the service to men and women across the North suburbs, to help speed up their job search process by becoming more effective and efficient in job search and relationship networking results.

Northbrook Village President Sandy Frum is on board and offering her support.

"It was amazing wasn't it?" noted Frum following the career center's Open House. "It's just amazing. They (volunteers) are so professional. So much comes from the heart. The people they have got involved are people that will help all of these folks who are without jobs in the communities around here. Amazing!"

Like Frum, Schultz is backing the community effort by offering up workspace at the local YMCA, located at 2705 Techny Road.

"Our Y 'Island in a Storm' initiative focuses on supporting and giving back to the community as unemployment rates continue to skyrocket," Schultz said. "So we were thrilled with the impressive turnouts and high energy at the open house and networking events. When the community bands together to help each other, everyone benefits."

Landwehr pointed out in his initial presentation that unemployment rates have climbed over 70% (3.5% to 6%) in Northbrook and to 88% (3.5% to 6.6%) in Glenview over the past 12 months. He also noted more than 260 Northbrook homes and 330 in Glenview are in foreclosure, pre-foreclosure or bankruptcy.

The NS-CNC staff has jumped head first into the wake of the recession to aid the area's unemployed.

"This group has got a lot of passion," observed Williams, who re-created herself and started CyberLife Tutors after being laid off from her former job. "There are so many people who are participating. They've got not only the Village of Northbrook participating but all of the business owners, too. There are a lot of contributions. There are non-profits and for-profit businesses helping. You can see by the mass (initial) turnouts people definitely interested.

"There is a real need in this area. There are career centers out towards the Barrington area and in Lake Forest and in the city, but there's really a hole in this spot where we're missing some career help."

In addition to the North Suburban Y, primary local sponsors Northbrook Bank and Trust, the law firm EPPR, certified public accountants Craig & Associates, LLC and Sunset Foods are backing the

brainstorm of Landwehr and Cram. Creative Marketing Associates of Highland Park is providing volunteer publicity.

One unemployed volunteer, Tom Turner, Jr., has helped Cram further develop and tweak the center's website. The NSC&NC already has its own LinkedIn group so members can connect with others.