

# Turning job loss into opportunity



By Barbara J. Zabawa

**C**ongratulations, you lost your job! That is not what people want to hear when they face one of life's most stressful events. In fact, it sounds downright insensitive. Admittedly, I would never make that my standard response to someone who reveals to me that they just lost their job. I am all too familiar with the pain and uncertainty that accompanies job loss, whether it's lost by choice or by mandate.

Nevertheless, as people move past the initial shock of losing a means of financial support, perhaps a jolting comment like that may bring a new perspective to the loss. After all, a previous job is only *a means* of financial support. It isn't the only means of supporting one's self or one's family. For many people, losing a job presents an opportunity to start over, try something new or pursue a lifelong dream. Often, job loss is the catalyst that rescues people from monotony and mediocrity.

That's exactly how some of the people I've met through LemonSpark, Inc. — a non-profit that aims to inspire people in a tough situation with short stories — have viewed their job loss. One single mom, Gail Ambrosius, lost her cartographer job with the State of Wisconsin after budget cuts demanded layoffs. She returned to the same retail store in which she worked as a college student while figuring out how to start her own chocolate-making business. With some planning and time, she is now living a dream from her youth. The lay-off from the state propelled that dream.

Brian Brown of EcoSun, Inc. shares a similar story. Both he and his wife lost their information technology jobs after Y2k and 9/11 occurred. Brian worked as a swim coach for awhile, then as an electrician, and his wife found a job working as a pharmaceutical consultant after being unemployed for six months. She made 60 percent less than before her job loss. Yet, through his wife's new job, Brian learned about renewable energy, and after losing his electrician job, decided to start his own renewable energy business. Brian told me that he could not imagine being

happier than he had been working as electrician, which provided financial security for his family. But he *is* happier, and credits losing his job to his new venture.

Job loss can create a more fulfilling life, yet many still fear the unknown. How will I support my family? What about health insurance? When will I study? What about my bills? Who will care for my kids? Apprehension is natural when blazing any new trail, but it's comforting to know that many people have overcome that fear. They have learned that once someone starts down a path, a world of resources often appears.

Wisconsin is especially full of resources and support. For example, Wisconsin's BadgerCare program is one of the broadest state-supported health coverage programs in the nation, particularly for children. Many adults below a certain income level (which is a typical income level for people in school or starting a new business) qualify, too. The Wisconsin Entrepreneur's Network, Small Business Development Center and Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation all provide resources to help launch business ideas. There are college staff to help returning students navigate the many financial and child care assistance opportunities that exist. These programs are meant to serve people who are climbing up the financial independence ladder, and should be viewed as such.

Of course, people who chart a new course after a job loss often find themselves making lifestyle adjustments, at least temporarily. Gayle Zinda, owner of Pink Lemonade Presentations, LLC, quit her well-paying nursing job, sold her house and moved into an apartment with her two young sons after discovering that she wanted to operate a business helping cancer patients. Today she is a happy and successful entrepreneur. Moreover, she feels like her work makes a difference in the world (and it does — she is a very inspirational speaker).

The people I've interviewed for LemonSpark are living proof that anything is possible. As Margaret Henningsen, owner of Legacy Bancorp, Inc., told me in regard to her journey: "It won't be easy and it will take some time, but if you don't turn that lemon into a spark to change your life, shame on you." So, maybe it's time to break out that champagne and celebrate the "gift" of job loss. Then, let's all take Margaret's advice and get to work on our new life in the new year.



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