

New Leaf Visions showing success in helping unemployed find jobs

Workforce development program provides tools to succeed in finding employment and retaining it

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COVINGTON — Tonia Smith was busy in class Wednesday working on a computer when Shamica Redding finished a cellphone conversation and shouted, “Fourteen!” Several women in the classroom cheered.

Redding, director of the New Leaf Visions Center in Covington, announced that another graduate of the center’s job training program had called to tell her he’d been hired. She and the women — all associated with the program in one capacity or another — had gathered in the classroom for a photo session.

Aurelia Chatman, a teacher at the New Leaf Visions workforce development program, assists Ozieline Boykin during Wednesday’s session. Others in Chatman’s financial and resource management class are, from left, Sharon Durden, Tonia Smith, Shantavious Derricho, Dustin Hitt and, not shown, Lationna Gasper. (Staff Photo: Wade Marbaugh)

New Leaf Visions, located at the Avery Street entrance to Walker’s Bend, a Covington subdivision, is a workforce development program that provides people with the tools they need to succeed in finding employment and retaining it. The staff includes a team of teachers, counselors and other professionals to guide enrollees through the program and beyond.



Shamica Redding heads

After a year of operation, New Leaf has some impressive numbers to indicate its success. Of 22 enrollees, 20 have weathered the rigorous program and graduated. Of those 20, 14 found jobs.

That 14 figure is important to Redding and the staff because in order to retain operating funds provided by a grant from the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission, 50 percent plus one of the center’s graduates must find employment.

Participants attend class from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. five

the New Leaf Visions Center in Covington, a workforce development program which has helped 14 of its 20 graduates find jobs. (Staff Photo: Wade Marbaugh)

days a week for six weeks. From all accounts, the process is challenging.

“This program is not a hold-your-hand type of program,” said Program Manager Consuela Thompson, owner of The Community Academy, a private firm in Decatur. “It is not a handout. It’s very challenging — it challenges you to be your best stuff.”

The curriculum includes computer training and other common job skills. There is lift truck training, and manufacturing orientation class introduces students to terms and processes in a production company.

Students earn certifications, making them more employable — Lift Truck Certification, Occupational Safety and Health Act Certification, CPR and First Aid Training, Customer Service Certification.

Outside of the hard job skills, there’s another important component to the program.

“What we have found is the major problem is not knowing how to learn new skills but the lack of soft skills,” Redding said. The enrollees, she explained, commonly lack skills such as communication, problem solving, conflict management and time management. The program also teaches critical thinking.

“That adds value to the company — if there’s critical thinking,” Redding said.

She noted that many of the students need help in those areas to solve problems in their personal lives.

Redding told of one student who, prior to enrolling at New Leaf had tried numerous times to get a job at a local charity organization. The employer listened to her pitch each time, and he never hired her.

After graduating from New Leaf, Redding said, the woman went back and got hired.

“Her whole appearance had changed,” Redding said. “Her approach was different. She had a well-prepared resume and knew what to say and how to say it. And he (employer) didn’t realize he was talking to the same person.”

Another student was fired from a job prior to enrolling at New Leaf. After taking some classes, the student told Redding, “I realize now I had the wrong attitude. They should have fired me.”

Only one week into the training session that began in December, Smith said she could see the benefits.

“I have learned a lot in the few days that I’ve been in class,” she said during the photo session at Aurelia Chatman’s financial and resource management class.

“The class is very helpful to me, and I’m glad that I made the right choice to attend,” Smith added.

“The biggest challenge in recruiting people is that they feel they’re not able to do it,” Thompson said. “If they think that, this is the place they need to be.”

Tears welled in the eyes of Thompson’s assistant, Ruby Huff, as she described what the program did for her.

“It gave me a brand new leaf — it’s a new me,” she said. “Words can’t express it. It was a great challenge. At first it was a difficult challenge. Then it was a rewarding challenge.”

“I can piggy-back off that,” remarked Ashley Derricho, now an administrative assistant at the center employed by the Covington Housing Authority. “I was one of the first students who took the course in December 2013. It helped me as far as taking risks and meeting new challenges. ... They (teachers and staff) really care about the people in the program.”

“Shamica is a brilliant and compassionate educator,” said Randy Vinson, director of the Covington Planning and Zoning Department. “I believe the New Leaf workforce development program along with Shamica’s household financial management program (a nonprofit called Energema) are the most significant endeavors the Covington Redevelopment Authority helped initiate.”

The Covington Redevelopment Authority was created in 2009 by the City Council in part to revitalize Walker’s Bend, a subdivision of single-family homes and rental units that declined when foreclosures spiked and the developer went bankrupt in 2008.

Several local ministers and J.C. Henderson, the county commissioner representing the district where Walker’s Bend is located, approached the Newton County Board of Commissioners with the idea that something could be done for the subdivision and other struggling areas in Newton.

In 2011 the BOC used SPOST funds to build the center. The Covington Housing Authority owns the center’s building, part of which provides affordable apartments for the authority’s clients.

Redding credited Housing Authority Director Greg Williams, County Commission Chairman Keith Ellis, Covington Mayor Ronnie Johnston and numerous others in the community for their support while the program was being developed.

Landis Stephens, chairman of the Housing Authority board, said, “I think I can speak for the Board of Commissioners of the Housing Authority in expressing how proud we are for the progress and success of the New Leaf workforce development program. We are so grateful for all the help and support that went into the creation and development of this vital community program.”

“You’re not guaranteed a job when you finish the program,” Redding said. “But you do have a much greater chance of getting one. Our goal is to have 80 to 90 percent of the graduates employed after they graduate.”

From all appearances, New Leaf has a successful foothold, so what’s next for the program?

“Now that we have a good road map, we need to grow our numbers,” Redding said.

Visit www.NewLeafVisions.org or call 770-728-6065 for more information on New Leaf

Visions, which is located at 6147 Avery Street in Covington.

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