

Adults taking summer jobs away from teens

©Akron Beacon Journal- May 20, 2003

BY ERIKA D. SMITH

SANDUSKY, Ohio - George Kurilic Sr. won't be the typical Cedar Point employee this summer. At 73, he has aches and pains, and a lifetime of experience.

He also has too much time on his hands.

So, like many older people, he decided to go back to work. In Sandusky, as in many communities nationwide, adults and even senior citizens are competing for lower-wage, seasonal service jobs that teen-agers traditionally rely on for summer employment.

Some are experienced, middle-age adults who have been laid off. Others, like Lorna Young, 73, are seniors just looking for something to do or some extra money to pay the bills.

Either way, it is putting pressure on teen-agers.

A survey by Teens4hire.org found that more than 775 employers that usually hire teen-agers, including restaurants, retailers and summer camps, are cutting back on all hires. Many aren't even considering teen applicants this year because more experienced adults have taken all the jobs.

"So far, the trend is worse than last year," said Renee Ward, founder of Teens4hire.

In 2002, about 2.5 million teen-agers, ages 14 to 19, were unemployed, and that figure could climb to 3.5 million in 2003, she said.

Ward blames the trend on the economy's decline.

The jobless rate has hovered at or near 6 percent for more than a year, and some economists think it could continue to climb through the summer because economic improvements could take some time to trickle down into hiring.

Layoffs haven't eased either.

The sheer number of teen-agers and young adults looking for work also hasn't helped, Ward said.

While the number of employed youth - ages 16 to 24 by federal standards - jumped by 2.4 million last summer, their proportion in the labor force actually dropped, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Just 69.5 percent of Americans ages 16 to 24 were in the labor force last July - the traditional summertime peak for youth employment - for the lowest rate since 1971. The number of jobless youth rose by 530,000 between April and July 2002, larger than the seasonal increases from the prior three years.

Government analysts blame this trend, which began in the mid- to late-1990s, on more youths choosing to enroll in summer school. Teens who attend school are far less likely to work in the summer than those who don't attend class, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

But Ward said what federal analysts are missing is: Why are more teen-agers choosing school over work?

"The reason is they can't find jobs," she explained. "... Basic skills aren't enough anymore. Retail sales are down. Jobless claims are up."

Teen-friendly seasonal jobs, like working at amusement parks and as lifeguards, are still available. But those positions are being curbed nationwide, she said, and those jobs won't last long with more teens competing for them.

"They'll still have jobs, but not as many," Ward said.

At Cedar Point, which hires about 5,000 workers every summer, Public Relations Manager Janice Wightherow said she's seen an increase in the number of older applicants over the last five years. While most of the amusement park's workers continue to be in their 20s - a heavily recruited age group - senior citizens now make up about 10 percent of its work force.

Janice Miller, who runs four shops at Cedar Point with her husband, Larry, said a lot of retired people, like them, have re-entered the work force in the last three years as the economy has dipped. Retirement savings just aren't a sure thing anymore.

The number of middle-age adults applying at their shops also surprised Miller. "The last five people have been grown-ups. I mean with suits and resumes. I didn't expect that," she said.

Some just moved to the Sandusky area and needed to pay the bills, Miller said. Others were casualties of the economy.

The trend of older workers in seasonal jobs is especially true in the mountain resort town of Gatlinburg, Tenn., where the Millers used to work. In that Smoky Mountains getaway, businesses seem to recruit senior citizens, while Ohio targets younger workers, she said.

That is certainly the case at Chapel Hill Mall in Akron, where most of the employees are teen-agers or young adults.

Many mall stores, such as American Eagle and Journeys, already are seeing an increase in applications as the summer months roll around. Younger teen-agers can run into problems finding jobs at mall shops, though, because of strict age requirements over labor laws limiting the hours teens can work.

For instance, people must be 18 years old to work at the Gap, Bath and Body Works, Express or The Limited. However, other stores that cater to kids, such as Old Navy and Foot Locker, allow 16-year-olds as employees.

Many college students nationwide also are having difficulty finding internships and real jobs, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

But some students relaxing in the University of Akron's Polsky Building recently said they had no trouble finding summer work.

Some said they hold down jobs year-round. Others said they've had the same position for years, picking it up every summer when school lets out.

Dana Claxton, a UA sophomore, falls into the latter category. But this year, she decided to test the waters at Cedar Point.

"I had no trouble getting in," she said. And neither did many of her friends from her hometown of Sandusky.

Sallie Long, a community relations representative for several local McDonald's restaurants, said the majority of its work force has remained young. The same can be said for the Burger King on Howe Avenue, where 79-year-old Young works.

The Cuyahoga Falls woman, who is retired from Oberlin College, cleans windows and makes salads with people half her age because "I'm a workaholic."

The extra spending money doesn't hurt either, but Long said that's not her main motivation.

Kurilic said he thinks the same way.

Kurilic counts himself lucky that his job at a Cedar Point wood-working shop run by the Millers is optional. "Some people don't want to work, but they have to work. Those are the people I really feel sorry for," he said. "They come to retirement and they find themselves in a bunch of trouble."

AARP's Cliff Willis of Indiana confirmed that lots of adults are returning to work, often because their retirement packages come up short.

And the economy is partly to blame.

Many expect the job market will get worse for young people before it gets better as laid-off adults exhaust their unemployment benefits and look for any work that will pay the bills.

"This is Phoenix, this is Dallas, this is Houston, this is St. Louis, this is Oregon," Ward said. "I've got thousands, literally hundreds of thousands of young adults that want to work, and there are no jobs."