

Teens losing jobs to older workers

FENTON

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By Marlon Vaughn
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Fenton - Fifteen-year-old Liz Rogers of Linden didn't have a whole lot of trouble landing her job at Uncle Ray's ice cream shop. Her seasonal job ended, she popped into the parlor and landed her job as a server, which she's had for about a week.

"I've been coming here since I was little and I knew it was a fun place," said Rogers. "I was lucky."

She doesn't know how lucky.

Analysts expect this year's job market for teenagers to be virtually the same as last year's - the worst in half a century. The combination of a shaky economy, an abundance of older workers in the marketplace and more selective employers means landing those traditionally-teenage jobs at fast-food restaurants and mall retail stores is no longer a cinch.

"We've gone from 1999, which was statistically the best year ever, to 2003, which was probably one of the worst in 55 years," said Renee Ward, founder of the California-based teens4hire.org website, which links its 1.5 million teenage members with employers.

QUICK FACTS

Teen workers
Unemployment rate
among Michigan
residents 16-19 years
old:
2003 17.5 percent
2002 15.6 percent
2001 15.8 percent
2000 10.3 percent
Source: U.S. Bureau
of Labor Statistics

"This year is appearing to be a little bit better, but not much."

In Michigan, the unemployment rate for 16- to 19-year-olds was 17.5 percent last year, up from 15.6 percent in 2002 and 15.8 percent in 2001, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A report released last fall by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies showed that summer employment nationally last year was down 1 million from 2003.

Jeff Aula of the state Dept. of Labor said estimates about this year's teen employment picture should be available later in the spring.

"In the late '90s, they couldn't find enough young people to fill jobs, thinking that their tech-savviness and knowledge of the Internet were great assets," Ward said. "Those opportunities have dried up."

But so have opportunities in jobs traditionally associated with teens, such as fast-food servers. Damien Brookings of Flint said he's applied at several sit-down and fast-food restaurants, but his phone has yet to ring.

"It's rough out there right now," said Brookings, 19. "I didn't have any problems getting a job (at a restaurant) the last few years, but it's been real hard for the last six months or so."

Analysts identify several factors contributing to the malaise in teen hiring, starting with the abundance of experienced workers seeking jobs. The downsizing and layoffs since the recession of 2001 have put plenty of new job-seekers into the market and taking jobs that have been the domain of teenagers.

"A lot of older workers ... will displace a lot of teens in the market," said Ward, whose website posts job listings from employers.

"Employers are telling us, We don't want to hire teenagers," she said. "Ten-to-one employers are favoring older workers. They probably won't say this, but when a 16-year-old with no experience is up against an experienced worker, they're going to choose the experienced worker."

Brookings agrees with that assessment.

"There are a lot of older people working at KFC and McDonald's these days," he said. "I think they might think of them as being more responsible than a young person."

But not everyone is abandoning Generation Y. The local Halo Burger restaurant chain traditionally hires teens, and that's not likely to change this year, said company Vice President William "Tiger" Thomas.

"Our company attracts the younger job-seekers because it's an entry-level type position "

Thomas said. "I don't foresee us cutting down on hiring as of now."

Dave Durant, one of the owners of family-run Uncle Ray's, said his store has received a relatively high number of applications - 47 - since Valentine's Day. But he attributes the thick stack of apps to his store's reputation as much as a dire teen job market.

"This is perceived as a fun place to work," he said.

Ward worries that the altered teen jobs picture might be much longer term.

"This rite of passage for teens has really fallen by the wayside," she said.

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