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The story of unemployment

Out-of-work exec turns to writing

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BY KEVIN SHEA

In April, Dennis Ryan received several job offers and calls from friends and former colleagues after a story chronicling his two-year struggle to find a job appeared in The Times.

Ryan, 56, of East Windsor, says the calls were an emotional boon to him as he dealt with job fairs and interviews, two years after being downsized and forced out of the pharmaceutical world.

As he mulled the offers, he heard something special in the calls he received. Some of the people, Ryan said, heard themselves in his story.

They told him, "my God, I thought I was reading about myself," Ryan said recently.

Then Ryan started thinking, maybe his new career should be about his situation, of not having a job, the worry it brings an individual, and how it relates to the country's financial mess and his belief that the American Dream has dimmed.

Ryan said thought turned to reality when someone said to him, "Why don't you write a book?"

So he is.

He has started writing about his jobless experiences, tentatively titled, "Waking Up On the Wrong Side of the American Dream," and has created a website, whotookamerica.com, to generate interest in the project. He hopes the website also can be an outlet for people to discuss -- or vent -- their unemployment woes.

"If (my story) caught the attention of people who thought they were reading about themselves, then I hope the book will get the attention of even more," he said.

In his short time as a reporter of sorts on the unemployment beat, Ryan said, he's heard many stories similar to his. He also has heard real fear in their voices.

Since The Times wrote about Ryan in April, he notes, the faltering economy has become a daily national headline. And unemployment continues to rise.

In March, the state's unemployment rate had climbed to 4.8 percent; and New Jersey had lost 9,700 jobs in the first quarter of the year.

The state's unemployment rate is now 5.8 percent, and New Jersey lost another 3,900 jobs in September alone, for a statewide loss through September of 21,100, the latest Department of Labor statistics show.

"There are people out there who tell me, 'I am afraid of going into work every day'," he said.

Ryan, who worked from 1980 to 2006 in corporate purchasing, including 22 years with industry giant Carter-Wallace, formerly in Cranbury, where he worked on multimillion-dollar deals on the famed Trojan condoms line, said part of him wants to return to the corporate world.

He's still looking for jobs, and he said he wants to thank every person who personally offered him work this past spring.

"I am very grateful for the suggestions," Ryan said. He got a lot of interviews, and a few seemed very promising, but something always went awry.

Ryan said he was going to sell furniture, and was told he could make up to \$80,000 a year if he put in the work. Then the company said nobody ever really made that much, but they put that in the ad to pull in applicants.

A North Jersey health-care company interviewed him, then never contacted him again, and when he did get someone on the phone, he found out they too were having financial problems.

Ryan admits he did not pursue some lower-paying jobs, because, he said, he still has his eye on the prize of a corporate job he can retire from. "I am just not ready to give up yet," he said. Meanwhile he retains a financial cushion built up from his days of steady employment and his wife remains employed.

And his passion has been building to write his book and grow the website. He's also trying to carve out a niche as an employment/unemployment advocate.

"This is the first time I've been a statistic and it's got my Irish blood running," he said. "I am going to keep being vocal about this until I get people to listen."