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How one worker made her own decisions

By LEE ROMNEY
STAFF WRITER

When Pillsbury/Green Giant scaled back its Watsonville operation in January, laying off hundreds of workers, lab technician Raquel Gonzalez opted for her severance package and set out in search of a new life, "even if it meant starting from the bottom up."



Mike McCollum

Raquel Gonzalez

But Gonzalez hopes her perseverance may help other laid-off workers rise above the barriers of age, language, and a lack of formal education that many face.

Gonzalez decided in 1987 to find a way out of the food-processing field. For a year she worked as an assistant to a Watsonville dentist while holding a full-time shift at the Green Giant plant. But then she broke her leg and, with a family to raise, decided she could not keep up.

Gonzalez' husband, Ramon, a foreman at a poultry ranch, has brought the family a steady income as well as medical insurance.

While her efforts in dentistry were thwarted, Gonzalez' experience working in an office helped her land her current job as peer counselor.

In the beginning of June, Gonzalez received a letter announcing the peer counselor position — a position that the laid-off workers themselves had requested to help ease the suspicion and mistrust associated with the Job Assistance Center.

On May 22, after almost 35 years in the United States, Gonzalez took the oath of citizenship. Although she was a legal U.S. resident, the move may help her find work with employers who are wary of forged documents and discriminate accordingly, Gonzalez said.

"Sometimes I think that we're to be blamed ourselves," Gonzalez said of the tendency to remain isolated. But now that the laid-off workers are in a critical situation, it's more important than ever to make the extra effort to learn English, she added.

What Gonzalez has achieved for herself, she hopes her two daughters will surpass. The elder, 14-year-old Elva, is a straight-A student at Monte Vista Christian School, where she is on a full work scholarship. Elva wants to be a teacher. Twelve-year-old Ruth is at Green Valley Christian School and wants to be a pediatrician.

By embarking on a new life, Gonzalez hopes she may be able to help her girls achieve their goals.

"In a way it's been a good thing," Gonzalez said of the events that led to her new job. "Hopefully,

I can make it there. The job will only last for six months to a year, but I know if I try hard enough, I can get experience to better myself in the future. Maybe in the future I can go ahead and apply for a county job."

"I thought, 'Well, it won't hurt to go see what it's about,'" Gonzalez said.

Now that she has been hired, she will be helping other laid-off workers overcome the same insecurities she still struggles with daily.

"I'm learning not to put myself down like I have for the last couple of years. (Job Assistance Center Director) Maria Lopez keeps saying, 'You can do it. You can do it,'" Gonzalez said.

Born in Puebla, Mexico, Gonzalez moved to Monterey when she was 4-years-old. Her family later moved to Watsonville, and a high school summer job turned into a lifetime of work.

"When I was a teenager, I hated school," Gonzalez reflected. "But when you get to a certain age you realize how much education is needed." Gonzalez later returned to school to finish her high school diploma — something many of the laid-off workers are confronting now.

"I know some of the people are saying, 'Hey, this is not for me. I'm too old.' I say, 'Hey, it's never too late,'" she said. That's a message Gonzalez has heard repeatedly from her own mother, who retired in January from the Green Giant plant after 28 years.

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