

Finding work from port to port

By KATE GOGGIN

KAREN LYON HAD a successful career before her marriage. She had developed sophisticated skills with computer systems and data analysis.

But she hadn't used those skills much in recent years. Instead, she'd spent more time coordinating household logistics and helping her children adapt to new environments.

Lyon is married to a military man, and she's moved three times in the past six years. Where he goes, she follows.

With her husband close to retirement, though, Lyon felt it was time to tune up her career. "I just wanted to go out and do something for me. Use all my talents and skills to apply to a new direction."

Lyon, who lives in Spotsylvania County, is among a growing number of military spouses whose message is coming across loud and clear: I just want to work.

According to Marilyn Henry, relocation assistance program specialist at Dahlgren, "More military spouses are working now than in previous years, and the increase is not just for economic reasons." The mobile global lifestyle of today's military is opening up new opportunities for their accompanying family members.

And those family members today often include the husband. According to Henry, "more men are now following their military spouses than ever before. We have a lot of active duty females, and their spouses are

Kate Goggin, a Northern Virginia-based free-lance writer, is herself a trailing spouse.

following them. This is becoming more prevalent in the last couple of years."

Local jobs are what most family members seek. Melissa Ackley is the Spouse Employment Specialist at Dahlgren. Her office provides family members with everything from résumé writing to interview technique seminars. After attending the seminars, military spouses are better prepared to face local employers.

Her office even provides a free resource for local employers—a job matching service. This service is available to all local employers who send in a simple request form. "They are ready for us and appreciate the fact we are the pipeline" to the employment pool here at the base, Ackley said. "Also, the off-base defense contractors here don't need someone for long-term assignments sometimes. It works out real well that our spouses are mobile and can jump in and fill the need."

Half the spouses who come through Ackley's office end up working in the Fredericksburg area. Karen Lyon did find rewarding work as a personnel assistant at TeleSec Core Staff in Fredericksburg. After six years of being out of the work force, she said, "I was flying blindfolded, and my fear was that they wouldn't value my years at home.

"As a following spouse, it's your responsibility to make things work smoothly at each new posting. There are a lot of skills that go into being a homemaker and following spouse. Not everyone could do it."

Lyon's employer said it was her flexibility that gave her the edge over other candidates.

She picked up some interviewing tips from



Karen Lyon, left, explains the interview process to a group of potential associates, Theresa Toomey, Allen Marsh and Jennifer Colbin, at TeleSec Core Staff off Bragg Road in Spotsylvania.

a seminar she had attended with her husband and was matched to the TeleSec Core Staff office through Ackley's job matching service.

Ackley urges anyone entering the job market today to undergo a skills assessment. She said job candidates would be surprised by how many skills they have picked up just by virtue of arranging moves and juggling responsibilities at home.

Also boosting résumés, she added, are "volunteer activities, time and financial management skills utilized while at home with your kids."

"A lot of people are still thinking there's only one kind of résumé—starting with most recent work experience and listing backward. And that's just not the case," she

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SUZANNE CARR / The Free Lance-Star

Melissa Ackley, left, an employment counselor at Dahlgren, helps Kristin Amos with job information at the base yesterday.

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said.

Ackley, who is not a military spouse and does not have a military background, said, "I've been surprised at the great range of skills [these spouses] bring to their job. I've had very positive feedback from local employers. If we give them one employee they're coming back for more. It's working."

Ackley encourages use of a portfolio, which includes a compilation of what the job candidate has done over the years as well as references acquired along the way.

Terri Cope is one who took Ackley's advice.

After spending five years at home raising her children, she wanted a job outside the home. Within a month of moving to Dahlgren, she went to the employee assistance office for a skills-assessment evaluation. She then was referred to another office where she learned Windows 95, Powerpoint and Word.

She was immediately placed in a job on base at the military exchange store. The job is good, but it was the skills assessment that was most helpful to her. Cope soon will begin taking adult education courses at King George High School to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. "I finally know what I want to be when I grow up, and it's something I can take with me to the next post."

Once called trailing spouses, the military and the corporate world now refer to "the employee and his family" when discussing personnel

moves. "We have removed 'trailing spouse' from our vocabulary in the Navy," said Henry, the Dahlgren relocation specialist. "The term has a negative connotation."

Recent research shows an employee with a contented family is more productive and is less likely to curtail his assignment because of family issues.

Husbands report to their commands and they are ready to do their jobs, and their supportive family members are left to fend for themselves trying to locate job opportunities.

At Dahlgren, an isolated community, employment is not readily available or visible. "I see them first and give them general information about the community," said Henry, and usually within three months they are ready to begin the job-hunting phase of transition.

Is it possible to have a two-career marriage in the military? Karen Lyon believes so. "You can have your own career. But you must consider it as portable, like marrying a traveling salesman. If you choose teaching and nursing, you're less likely to lose seniority when you move. One of the reasons I'm with the temporary employment business is I thought I could learn about it now and take it to where we're headed."

Contributing to the local economy and "taking it" with them is what military spouses do best. If the Navy slogan is "Join the Adventure," then perhaps the spouses should have as their slogan: "Have Skills, Will Travel."