

By **TONYIA CONE**
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

When Catherine Pronga started looking for a job in October after 12 years as a stay-at-home-mom, she turned to the Connect Forward Job Club, which meets every Tuesday morning at “The J,” for help.

Pronga, who began working as a device engineer for Freescale Semiconductor Inc. in March, said participating in the group’s exercises helped her figure out the type of job she should try to find.

This is exactly the type of question Suzy Drapkin, founder of Connect Forward Job Club, is trying to help her group’s members answer.

Drapkin, who helps people in career transition and those needing more structure and guidance in job search strategy as a career development and planning strategist and principal of Career Achievers, her private career counseling business, has also been a diagnostic vocational evaluator and assessor and has a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling.

A member of the Jewish Community Center, Mosaic Jewish Outdoor Club and Jewish Business Network, Drapkin helped her husband, Michael, start the Drapkin Institute for Music Entrepreneurship. He plays klezmer music, and their daughters — Shayna, Sara and Leia — are active members of the Jewish community as well, participating in BBYO and J-Serve, the National Day of Jewish Youth Service.

Shayna also went on a March of the Living trip, an international education program that takes Jewish teens from around the world to Poland on Yom HaShoah/Holocaust Remembrance Day to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau, and then on to Israel to observe Yom HaZikaron/Israel Memorial Day and Yom Ha’Atzmaut/Israel Independence Day.

Drapkin started the Connect Forward Job Club in April 2009 when she saw what was happening with the job market.

Through reading about the situation and talking to people, she said, she knew people were struggling. She also had personal experience with job loss, since people in her family have been laid off over the years.

“With all the people unemployed, I could be a good source of information since this is my background,” Drapkin said. “It’s a way for me to give back.”

Jody Lockshin of the Jewish Business Network helped Drapkin get space at The J.

Jay Rubin, chief executive officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Austin, said, “We were thrilled with Jody’s introduction and Suzy’s volunteering, and happy to provide meeting space and marketing support.”

Drapkin said club meetings are made up of core members who come regularly and

CONNECT FORWARD

Job club helps members
form connections,
focus on self-assessment



Suzy Drapkin (from left), Ying Xu, Bob Baker and Debra Green at a meeting in mid-March of the Connect Forward Job Club.

people who weave in and out due to scheduling conflicts or things like contract work.

“The dynamics of the group can change because of that,” she said. “I learned to be really flexible.”

After attending one meeting, people are eligible to sign up for Drapkin’s e-mail list, which includes job postings. More than 150 people make up the e-mail list.

The job club also has a LinkedIn group, which is open to anyone.

Drapkin emphasized that she has a strict no-vendor policy and really makes an effort to protect job club members.

“I won’t promote anyone, including myself. There are lots of people trying to make a dollar off the unemployed. I will not be part of that,” she said, adding that she gives away a lot of free services, meeting with people and talking to them on the telephone. “I see a differentiation between what I do privately for my business and what I do as a facilitator for this group.”

About two-thirds of the club’s members are Jewish. The club is not religious in nature.

The Connect Forward Job Club is open to anyone who is unemployed or underemployed — anyone not doing the work they really want to do on a full-time basis — or those working bridge jobs, those they take to survive.

“There is a whole segment of the market

that is not talked about because they are not a statistic,” Drapkin said. “Once they are off unemployment, they drop off the charts. They are not talked about or part of the overall picture of unemployment.”

Most people in the job club are older, white-collar professionals. While some younger people have attended meetings, Drapkin said, it is really not the right group for young people.

“They stay on my e-mail list, but it’s an older-worker group,” she said. “These are people I think are struggling a lot because they have to catch up with technology. All the social media can be overwhelming. If you haven’t been on a job search in years, you have a whole learning curve.”

Older workers often have to reinvent themselves, Drapkin said, because their jobs may have been eliminated and there is a deluge of people in the job market.

While age discrimination is masked because it is illegal, she said, it often occurs under the guise of telling people they are overqualified.

“It’s just another added hurdle for older job seekers to deal with,” Drapkin said.

Wes Campbell, an electrical engineer who last worked two years ago as an independent technical sales representative representing small start-up companies in the semiconductor industry, said that at 65 years old he has faced job search chal-

lenges he thinks may be related to his age.

After several interviews over the telephone, a hiring manager told Campbell he was a perfect fit for a job. When he met with company representatives in person, however, he could see the shock on their faces. The oldest person at the company was 38 years old.

The sales manager “flat out asked, ‘Do you think you have the energy to perform the job?’” Campbell said.

Participating in the Connect Forward Job Club, he said, confirmed that he would have to do entrepreneurial work.

Molly Kristall, a 63-year-old member of the job club who has been unemployed for more than a year, said she also thinks age discrimination is out there in the hiring world.

Kristall, who is working toward an associate’s degree at Austin Community College, said she thinks companies are missing an opportunity by hiring young people who will work for lower pay over people who have been in the workforce longer and have more experience and people skills.

About half the job club members are from the tech industry. The rest come from all backgrounds, including education, real estate, event planning, administration, writing, marketing and public relations.

A good number of job club members are transient, many of whom moved to Austin from California because they heard Austin is recovering from the economic downturn and that there are jobs here, only to learn they would only struggle just as much here.

Drapkin said she likes the diversity and size of the job club. Unlike large job clubs, Connect Forward provides an intimacy that allows people to open up, talk and get comfortable with each other.

Pronga said the connections she made in Connect Forward are more meaningful than in other clubs to which she belongs because members spend time getting to know each other.

“It felt like more of an open group,” she said. “It felt safe.”

Campbell said the Connect Forward Job Club is personal, with a format and size that allow individual issues to be addressed.

Other clubs he goes to, he said, are too large for that.

Austin had few job clubs when Drapkin started her group last spring, she said, but today almost every church in town has one.

Drapkin said the Connect Forward Job Club offers participants a supportive environment where everyone is treated with respect and empathy. As a career professional, she said, she keeps everything people tell her confidential.

The club also provides networking opportunities.

“What I really have seen and what has been most gratifying are friendships de-

veloped among certain club members who come more regularly for longer periods of time,” Drapkin said.

Another club benefit is that Drapkin, who tries to stay on top of current trends and resources, offers club members job search information.

She often talks to people outside the group and fields many requests for advice related to job searching. When people who are in crisis call her, she refers them to resources she knows of in the community, such as Jewish Family Service.

“I am seeing people who are not able to pay mortgages or utility bills, people sweating bullets because their unemployment is being cut off and they don’t even know now if they’ll be extended,” she said, adding that people often struggle with various health and marital issues as the result of stress caused by unemployment.

People may find job loss as devastating as losing a loved one or going through divorce, Drapkin said, explaining that for some, especially those who are seriously depressed, the club serves as a reason to get out of bed Tuesday mornings.

“The number one factor that encompasses this is the downward spiral in self-confidence of their value. That is most devastating of all,” she said. “Everything else flows from that.”

It is important, she added, for the unemployed to sometimes take a break from searching for a job and reward themselves when they reach goals and objectives.

“You have to be able to enjoy yourself or it will beat you down,” Drapkin said. “If you are not able to separate yourself from the job search, it will overtake you. That’s when marriages fall apart and people succumb to depression.”

She has seen positive things through the club, too. She has developed good relationships with people and has witnessed people reaching out to others in their time of need. She said it also fills people with hope when they see others finding jobs.

“I get as much out of this as my club members get,” Drapkin said. “I meet lots of interesting, intelligent people, and have made friends within the group. It feels good to be able to be helpful. I get to hone my skills and use the group to try out things. I try out new exercises or strategies. It’s like an incubator for me. I’m always looking for latest and greatest to share.”

Each Connect Forward Job Club meeting starts with announcements of upcoming networking events and other information people want to disseminate. Next, a job search-related topic is discussed, either by a guest speaker or Drapkin. Topics have ranged from how to deal with the emotional side of unemployment to résumé writing and other resources.

Kristall said every aspect of finding a



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job is covered at club meetings.

“I always learn something,” said Kristall, an active member of Temple Beth Shalom.

Drapkin said she tries to keep meetings interactive, creative and fun. She is starting to use contests, like the elevator pitch contest 17 club members recently entered, and is looking for small donations to offer as prizes.

In another exercise, Drapkin has participants write down questions on pieces of paper and hand them in. Then everyone brainstorms, pitching in to answer the questions.

“I don’t claim to be the end all expert on every topic,” she said. “Job searching is not rocket science. It’s skills. Within that, people need to look outside the box and be open to being creative, especially in this market.”

Looking for work, Drapkin said, is about going into organizations or businesses and creating opportunity for oneself.

“Sending your résumé into cyberspace isn’t going to get you very far,” she said.

The biggest challenge many job club members face is articulating what they want to do and identifying their value, or what they bring to the table.

This kind of personal branding is important, Drapkin explained, particularly for those who have been at the same job for 10 or 20 years. While it has always been key to searching for a job, the Internet has made it more important than ever.

“You need to articulate those things so people will take you seriously and invest in you,” she said. “It is a learned skill that takes a lot of practice.”

The self-assessment exercises that Connect Forward Job Club members work on at meetings help with this because it enables them to get in touch with all their skills, achievements and things they have accomplished over their lifetimes.

Pronga, who previously worked for Motorola Inc. as a product engineer, said that, if not for the job club, she would not have taken the time to ask herself these kinds of questions since she knew she wanted to continue working in the same industry and type of job.

As a result of the exercises, Pronga said, she clearly understood that transitioning back into the workforce was something she wanted to take into consideration and found a part-time contract position that made the transition smoother for her family.

Drapkin sees a long-term need for her job club.

“It’s a jobless recovery,” she said. “The recession is recovering but I don’t see how, if people aren’t working, you can actually say that.”

While some people are finding jobs, Drapkin said, there are a lot of people for whom there aren’t jobs.

People who see layoffs coming and prepare to search for new work, who are focused, targeted and really good at self-promoting, often experience the shortest time between jobs, Drapkin said.

Those who struggle the most are those who find networking really difficult because, by Drapkin’s estimate, about 75 percent of jobs are found through networking.

Introverted people can take baby steps, like going to any kind of event with the

goal to talk to one person, and the next time, two people, she said.

“The important thing is to be talking to people,” Drapkin said. “Networking is a two-way street. It’s not just about you; it’s about establishing a connection, a relationship, and nurturing that so that person has an investment in terms of wanting to help.”

People who have been out of work for two years or longer, Drapkin said, are really struggling — an issue not discussed enough.

“There was supposed to be an \$80 billion job creation act,” she said. “It was cut to \$15 billion. ... People in government are not getting what the struggles are.”

Lisa Goodgame, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Austin, said that in December Drapkin brought the Austin Community Jobs Forum to the council.

In January, Drapkin used a template provided by the Office of the President and facilitated a program that drew about 45 participants.

They discussed a set of six questions designed to help the administration identify areas for job creation, training and development, then Drapkin submitted a report of the results to the Office of the President on behalf of the Jewish Community Relations Council.

“This program fell neatly into two areas of the JCRC’s work: Tikkun Austin, our new community service initiative, and Community and Civic Engagement,” Goodgame said.

Drapkin submitted the report on the Austin Community Jobs Forum to the White House as requested, but it seems that the work the group did during the two-hour session was for naught.

There has not been any follow-up since the January forum.

One participant at the forum said that she had not heard about the president’s initial job summit in early December and felt that the health care reform debate crowded out job creation.

Drapkin, who moved to Austin from New York, said Austin is a networking community, with networks for every industry and people who really want to help one another.

“I think it’s great,” she said, “and I think there are a lot of people out there — individually or via groups like mine or companies providing services — to help people get through this. I think that’s great. I’m really happy to be part of that.”

For more information, contact Drapkin at sdrapkin@careerachievers.com or 590-2545.

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Tonyia Cone, an Austin-based freelance journalist, is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com.