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TOP STORY

## After 23 years at the helm, non-profit leader retires

Dennis Gaub, staff writer 6 hrs ago



Darla Joyner recently retired from Career Transitions.

Dennis Gaub

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When Darla Joyner graduated from high school 53 years ago, she transitioned from the job she started at age 16 and joined the military. The native of Bottineau, N.D., located north of Minot, 70 miles from the Canadian border, became the first Peace Garden State woman to enlist in the Marines in 1966.

Joyner, 71, didn't – couldn't – know that her job shift as an 18-year-old would be the first of several during the 55 years she was in the workforce. Or that multiple work transitions would give her personal awareness of the needs of those she helped during the final two-plus decades of her career.

Twenty-three years after becoming executive director of Career Transitions, a Belgrade nonprofit agency that helps meet the training needs of local workers and industries, Joyner director retired on December 31.

She hasn't, however, severed all ties with the center, located on Arden Road in Bruce Industrial Park.

For now, she comes into the office several times a week to mentor her successor, Jennifer Sipes. The new organization head has non-profit experience but this is her first role as an executive director, Joyner said.

“I want CT to continue and grow. You need new blood and fresh ideas, someone who can look at things a little differently and keep some things the same. That’s the way I look at change,” Joyner said Tuesday.

When she took over as Career Transition’s head in 1995, it was based in Bozeman and used a different method with occupation-changers.

“We were doing 5 and 6-week classes on how to transition, get a job, do a resume, interview, all the things we do. And now we do it just in time.

“We try to connect with you when you need it, not according to a schedule. Resumes have changed; we’ve had to change our interview techniques that we teach. How you present yourself is a little different anymore,” she said.

Career Transitions hasn’t changed, though, in its goal of trying to meet individual needs. Instead of using a blanket approach, “We try to tailor (training and other assistance) to what that person needs at the time,” Joyner said.

“We’re a small unit, we’re not something that’s an education unit like Gallatin College. We can help people get into the work force faster with certain kind of skills.”

Career Transitions took on added responsibilities in November 2013 when it rolled programs offered by READI Workforce Training System, Inc., into CT. That brought training such as CDL (commercial driver’s license, for people working in trucking and bus transportation industries) and CNA (certified nurse assistant) within the agency managed by Joyner.

A former Montana State University vocational training professor founded READI in 2001. The organization relied on a part-time office manager and an all-volunteer board of directors, which wearied of “looking for money and creating things,” Joyner said.

“They said they didn’t want to let programs such as CDL training go. That’s an important need because it’s expensive and we know there’s a need for that in the job world. They transferred everything over to us, and our board became the board for that.”

The joint venture resulted in creation of the Career Workforce Community Training Center, “a one-stop location where you can go in, analyze what you need to do, what kind of education you need, what attributes you have and then get some training from Career Transitions,” Joyner said.

Job seekers then can go to Job Service, find available jobs, “and you’re out the door, off and running with your life.”

CDL and CNA training have proven especially attractive to career changers because of their practicality and market need.

The organization provides CDL training on premise, using a contractor, a tractor-trailer and a practice driving area. Those who’ve gone through the program include two Russian men and a school superintendent who planned to start a trucking company with a relative.

Joyner said CNA training has been “pretty popular” in a booming health-care field that must cope with millions of Baby Boomers who’ve reached or soon will reach retirement age. The training serves some as a ladder to becoming a registered nurse or entering another medical profession.

“They can test the waters in a least expensive way with a CNA and then gauge whether they want to go forward. We fill those classes twice a year. And try to keep the quality up and the cost down — that’s kind of what CT is able to do, make it accessible to someone that doesn’t have a lot of money or needs something quick to make money on the side.”

Joyner first worked in media, in the print, pre-online world. She was the first female writer for Leatherneck, the Marine Corps magazine, and worked out of corps headquarters in Washington, D.C. While in uniform, she met her husband, John, a fellow Marine, and they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary last year.

John was slated for duty in the Vietnam War, but his father died, so the couple left active duty and moved to Durango, Colorado.

There, Darla handled public relations for the Southern Ute Indian tribe; worked for a weekly newspaper in neighboring Cortez as editor, delivery person and other roles; and then, the Joyners moved to Denver. John, who had been a punch-card computer operator in the Marines, got a similar job while Darla worked for J.C. Penney’s advertising department, handling layout duties. She was a writer again for Beverage Analyst, a trade magazine for state-owned liquor stores.

The Joyners moved to the Gallatin Valley in 1978, after passing through the area on a vacation and deciding it looked like Durango before an influx of newcomers. Bozeman seemed like a good place to raise their three children, then ages 3 to 6 or 7. John got a job as a tire store manager in downtown Bozeman, and Darla took a front-office position with a construction company.

She later got a paste-up job with the Bozeman Chronicle, worked for the High Country Independent Press and was a member of the then two-person staff at the Bozeman Chamber of Commerce. Finally, she shifted to Career Transitions as assistant director. When the executive director was injured in a car accident and could no longer work full time, the board asked her to accept those duties.

The Joyners own a home in Clarkston, so Darla said she relishes the idea of no longer commuting an hour to work as she did most of her career.

In her newfound spare time, she’ll volunteer. “I’ve been on every board you can think of in this area as well as in my profession. I’m going to pick and choose and probably look in the military arena, with veterans.”

She and her husband, who retired from the military at age 60, plan to take a retirement to Alaska. Another travel destination in the next year or two: Sweden. Darla and her four sisters want to visit the place where their grandfather lived before migrating to America.