



From left: Andrew Goldfeder, Michelle Gralnick and Michael Simon discuss the challenges they faced — and overcame — when they found themselves in an incredibly tough job market. Photos: Kristi Foster

WEATHERING — the — ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

*Whether entering the job market
or coping after layoffs, here are some
local stories of finding success*

BY VICTORIA SIEGEL
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

Not all *simchas* are life-cycle events.
Not all *simchas* involve parties and caterers.

In fact, some *simchas* are just plain necessary in order to eat and turn on the electricity. And during this low point in our country's economic history, the *simcha* of starting a business or finding a new job becomes that much more precious. As these stories demonstrate, whether it's because of the loss of a job or entering the work force for the first time, it is possible to turn lemons into . . . *simchas*.

From Layoff to Blessing

For five years, Michael Simon, 49, had been working in business development for a marketing communications company. Then the downturn in the economy forced the firm to lay off several senior employees in early 2009, including him. Even though he knew the lay-off was coming, it was still a shock.

"Holy cow! I have a wife and two kids to support and I have 30 days of severance pay," Simon said. "So I hit the ground doing what I do best: calling businesses and picking out opportunities to help them with their marketing." He said he took out his address book and started making calls. Through some very intense networking, Simon immediately landed enough work to cover his expenses while he looked for a job.

But then something unexpected happened: "I started having a lot of fun doing the work," Simon said. As he continued to look for a fulltime job he noticed he was getting repeat business and receiving additional opportunities to do projects. He also noticed he was enjoying himself.

"I rediscovered the pleasure that I was missing in my field when I was working for someone else," Simon explained. "It was a rebirth for me. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes."

Today, Simon's own company, Big Think (www.big-think.net), provides marketing communications and brand consultancy services to businesses wanting to advance their sales and products in this very challenging economy. "My typical client is a business that is stagnant but knows it has a viable market and opportunity," Simon said. Since graduating more than 20 years ago from the University of Missouri-Columbia with a degree in speech communications, Simon has spent his entire career working with aggressive start-ups and Fortune 500 firms on marketing communica-

ECONOMY | PAGE 53



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

tions and branding projects.

Now that he has rediscovered his passion and energy for his field he also is enjoying positive feedback from his clients about the impact he is making on their businesses. He acknowledges that he owes a lot to people who helped him along the way. "I thank my friends, business associates, J-Biz (an independent networking organization of Jewish entrepreneurs, jbizstl@sbcglobal.net), SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), and my previous employer for cutting the cord knowing that I could do fine on my own," he said. "They gave me that extra push to remind me that I do love what I do. It was really a blessing in disguise."

The Rebounding Multipreneur

When Michelle Gralnick's contracts as the part-time executive director for a couple of nonprofits were not renewed because of budget constraints, she didn't spend a single second agonizing about her future.

"I did not worry about the economic climate because I had been generating my own income since 1999," Gralnick, 48, said. "I didn't feel fear [even though Gralnick was given short notice], but instead thought this was an exciting opportunity. I get to recreate myself and focus on those projects where I want to spend my energy."

So, like Michael Simon, she started her own business: M Gralnick Enterprises, LLC. In fact, Gralnick launched the website for her new business venture (www.mgralnick-enterprises.com) within a month of learning her contract was ending.

Her business allows her to feature a variety of the skills and talents she's accumulated over the years:

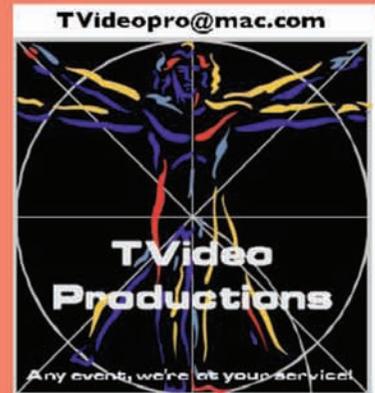


Michael Simon
After losing his job because of the economic downturn, Simon began his own company.
Photo: Kristi Foster

providing services as an executive director; helping nonprofit and for-profit organizations with strategic planning and creating their unique image and preserving memories through her Creative Memories™ consultant services. Soon, she will be launching *h. gralnick studios*, an online art gallery featuring the artwork of her father, Herbert Gralnick.

With this new business, Gralnick enjoys setting and achieving her own standards of professionalism. "I get to make customer service a priority and don't have to make compromises like I had to do when working at a 'conventional' job." She also can offer a fresh perspective to organizations since she's on the outside looking in.

Gralnick avails herself of resources in the community to help shape her business. In addition to turning to people she knows with specific levels of expertise, she associates with JProStl (www.jewishinstlouis.org), which offers seminars that are complementary to her company, as well as the entrepreneur support



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group J-Biz. “J-Biz is a sounding board, in a safe and supportive environment, where I can speak specifically about what I’m trying to accomplish,” Gralnick explained.

As is the case with many new businesses, Gralnick sacrificed financial security during the start-up phase. But she feels the trade-off of being her own boss is worth some uncertainty. “I get to be professional on every level but still get to be free to be who I am,” she said.

Novice Job Seeker

Michael Zerman, 24, didn’t have years of experience from which he could create a new business like Simon and Gralnick. Instead, he was one of the thousands of college graduates facing a harsh job market upon receiving a diploma. “It was daunting graduating into this economic environment,” Zerman said. “It was an uneasy feeling. The transition from college to the ‘real’ world is challenging on its own. But combined with the stories of veteran employees being laid off, it made finding a job that much more difficult.”

In May 2009, just a few days after graduation with his bachelor of journalism degree from Mizzou, Zerman interviewed with a former adjunct professor about an internship. He landed the job and started working right away. However, Zerman knew this was short-term since the internship would be ending in August.

“So I met with Margo Newman and Bonnie Solomon with EAP (Employment Assistance Program) through the Jewish Federation,” Zerman said. “They went over my resume, made suggestions of things I needed to improve and recom-



Michael Zerman



Michelle Gralnick

She launched a website for her new consulting business within a month after losing a contract job. Photo: Kristi Foster

mended job websites to scour. They also had contacts for me to talk to.”

With the advice and contacts he received through EAP, Zerman secured another internship for a longer period of time at Fleishman-Hillard, the public relations giant. While there, the company changed his status from intern to a contract employee. He also took advantage of the contacts he made at the firm and by networking with a fellow colleague, he learned of an account executive position elsewhere. Now he is working at Cushman/Amberg, another well-respected PR firm.

“I have been working since a week after graduation. Of my friends from school, not everyone has landed a full-time job,” Zerman said. “Many have had internships extended but places are still reluctant to hire so I’m very lucky.”

He admits there were moments in the job-hunting process that were maddening. “A lot of graduates think the world is theirs and they’re ready to conquer it and anyone would be lucky to have them as employees. The situation with my class was there weren’t a lot of jobs to be had. The trick was to get your

foot in the door of any company that was remotely close to what you want to be doing. I knew it would take time.”

Career Change

Andrew Goldfeder wasn’t exactly overjoyed when he was laid off, but he looked at the situation as an opportunity to do something more meaningful. “For two and a half years I was on the phone as an inside salesperson selling online training resources. I really wanted a job that allowed me to utilize my degree in public management and see people face-to-face,” Goldfeder, 27, said. “I originally got into sales because it was my first job out of college.”

So he got a part-time job while he was job hunting in order to keep up his customer service skills and make a little money. “The job also helped with my confidence which sometimes is a struggle when you’re unemployed,” Goldfeder explained. “When you watch the news and all you hear and see are negative things about unemployment, it creates a dark image. I was part of the unem-

ployed so there was that message: 'There are a lot of other qualified people out there. How do I stand out?'"

Goldfeder stood out by staying active, volunteering and brushing up his skills. He searched for job openings, worked out at the Jewish Community Center, and found a support system in a friend who was going through the same thing. "We would work out together which got my mind off things for a while and fed my energy to keep job searching," he said. "And he and I would talk to each other about our interviews and what we were going through."

One of Goldfeder's volunteer activities is serving on the board of the Young Professionals Division (YPD). It was here that he heard about EAP. "At first, I resisted going to EAP because I wanted to find the job on my own. It's not always easy to ask for help especially when you're usually the one doing the giving," he said.

However, he met with Newman and they talked about opportunities in the Jewish community and the ways she could help him with net-

Resources mentioned in the story

• Employment Assistance Program, EAP

<http://www.jewishinstlouis.org/IR/Listing.aspx?id=49298>

An organization that provides a network to self-identified, committed and engaged young leaders of Jewish Federation temporarily displaced from jobs due and seeking meaningful employment.

• JProSTL

www.jewishinstlouis.org, 314-442-3810

A professional association whose mission is to "enhance the Jewish communal service field through networking, mentoring services, continuing education, recognition of achievements, community-wide collaboration, and the exploration of issues that affect this unique community of professionals."

• J-Biz

jbizstl@sbcglobal.net

Jewish business people in St. Louis who are trying to improve entrepreneurial opportunities by leveraging their collective expertise.

working and resources. She teamed him with Solomon who had a wide range of networks and contacts.

"Working with them gave me a lot of confidence," Goldfeder said. "They both really helped me get everything together and built my confidence because I was able to meet with

Bonnie's network. Margo kept me posted on job openings in the Jewish community."

As a BBYO advisor for the boys' chapter Esperanto AZA #2486, Goldfeder said he always knew he got more out of his volunteer work than he did working in sales. So when Newman told him about an opening at the Holocaust Museum and Learning Center [HMLC], he applied...and he got the job.

"As the administrative assistant at the HMLC, I keep the museum running, book tours, coordinate docents and volunteers and perform office management duties," Goldfeder said. "It's a huge difference from what I was doing but being able to make an impact for such an important organization and such an important mission makes me happy."

While the *simcha* of finding a job or starting a new business doesn't necessarily come with engraved invitations to a party, it does offer those who are lucky enough to find it fulfillment, a financial source, creativity, fun, meaning, independence, pride and a bit of security in this uncertain economic time. ■



Andrew Goldfeder

Getting laid off gave Goldfeder the opportunity to find more meaningful work. Photo: Kristi Foster