

CAREER JOURNAL

SECOND ACT | Stories of Reinventing a Career

The Drive to Go From the Factory to the Classroom

By DENNIS NISHI

Pamela Becker spent 13 years assembling Buick Skylarks all the while studying part-time for two degrees as she looked for a way off the General Motors factory floor. Now, 29 years after starting her studies—and at the height of the crisis in the auto industry—Ms. Becker is a college instructor helping displaced Michigan auto workers reinvent themselves.

At 18 years old, fresh out of high school, Ms. Becker followed her father and brother onto the auto-assembly line. She did everything from assembling tail lights to spot welding and painting. She earned enough money that she was able to buy her first house by age 25. But the rote work never kept her engaged.

Ms. Becker enrolled part-time at a local community college in 1979. She kept her mind occupied at work by doing calculus problems in her head. "Everybody on



Randy Mascharka

Pamela Becker spent years working full time and studying part time.

the line has dreams to do something else," says Patrick Cleary, a co-worker who left GM in 1992 to open a bar. "But you end up getting married and having kids and you end up staying," he says.

With an unpredictable work-

week schedule—rotating 10-hour days that included alternating weekend work—and indecision about a major, Ms. Becker found it difficult to complete the degree quickly. Even though she earned good grades, she regularly had to drop courses after missing too many lectures. It took nearly 11 years of coursework at six different colleges for Ms. Becker to earn her bachelor's degree in managerial economics in 1990 from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. And once she did, she says she couldn't find any work that paid as well as GM.

By then, Ms. Becker had a husband and 7-year-old son; she couldn't afford to take a pay cut. So she decided to stay on the line and pursue a master's in technology studies at Eastern Michigan University. But the following year, word came that GM was considering shuttering the assembly plant where she worked (it closed in 1993). Ms. Becker could have moved to work at another plant, but instead opted for a voluntary buyout.

She took a big pay cut and got part-time work as a graduate assistant, making just \$7 an hour—but with tuition assistance—un-

til she completed her master's in 1994. It was then that her university department head, Paul Kulk, asked her to teach a class called "Understanding Technology," which taught basic technical literacy for students looking to go into an industrial occupation. "I never thought of teaching before that," says Ms. Becker, who turned 35 on the first day of the class. "But I really liked it."

Ms. Becker, now 49, wrapped up her doctorate in education in December and is an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan's department of interdisciplinary technology. Her proudest accomplishment, she says, is creating a new undergraduate degree in Technology Management. The program caters primarily to displaced, middle-aged auto workers who want to transition into management roles but need a bachelor's degree to make it through the door.

Ms. Becker says she is now far better off financially, but has

no regrets about the time she spent at GM. She is grateful that she was able to support her family and finance most of her education with a factory job.

These days, she's working on a proposal with the Michigan Department of Labor and an agreement with community colleges that would allow former auto workers to apply more of their previous schoolwork toward a four-year technical degree at Eastern Michigan University. If funding is approved, the program will offer educational reimbursement, job-placement help and career workshops.

Meanwhile, Ms. Becker is pushing for more programs like hers, something she sees as critical as the auto industry continues its decline. "So many jobs are connected to manufacturing cars in Michigan," says Ms. Becker. "It's important to be prepared, and I'm happy to help people go through the tough transition that I did."