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Faces of the unemployed a year after so many lost their jobs to the COVID-19 pandemic

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When Canada went into lockdown in March, 2020, putting hundreds of thousands out of work, The Globe talked to people whose jobs had been upended. We checked in with some of them a year later, to see how they've fared throughout the pandemic and how their employment prospects have changed.

Vincent Lavoie, 28

ACROBAT AND CIRCUS PERFORMER, DRUMMONDVILLE, QUE.

Cirque du Soleil, Mr. Lavoie's employer, was among the first major Canadian companies to file for bankruptcy protection after all its shows closed last spring. New ownership brings new hope, but uncertainty continues to loom over how quickly the circus will return, and over the fate of the acrobat, whose future is unclear too.

"A lot of people have ventured out into new careers but I think everybody will consider going back. Will they all go back? I don't know. These days, I'm working as a barista to just get out of the house and see people and not be in the gloom of winter. But with the gyms reopening, I'll have some days where I go and do some flips and work out. I haven't worked out probably since December, since the holidays. Other than walking, I haven't done much. So I'm excited about that. And hopefully if shows are reopening in the fall, it means we're going to go back to training in the summer. So, fingers crossed."

"[Acrobatics] is a muscle memory thing. It's kind of like riding a bike. Your body will never forget how to do it. What is worrying me a little bit is that all of the fast-twitch muscles that are used to working in daily life, I don't use them as much as I would doing acrobatics ... I'll also need to kind of readapt to spacial awareness. At first, I'll be dizzy after every 'go' I take in the training. But after a few weeks, that will come back to normal."



HANDOUT

Joe Lumley, 42

MANUFACTURING WORKER, NOVAR, ONT.

Last March, Mr. Lumley was temporarily laid off from his job at a plant that manufactures equipment for the mining industry.

“If I said I had three weeks off [after being laid off], I’d be lying to you. We were deemed essential, which I think blows a lot of people’s minds in the factory. I understand we’re in the mining industry, but essential? I don’t know. I had co-workers who, right off the top, used their right not to come back to work for a while because they felt that was an unsafe workplace. Me, I’m not living paycheque to paycheque, but I definitely got to go to work. Since then, there hasn’t been a slow-down. I’d say there’s been an increase in production and an increase in staff.”

“I also knew a guy who ran an airport shuttle service, and COVID really did affect the business. He was looking to see if he could sell some of his vans, so he sold them to me for a very fair price. I kept one of them, and I sold three of them again. My dad, who’s 85, was like, ‘Can I come in on this?’ So I split the profits with my father. I’m going to swim and not sink. That’s my attitude.”

HANDOUT

Jordan Canning, 38

FILM AND TV DIRECTOR, TORONTO-BASED; CURRENTLY IN CALGARY

Ms. Canning was on set in Vancouver when the pandemic hit. Work stopped and she returned to Toronto; she was back to work in July, and has worked fairly consistently since, though she turned down one job in December in order to travel to Newfoundland to spend Christmas with family.

“In this forced downtime, I really recalibrated how I saw what a full, meaningful life entailed. We all get caught up in productivity and output – take on more projects, do more things – and somehow that adds up to a successful life. I don’t need to take on

everything. I want to take the summer off so that every day I can just go outside and see friends.

“What we’re excited about is getting to see the people we love again. The idea of moving to L.A. – not that I was ever really that interested in doing it anyway, but going that far away from family and friends just for the sake of a career, that doesn’t appeal to me any more. The choices I want to make are based on my relationships, and the people in my life.”

SARAH B GROOT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Joel Martell

BARBERSHOP OWNER, HALIFAX

Mr. Martell closed his barbershop last March before shutdowns were required. During the weeks he was out of work, he took the time to learn to design software he is hoping will help with future business ventures. He opened back up in June. With extra time between appointments, the volume of business is down 33 per cent, but his employees are able to work.

“I took advantage of just about everything other than the rent deferrals. I was on CERB when I was off. The wage subsidy was a really great help. There was a \$40,000 CEBA loan and an additional extension onto that. I’m thankful for that. It’s clear that, speaking to my entrepreneur friends, that saved a lot of people’s skin. My geographic location plays a big part as well. Nova Scotia has done such a good job of keeping people safe. Another reason for my optimism is the number of people I see moving here from Toronto, Calgary and elsewhere. When people move into town, the first thing they do is look for a new barber. It’s fun hearing those people’s stories. I think people are starting to see there are opportunities here. That makes me really optimistic for Halifax as a city, and for my business.”

HANDOUT

Grace Onasanya, 38

COOK, TORONTO

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

When Ms. Onasanya was laid off last March, she had already experienced upheaval. She left a nine-to-five job to go back to school and pursue her dream of being a chef. She worked long hours in the kitchen to get out of debt, all while grieving the loss of her fiancé, who died in 2018. She has been able to stay in her apartment this year thanks to her savings and CERB, but with restaurants still closed down in Toronto except for take-out services, she has not been able to go back to work yet.

“It was actually kind of nice to be able to take a moment and step back, and breathe. A lot of people in the industry like myself, we don’t have a lot of free time. You’re working 10 hours, 12 hours, 14 hours a day. I’ve gotten back to writing a little bit. My friends and I, we have a podcast from the Black perspective on Star Trek. I’m really excited about that. And that’s something that I wouldn’t have had the time or energy to do, had I still been working. It was, and still is, my dream to keep cooking. The [restaurant] industry is never going to be the same after this. I may not be working in a fine dining restaurant like I want to be. I may end up working in other places, like I may work in food service in a long-term care facility, or a hospital, or a catering company. I want to stay as close to cooking as I possibly can. It’s really sad to see. Over this year, a lot of places have gone under. There’s nothing I can do but hope that the right opportunity comes up.”

Rachel Iwaasa, 51

PIANIST, VANCOUVER

Rachel Iwaasa was supposed to travel to the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity to record a new album last April. That was cancelled, of course – as were her private lessons. But the loss of work was the least of her troubles. She got very sick in March with an upper respiratory infection that might have been COVID-19 – she was not able

to get a test. She had to isolate from her elderly mother, who lived with her. Then, in June, her mother died. It was an assisted death; she had Alzheimer's.

"I feel that the pandemic, ironically, made some things easier in this difficult time. I was scheduled to record a CD; I was too sick to go. At any other time if I had been sick for a month I would have had to cancel all of my gigs. As it was, they were cancelled.

HANDOUT

"We celebrated my mom's 90th birthday on April 25. I asked people to phone her in the weeks before and after; our phone was ringing off the hook. My mum said it was her best birthday ever. I think one of the gifts of dementia is that she couldn't really remember the other ones so well. But she felt duly celebrated for her 90th.

"My mother and I were very, very close and the grief has been very difficult. I feel like there has been more space for that than there would have been at other times.

"All the things that I've had to do to try to cope with the grief I think are making me a better artist."

Simone Orlando, 49

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, BALLET KELOWNA

For Simone Orlando, the pandemic was a triple-blow: the company's first full-length commission, *Macbeth*, had to be put on hold. Her partner, a physician, was working on the front lines. And her father, in long-term care with dementia, experienced a drastic decrease in cognitive ability and mood with the lockdown and subsequent isolation. Over this difficult year, Orlando has been hard at work keeping her company afloat – and dancing.

“We had to lay off an administrator and we were in the process last March of recruiting a communications co-ordinator. Because we just don’t know when we can return to live performance and see the revenue coming in from ticket sales, we decided that we needed to keep things as bare bones as possible this year and put our efforts into supporting the dancers and providing employment for them.”

TRYGG NELSON

“But we are gearing up for our first live-stream on April 17. It will actually be live. I want the dancers to have that experience that they know that there’s an audience out there on the other side of that camera.”

“In general, I really worry about the dancers, their mental health. I worry about many of my colleagues and myself going through this year feeling very much alone and dealing with just incredible stress on a daily basis. It just seems to never end.”

“We’re continuing to employ, to create, to ramp up in this hope that we will see people returning to the theatre in November.”

Grace Richards, 56

HEAVY EQUIPMENT OPERATOR, CONKLIN, ALTA.

Ms. Richards has been running graders, bulldozers and backhoes in the oil sands for more than two decades. That type of work has been more difficult to find in recent years. Then she lost the job she had lined up for summer, 2020, when the pandemic shut down a project to build a badly needed water and sewer system for her small Métis community. Federal income support programs have helped her pay the bills the last 12 months.

“They’ve reduced my car payments – the relief payment plan started back in October. They reduced my auto insurance because I wasn’t travelling so much because of COVID. Work-wise – well, there’s still nothing about work. I hear the [water and sewage system]

job is going through but it's still uncertain whether people in the community will be called back for hire. I'd like to be going back to work. For me to go elsewhere for work just isn't feasible. It's a small community – it's not like there's a whole lot of work. I am pretty grateful compared to a year ago, when I was panic-stricken about unemployment. I still haven't got back to work, but I thank my lucky stars I never did get sick."

COURTESY OF FAMILY

Molly Kuzyk, 47

WESTJET FLIGHT ATTENDANT, CALGARY

In early 2020, Ms. Kuzyk had only recently got back to her job in the airline industry after recovering from breast cancer. Despite many rounds of layoffs in the sector, the single mom of a young son has been able to hold onto her job this past year.

"It's been kind of an up-and-down year. After all the layoffs at WestJet, I survived that. But it was a tense year. You never knew if you were coming or going. My ex lost his job, mind you, and that was stressful for a few months there – with child support payments missing. He's started up work again last month so that's kind of nice. I feel like for the first little while it was dragged out just because the whole world was so upset. Last year the daycare said, 'You and your son can't come here, because you work for an airline.' I said, 'What about all the people that work at the hospital?' At the beginning it was really stressful but I think we have fallen into the new norm at this point."

SARAH B GROOT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Janelle Wimperis, 36

3/22/2021

Faces of the unemployed a year after so many lost their jobs to the COVID-19 pandemic - The Globe and Mail

DAYCARE OPERATOR, CALGARY

SARAH B GROOT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ms. Wimperis and her husband, Don, had opened the Right Start Daycare in the fall of 2019 and were still building up their business when the pandemic hit. Daycares were ordered to close in March, forcing them to temporarily lay off 14 workers, but have been open since May and are now back up to their prepandemic enrolment.

“The daycare is open and operating. It’s been kind of a crazy last year. When we reopened last May, after the first extended lockdown, we opened with seven kids and had to rebuild. And now we’re just slightly above our enrolment numbers that we were at a year ago. It has been a lot of treading water. A lot of people in Calgary are on CERB and not working. They’ve lost their jobs, work-from-home mandates are still in place in the province, so enrolment has been very, very slow. We kind of gain a few kids, and then we lose a few because people continue to lose jobs and have layoffs or cut back in hours. It’s been quite challenging to grow. But we’re still optimistic. There has been a slight uptick in tours, and we’re starting to see some people feeling confident enough to book a spot for the fall. I think with the vaccinations, people are feeling like things are moving in the right direction.”

Interviews have been edited and condensed.

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