

## Michael's Way provides financial aid for those who 'fall between the cracks'

**Organization's goal is to serve 125 job seekers this year**

By **Jenny Munro** • Staff writer • Published: April 03, 2011 2:00AM

Marie Ella Riggins has been in the health-care field for nearly a year after losing a job because of health concerns, undergoing back surgery and being unemployed for more than two years.

She had a high school diploma and some college but decided to move into the health-care field.

"I'm always taking care of everybody anyway," she said, adding "I love my job. I love my patients."

But without financial aid, the 42-year-old Greenville County resident said she would never have been able to gain the training, as she wasn't eligible for many of the programs.

Michael's Way came to the rescue.

"If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here," she told GreenvilleOnline.com, adding that the non-profit organization provided nearly \$2,000 for tuition, books, a uniform and shoes. "I had no extra money."

Many individuals are in the same situation as Riggins. They know they need more education or training to gain a job with a decent wage. But that's not enough. They also need the ability to pay for that education and training. When unemployed or working a part-time or minimum wage job, coming up with training funds is not easy.

Michael's Way, which can sometimes help in these situations, is a grassroots organization that helps those in dire need, said Steve Hand, head of Greenville Technical College's Quick Jobs program.

"There have been and always will be people that fall between the cracks," he said. With funding cuts over the past several years, "the resources out there for people struggling have not been adequate. To get a job in a tight job market, most people know they need to have something extra."

Jan Howard, executive director of Michael's Way, said the organization tries to help students who are ineligible for state education lottery funds or WIA funds.

Even some of those who might qualify, "most can't wait for the lengthy process that agencies taken even when those agencies have the money," Hand said.

The going can be slow — the organization has added 177 people since it began in 2004 — but Michael's Way is growing, Howard said.

Funding comes from individuals, churches and grants, both local and national. Plans are to begin applying for federal grants this year, Howard said. Also, Michael's Way is initiating an adoption program — a person or organization can provide the funding needed for one student to go to school. The group also plans a 70's Disco Fever fundraiser on June 25 at Larkins' SawMill. Tickets are \$40 a person and \$75 a couple. Events during the fundraiser will include dance competitions, instruction in The Hustle and a silent auction.

The organization's 2010 budget totaled \$102,000 while the current budget is \$185,000. But to serve the goal of 125 people this year, that budget will have to grow, Howard said. So she's in the process of seeking grants.

Howard is passionate about the mission of Michael's Way, named by St. Andrews Episcopal Church for a member who was active in tutoring adults for their GED tests. Michael Francis Morrisey died

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unexpectedly the year before the organization began operation.

"I believe that in order for these students to attain a job, we need to give them every resource possible," she said. "Not only are these people who are unemployed or have minimum wage jobs, many are coming to us and realizing they will have to make a career change."

Initially, the organization helped students gain their GED.

"We realized that just doing GED training wasn't enough," she said.

The organization has evolved to referring students needing a GED to other agencies — recommending that every client have a high school diploma or a GED — while providing financial assistance for those who are gaining additional training through Greenville Technical College.

And that financial assistance varies depending on the student's situation.

"We pay for the tuition, all the textbooks, work-related clothing and work-related equipment," such as stethoscopes. Kaye Martell said Michael's Way also pays for insurance if that's necessary, background checks, drug screening, transportation costs and for childcare in unusual situations.

The organization is also partnering with the WorkKeys programs, paying for clients to take the work readiness exam through Greenville County School District's Life Long Learning division.

"It is a way to measure their entrance level skills," Howard said. "We want them to be work ready. That's one more document the person can take to the job interview."

She estimated that the organization normally spends about \$400 per student.

Clients, who must fit income criteria, apply for Michael's Way aid. The organization doesn't take a rigid line of income, but generally it uses poverty guidelines. It also asks about criminal records and whether the applicant has a driver's license and a high school diploma.

"We want to try to help them be successful" and information on the application can help, said

Martell, a volunteer who interviews Michael's Way candidates. For example, a criminal record doesn't prevent a person from obtaining aid through Michael's Way. Knowing that information, however, can aid the organization in more adequately helping the student.

The organization, based in a donated office in Greenville Tech's Buck Mickel Center, initially was staffed with volunteers, including Martell and Frank Walker.

"They stepped up at a timely time," Hand said.

Since hiring Howard as the executive director — the first paid staff member — in January, Michael's Way is moving toward a case management type of aid. It will follow students through the training and then afterward as they seek and find jobs.

The organization is partnering with staffing agencies, nursing homes, home health organizations, assisted living communities and others to help students in health-care fields gain clinical experience and to help them find out about existing job openings, she said.

Although Michael's Way just began tracking its clients, "we have not had a big dropout rate," she said. She and volunteers are going back to 2009 to begin the tracking process to be able to find out what their success rate is.

They know some of their clients have jobs. Martell recalled one student who was studying to be an EMT and found a job before he finished his training — although he completed the course. Another is now

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driving a truck. And they know of several in health-care fields.

Riggins, who is raising four children with her disabled husband, said she learned of Michael's Way through Greenville Tech. Once accepted, she said she received encouragement as well as financial aid.

After receiving her CAN, "I went straight from there into work," she said. She now works at Loving and Gentle Care, a home health agency. Riggins said she works with two clients — a young man with cerebral palsy and an elderly woman who is bedridden.

"I basically keep them healthy and happy," she said of her job. Her initial job was in a nursing home, but she said she likes having fewer patients.

"You can see the change in a person when you work with them one-on-one. Besides, you get close to the entire family," she said.

Her career aspirations include going back to school to receive training in physical therapy. She is now eligible for grants to other colleges and plans to work while attending school, she said.



Ella Marie Riggins, a certified nursing assistant, stops in the offices of Loving and Gentle Care for a portrait with one of the owners of Loving and Gentle Care, Farrah Owens, left. (HEIDI HEILBRUNN/Staff)

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