

‘You can do it’ program helps jobless professional women rebuild their confidence

Unique Vancouver-based program gives professional women skills and tools to re-enter the workforce



Karen LeClair (standing), program manager for the Minerva program at Simon Fraser University, says participants usually land meaningful jobs within six to 12 months of taking the course.

Photograph by: Nick Procaulo, PNG, Vancouver Sun

Sheila Fagnan didn't really know what to expect when she enrolled in the Minerva Helping Women Work program earlier this month.

"To be honest, in the beginning I thought this program would give me the discipline to get dressed in business casual outfits twice a week and get out of the house and leave the family on their own," said the 49-year-old economist, who left a high-powered career with the federal government to spend more time with her children.

Now, just three weeks into the five month course, she's thinking much differently.

The program has taken her on an emotional journey as she and her classmates are asked to dig deep in order to rediscover their confidence and potential as they look to re-enter a professional world they thought had left them behind.

"It's provocative thinking," Fagnan said.

This latest class marks the 18th session of Minerva Helping Women Work. The Vancouver-based program is uniquely tailored for professional women over the age of 30 who want to get back to work after a period of unemployment or underemployment.

Many of the women who enrol are mothers looking to restart their careers as their children mature. Many others are new to the city, or even to Canada, and have yet to develop the professional contacts and personal support systems necessary to tackle the often daunting task of finding work that

matches both their skills and education levels.

"It's all about networking and knowing the right people and being in the right place at the right time," said Nitya Prakash, a University of B.C. project manager and one of the hundreds of women who've gone on to find career success after graduating from the program.

The course allows women to explore the kind of work they want to do, and provides solid advice on resumé writing, mentoring and the chance to practise their pitch in mock job interviews.

Tuesday morning's class, held at Simon Fraser University Harbour Centre campus, saw participants enthusiastically discussing demographics and what B.C.'s aging workforce might mean to them.

One woman noted that many people are choosing to work past their 65th birthdays, adding, "There might not be room in certain sectors for us."

"True. What else?" prompted Helen Dewar, the program's lead facilitator.

"That the opposite may also be true," replied another woman.

Dewar said the program, which involves two days of classwork for three months, followed by two months of group check-ins, was designed through a series of focus groups to specifically address the needs of professional women re-entering the job market after a time away.

That means readying participants to meet

employer expectations, connecting them to professional mentors and bringing them up-to-date on how technology and social media have evolved in their absence.

“For instance, we talk about how important it is to have a LinkedIn account. That’s non-negotiable,” Dewar said.

Personal support is still a main pillar of the program.

“The message is ‘You can do it,’ “ Dewar said.

Confidence is something many of the participants said they badly needed when they enrolled.

Janet Esseiva, 47, has been out of the professional workforce for 13 years. Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Esseiva once held a top organizational position in Shell’s head office.

Since having children and immigrating to Canada, she’s pieced together work in a variety of fields, including running a daycare, as well as a gardening and property management company, but considers herself to be underemployed.

“I’ve done lots of little things, but nothing that is really fulfilling in any way,” she said.

Esseiva said the course has already expanded her definition of what is possible. She’s always known she’s strong on planning and organizing, but until now dismissed other talents, such as her artistic ability and strong team-building skills.

“It’s the whole idea of marketing yourself that is so new to me,” she said.

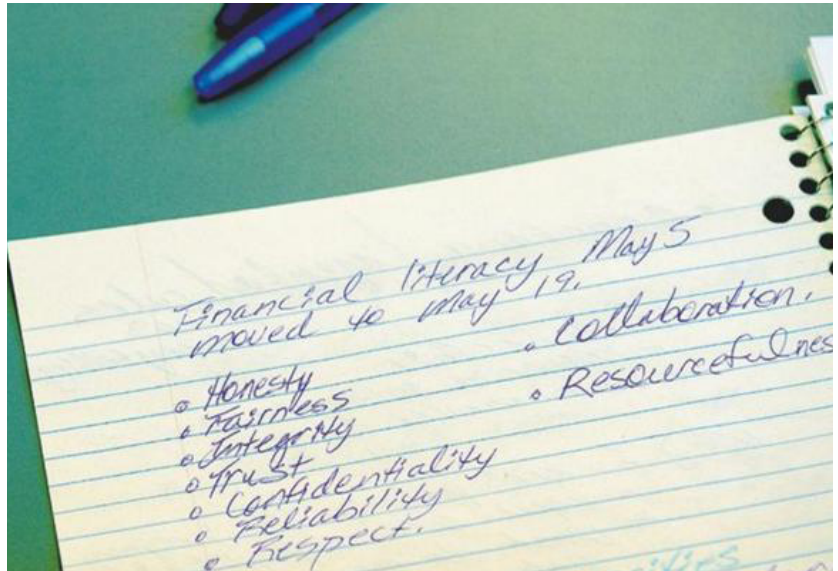
For Yuliya Kuzmneko, the kinship, and not just the information, offered through the program has proven a real life saver.

The 35-year-old biologist with a PhD in fish studies immigrated to Canada from Ukraine last year, leaving a successful career as an instructor at a university in Kiev behind her. She chose British Columbia because of its connection to fisheries and conservation. But after five months of getting nowhere in her job search, she was depressed and ready to give up.

“I didn’t know anyone and I am so used to having a lot of friends and peers in Ukraine,” she said.

She found the Minerva class on the Internet and decided to apply. The result? It’s given her hope.

“I feel I belong in this group. The women have the same problems as me,” she said.



Notes from one of the students in the Minerva program, which is tailored for professional women over the age of 30.
Photograph by: Nick Procylo, PNG, Vancouver Sun

It’s not an easy journey to transition back to professional life, said Fagnan. The demands of the class and the deep thinking it provokes have taken an emotional toll on participants.

“There’s a lot of information and we’re also being challenged to take seriously the opportunities we truly want,” she said.

But the rewards are equally clear. Fagnan said she’s particularly enjoying the feedback from her classmates when her thoughts and ideas appear too limited or lacking in confidence.

“Before this course, I tended to look at the next 10 years as an opportunity to go back to work but in a limited capacity,” Fagnan said.

“But the doors are open wider than I thought.”

According to Karen LeClair, program manager, the average participant lands meaningful and sustainable work within six to 12 months of course completion.

“These women are highly qualified. They have a lot to contribute. It’s just finding the right niche for them,” she said.

The Minerva Foundation for BC Women also offers a similar, fourweek program for recent graduates and women who’ve found themselves recently unemployed.

There are costs associated with both programs. There are also bursaries available for those who can’t afford the fees.