

Joan Aragone: Agency honors Peninsula residents who beat the odds

By Joan Aragone

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Diane Young never thought it would happen to her.

While in her 50s, the San Jose State graduate, who had been employed for more than 11 years at a Peninsula company, had looked ahead to retirement and time to travel with her husband.

Then, suddenly, he died. The company was sold. Offered a position in a distant location, she resigned, knowing that her skills and experience would assure plenty of temporary work. But then 2007 arrived, and the economy began its dip into what became a devastating dive.

Temp jobs dried up. Her backup, hotel housekeeping, also disappeared. After more than a year without income, her savings were exhausted. The car was sold. Unable to pay rent and without family to rely on, the Peninsula native was homeless.

But that's not the whole story. Now 63, the energetic Young, with determination and the support of Peninsula Family Service, is back, and Wednesday she'll be among those honored at the 16th-annual Winners Celebration for clients "who have overcome extreme obstacles to create better lives for themselves and their families." Honorees are nominated by staff and chosen by a committee.

"I was honored to be nominated," Young said. "And I want to share my story. When I give workshops, I tell people I have been there, done that, been unemployed as an older person. I know what you're going through."

Young, who lived temporarily at a shelter, learned of Peninsula Family Service programs while job hunting, but things started to turn around when she attended a workshop by Brenda Brown of the agency's Older Adults Services.

There she learned of PeninsulaWorks, a job-assistance program that provides free job training and counseling and connects job seekers with employers. The contact with Brown eventually led

to a position at Peninsula Family Service as an intern trainer for job seekers over 55. She's been a hit.

"She's a fabulous trainer," said Laurie Wishard, president of Peninsula Family Service. "Amazing."

"I believe job-hunting is being at the right place at the right time," Young said. "I wouldn't have heard of PeninsulaWorks or met Brenda if I hadn't come to the workshop. Jobs don't come to you. You have to look for them."

During her search, she sent out an average of 20 to 25 resumes a week. Interviewers often told her she was overqualified, or never called back. If they did call, they never told her why she hadn't been chosen. Discouragement was built into the experience.

It helped to meet others who understood. At PeninsulaWorks, she met other unemployed professional people. At the shelter she met other professional women who were also homeless.

"Homelessness and unemployment cross all barriers," she said.

Among her tips:

- "Job hunters need technology, not just to get the job but in the workplace. Keep up to date."
- "Don't apply for a job unless you have all the qualifications. There will always be somebody who has them."
- "It's all about networking. Keep your network open or start one. Let people know you are available."

She also reminds those who can afford it to remember nonprofits, especially in today's economy. "We have so much to offer," she said, "and funds are shriveling."

Peninsula Works, for example, which used to have four locations in the county, has been reduced to two: Daly City and Menlo Park. (Go to www.peninsulaworks.org for more information.)

Other Wednesday honorees are the Naranjo family of San Mateo, clients of the agency's Early Learning Center; Regina Berrios, of Redwood City, client of Financial Empowerment Services; and a teenage client of the Family Visitation Center.

The Sept. 15 event takes place at the Crowne Plaza Cabaña Hotel in Palo Alto. Tickets start at \$150. For information, contact Lynn Engel at 650-403-4300, ext. 4410, or lengel@peninsulafamilyservice.org.