



In The News...

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Job seekers find gold at casino

By James Fink

Toscha Harris was looking for her first post-college job and wanted to stay in the area.

Dave Demmin was a worker in his 50s who wanted a new job.

Julia and Johnny Destino wanted to come back home.

Collectively, they represent the face of Seneca gaming Corp., the gaming arm of the Seneca Nation of Indians.

They are part of a fast-growing workforce whose paychecks come from the Seneca Nation's casino operations.

Obscured by political and lawsuits that surround Seneca Gaming's effort to build a casino in downtown Buffalo are the 4,000-plus employees the company has hired since 2002 to work at gaming and hotel operations in Niagara Falls and Salamanca.

No other public- or private-sector employer in the region has added as many workers in such a short period of time. Not even Geico Direct, the darling of the economic-development community. The insurance giant is hailed for creating 2,500 jobs at its regional operations center in Amherst. Once the proposed Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino opens, Seneca Gaming will employ twice as many people.

The Senecas, now the largest employer in Niagara County, employ 16 percent more workers than Delphi thermal & Interior, As of Jan.1, Delphi, Niagara County's largest manufacturer, had 3,450 workers.

"I can see some of the reservations people may have, but I think the good outweighs the bad," said Julia Destino, administrative assistant to the vice president of food and beverage at the Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel.

Mary Bartley does not buy into the notion that casinos boost the economy.

Bartley, a leader of Citizens Against casino gambling in Erie County, acknowledges that the Seneca Nation's operations have created a significant number of jobs. She is concerned, though, that more jobs will be lost because of the casinos.

Bartley points to independent economic-impact studies that say for every new casino job created, a community loses between 1.5 and 3 jobs.

"Millions are being sucked out of the community," Bartley said. "Casinos are not a benign industry. If a store or restaurant closes down because of a casino, those are jobs that a community loses. Casinos just cannibalize other industries."

Casino jobs were the reason the Destinios moved back to the region after spending more than three years in Raleigh, N.C.

"We left because there wasn't much to do here, and we decided to come back because there were some good jobs available at the casino," said Johnny Destino, technical services manager at the Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel.

Workers at the two Seneca casinos earned \$85.6 million last year, including \$63.35 million for approximately 3,000 workers in Niagara Falls.

The Gaming corporation is expected to hire another 400 workers this year once the 200-room hotel opens as part of the Seneca Allegany Casino.

The Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino is expected to employ another 1,000 people when it opens in December 2007.

Besides its payroll, Seneca Gaming spent more than \$60 million last year buying goods and services from local vendors.

"I'm all about opportunity and helping someone who wants to find work," said Harris.

Harris, a Niagara Falls native, was looking for job opportunities when she graduated from Northwood University in Massachusetts four years ago.

The Casino offered her a chance.

She was hired as a promotions representative and has since been promoted to the front desk shift manager at the casino's recently opened 600-room hotel. It was a life-changing job opportunity.

The casino job, including its health-care and 401(k) benefits, enabled Harris, who earns approximately \$30,000 a year, to find a home in Niagara Falls where she's raising her young son.

Harris is 27. Julia Destino is 30 and her husband, Johnny, is 29. They typify how Seneca Gaming Corp. is providing opportunities for younger workers.

Then there is Dave Demmin.

The North Tonawanda resident was in his early 50s when he was hired by the gaming corporation, initially as a recruiter and now as a mail clerk in the finance department.

Demmin, 55, had been a supervisor with Quest Diagnostics in Amherst when he made the job change.

Why?

"I really felt there was an opportunity," Demmin said. "Let's face it, at my age there just aren't that many places for me to go where I can seriously talk about career advancement."

Demmin said he is not alone.

As a recruiter, he met with a number of would-be workers who were in their 40s and 50s and looking for a place to work with a good paycheck, benefits and a chance for advancement.

"We hired a lot of people who were my age or older," Demmin said. "A lot of these were people who worked at places like one of the local chemical companies and lost their jobs."

The four Seneca Gaming Corp. employees say they are perplexed by anti-casino talk concerning the Seneca Buffalo Creek venue. Yes, they all work for the casino, but they all see the benefits of 1,000 jobs being created in Buffalo—jobs and development in an area of the city that is, at best, economically challenged.

"Why shouldn't others have the same chance that we had?" Julia Destino said.