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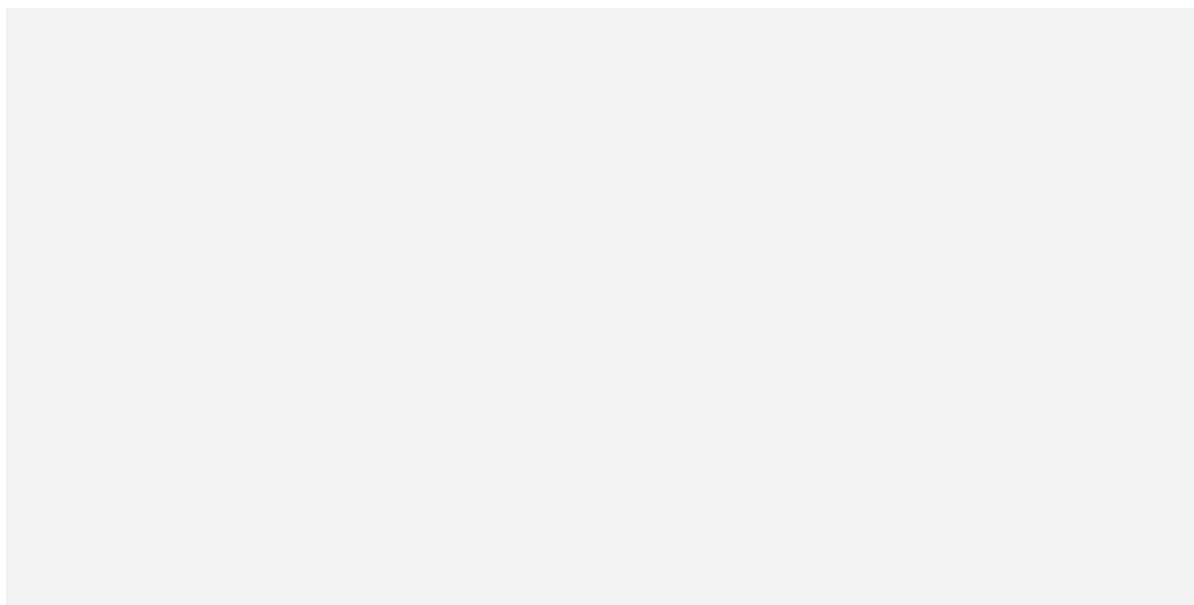
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A snapshot of joblessness

A photographer offers free portraits at a job fair, hoping to build up online resumes for the unemployed.



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Mark Gardiner, center, joins others as they crowd to find out information on job leads. (Scott Lewis / For The Times)

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By Tina Susman

February 7, 2010

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Reporting from Philadelphia

Susan Coyle threw back her shoulders, lifted her chin and forced a crooked smile. "What I want you to think about is that grumpy patient," a photographer bellowed at the former healthcare worker from the other side of a camera. "Now you're going to give that guy a shot, and think how much fun it's gonna be!"

A few seconds and a few snaps later, Coyle had a fresh portrait for her online resume. She then plunged into the fray of the job fair, joining thousands of others in hopes of finding a company to send it to.

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In the same week the government released statistics showing signs of economic growth, the only signs of growth here were the lines: lines that snaked like a giant scorpion's tail to get into Philadelphia's Wachovia Center; lines to thrust resumes toward potential employers, who piled them by the hundreds into plastic buckets; lines to grab business cards and other company handouts that ran dry within two hours; lines to buy \$3 cups of muddy coffee and soggy \$5.25 sandwiches.

One of the longest lines -- and the one that never let up as the others dissipated through the afternoon -- led to photographer Michael Albany. He was offering free portraits -- makeup and light airbrushing included -- that normally would run about \$225 each.

"I don't know anything else I can do for people," said Albany, who held his first free portrait session over the summer in Philadelphia. That one drew about 50 people over an eight-hour period. The job fair Jan. 28 lasted almost five hours, and Albany shot more than 170 portraits -- without taking a break to eat or to fuel his pack-a-day cigarette habit.

The event drew 6,353 people, more than twice what organizers had expected, and offered a snapshot of the desperation of the unemployed and the changing ways of job-hunting.

"It's hard out there," said Kurt Dupuis, 39, who used to work in the newspaper printing business. "It's not just wondering where the next paycheck is going to come from. It's the emotional aspect of it. It's getting up at 4:30 in the morning, going online, checking for e-mails. It's the same thing over and over again, with no light at the end of the tunnel."

No longer is a paper resume and business suit enough to catch employers' eyes, so Dupuis, dressed in a suit and red tie, was getting his picture taken.

Barbara Safani, owner of Career Solvers, which offers job-hunting guidance, said that everyone needed a professional-looking portrait on networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. "Most people get their jobs through relationships, and an online identity helps people better cultivate those relationships," Safani said. "If you're not on LinkedIn, people wonder why not."

The concept was lost on some of the people who wandered past Albany's site, where scores of men and women waited to get a quick touch-up from makeup artist Susan Schroeder before proceeding to

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the "X" on the floor and facing Albany.

Bonnie Hyman, 39, wailed that she couldn't bear the thought of having another photograph of herself floating around the Internet. "It's hard enough looking for a husband," she said, rattling off the dating websites on which she has posted profile pictures. "I'm not going to do it for a job too."

A 59-year-old man in a leather bomber jacket, who would give only his first name, Robert, was angry that he should be expected to produce a photograph of his face -- a face that he said would automatically take him out of the running for jobs geared toward younger, cheaper people.

"This is my ninth job fair," said Robert, who has been laid off from assembly-line jobs twice since 2007 and says he often encounters age discrimination in interviews. "I get these young honeys looking at me and they say, 'Aren't you ready to retire?' " he said bitterly.

But most people -- men, women, 20-somethings to 60-somethings -- have accepted that just as economic times have changed, so have job-hunting requirements. And a free portrait was one of the few things they were guaranteed to gain from an event with too many would-be workers and too few would-be employers.

Coyle, 46, was typical of the attendees. It has been years since she had to dress up for a job interview, she said, lamenting what she feared was her outdated style: a black skirt, white sweater and black, flat boots. No high heels this day -- she'd walked more than an hour to get to the job fair after giving up her car to save money. Her dark hair, which hadn't had a professional cut in months, was pulled back in a ponytail.

"The hardest thing is getting myself looking good to get out the door," said Coyle, who spends most of her time job-hunting online.

As she fretted, the line for portraits grew. The fair got so crowded that it was nearly impossible to push past the people clamoring to reach most of the booths. Even the stairways were jammed, with people using banisters as tables to fill out applications.

Beneath his bright studio lights, Albany tried to coax confident smiles from his subjects, whose insecurities were on full display.

"You're going to say strength, you're going to say power, you're going to say, 'I am here to enforce the law,' " he barked at soft-spoken Maurice Adams, 39, who was looking for work in law enforcement. Adams obliged with a smile, then vanished into the crowd to look for the Delaware State Trooper recruiting stand.



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Albany's line was so long that an assistant, Theresa Rivers, was deployed to start snapping pictures of people. The fair was supposed to end at 2:30 p.m., but there were about 50 people waiting to have their pictures taken as closing time neared. Eventually, Albany had to cut things off. The Flyers had a hockey game that night, and the arena had to be prepared.

"Oh, my God," one woman still in line said dispiritedly. Albany promised another free portrait session as soon as he could find a place to hold it.

"When people RSVPd me, I told them to get in line early because I thought it was going to be a very busy place," Albany said as he packed up his cameras and lighting equipment. "I didn't think it would be that busy."

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I know exactly how these folks feel. I was out of work for eight months and it sucked. My luck turned around when I began applying for jobs I was clearly overqualified for, and took on small projects and volunteer work. The volunteer work was something I could talk about in interviews, and the small projects improved my networking.

hacastro_2000 (02/07/2010, 9:08 AM)

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