

CAREERS: Making Life-Work Experience Pay Off

By Carol Krucoff

Barbara Sudler landed a job as director of Historic Denver, Inc., on the strength of administrative experience from homemaking and volunteer work.

Elizabeth Mohr drew on 16 years of volunteer experience—four with the Atlanta Public Library—to become its public-information officer.

Patricia Bashaw combined paid work experience as a teacher and volunteer work skills to become an industrial-relations representative for Memorex in California, where she runs training and management-development programs.

These three success stories are cited in a new workbook for women who want to change careers, enter or return to paid work after spending time as homemakers and volunteers. It is designed to help identify skills learned outside the workforce and match them with paid jobs.

"Just as hundreds of colleges now give academic credit for life-work experience," says author Ruth Ekstrom, "we want employers to give women credit for the skills they have developed as homemakers, mothers, community organizers and volunteer workers."

Ekstrom, a researcher at Education-

al Testing Service in New Jersey, says many women have trouble finding work or settle for being "underemployed" because "they underrate and undervalue their own experience."

"A woman may say, 'Oh, I've just done a little volunteer work for the Sierra Club,' when, in fact, they've investigated the environmental impact of something, reviewed legislation, drafted a sample bill and lobbied for passage. Those are highly marketable skills.

"Or they will focus on the setting in which they worked, rather than the skills they learned. For example, if a woman says she volunteered for the Red Cross, you imagine her toting bedpans. What she didn't say, but should have, is that she headed a multi-million-dollar fund-raising campaign."

Women also tend to narrow their sights to traditional "women's jobs," she says. "But some of the best opportunities are in non-traditional work, where employers are actively seeking women, and the pay is much better.

"A woman who's been working on the family car should consider mechanics. If a secretary is great at fixing the office copier, she should look into office machine repair. Someone who's got a green thumb may get a job with

a company that maintains plants in office buildings."

The new workbook was developed as part of Project HAVE (Homemaking and Volunteer) Skills, supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. It currently is being used and evaluated by several dozen women's centers, says Ekstrom, who hopes a revised version will be available to the public next fall.

Her advice for re-entry women, or those who want to change careers:

1. *List all work you've done.* Think back over everything you've done as a parent, volunteer and community member and include everything from planning and cooking meals to serving on tenants' groups or wallpapering the bathroom. Don't forget education and paid work.

2. *List the things people say you're good at.* Do you bake the best beans in town, have a perfectly balanced checkbook, listen well and give good advice?

3. *Group items on your list into related categories.* Balancing the family budget, preparing your tax return and serving as treasurer of the P-TA all involve financial management. Some other categories may be: health care, public relations/communications, teaching, arts/crafts, sales/fund-raising, clothing/textiles, mechanical/technical.

4. *Investigate job possibilities.* Explore job options available in the "Guide for Occupational Exploration" and "Occupational Outlook Handbook," available in most libraries or from the U.S. Government Printing Office.

Suiting Yourself

"One of the best places women can go to get help in identifying job-related skills," says educational researcher Ruth Ekstrom, "is a women's center."

Among the country's best, she says, is the District's Wider Opportunities for Women, which offers programs for women interested in changing careers, moving up, re-entering the workforce and landing nontraditional jobs.

The nonprofit group has just published "Suit Yourself... Shopping for a Job," a beginner's self-help guide with tips, techniques and self-assessment tools to organize a job search. It costs \$5 and can be purchased at WOW, 1511 K St. NW, Suite 345, Washington, D.C. 20005. \$1 postage & handling.

For more information, 638-3143.