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Matthew Karrandja: A Knack for Networking

If each one of us is born with a special gift, talent or natural ability, as many people believe, then Matthew Karrandja truly has a gift that just keeps on giving.

Karrandja, CAS '97, possesses an uncanny knack for networking, a talent that has helped him leverage others' strengths toward a common goal. It's a skill that has served him very well in his career in corporate recruiting.

But it's also something that is making a big difference in the lives of hundreds of Detroit-area jobseekers.

Karrandja is a volunteer career coach and organizer of a series of job fairs in the metro Detroit area. He frequently speaks at career workshops, including one held at Oakland University last May.

He also has founded a Web site (www.employmichiganworkers.com) to give the state's jobless online access to tools to gain employment, and uses the social network site LinkedIn to connect people to possible job prospects.

As the chairman of Career Ministries for the Arch Diocese of Detroit, Karrandja is working with other volunteers to help unemployed people write their resumes and connect them with others in the community who may be able to give them work or referrals.

No surprise then, given Michigan's 16 percent unemployment rate, the career workshops have been extremely well received and well attended.

"We get people together that normally would not meet," Karrandja says of the networking experience. "The way I see it, if one person can help another, then it's worth it."

He performs this community service in addition to his job in new business development for the Trialon company of Troy, Mich., and the demands of being the father of two -- soon to be three -- young children.

Karrandja's philanthropic endeavors and networking skills have caught the attention of local and national media, including the "Good Morning America" show, which featured him in a segment about joblessness in the hard-hit metro Detroit area.

Now his story is known internationally, in the wake of a recent report by a German television crew that filmed him and his group for a news segment that was broadcast to more than three million viewers in Europe.

Yet Karrandja shrugs off the attention, putting the focus instead on what he hopes to accomplish with his mission.

"I'm a firm believer that we all have the tools and ability to help others," he says. "For me, my passion is to create opportunities for others to be successful."

Karrandja says he is all too familiar with the turbulent forces buffeting the auto industry in general, and the Detroit area, specifically, and knows what it's like to suddenly be unemployed.

His former employer, a Tier One automotive supplier, laid him off a year and a half ago, along with the entire recruiting department, when it became apparent there wouldn't be any hiring for quite some time.

"I'll never forget that day," Karrandja says, "My wife was pregnant and was due any day, and suddenly I was out of work. She had our daughter the day after I lost my job."

Despite the seemingly dire circumstances, Karrandja says he had a feeling things would work out.

"I have a lot of faith in myself and that God would watch out for me," he says. "I guess I could have panicked, but somehow I felt it would be OK, because I had a network of friends and associates networking for me. In fact, within 24 hours, I had five job offers -- and this was all going on while my wife and new baby daughter were still in the hospital."

Thankful for such good fortune in having such an effective network of contacts Karrandja says he felt he should "pay it forward" to others who were in similar situations.

"What happens when people lose their job? Many don't know what to do," he observes. "The fact is, 98 percent of laid-off people do not get an offer for at least six months, so they struggle."

From his experience in recruiting, Karrandja says he knows that there are always employers who are in need of workers. He says it's a matter of connecting the two, which is always the big disconnect.

"That's where I come in, because I can use my skills to get everyone together," he explains. "My feeling is: I can be the vessel, I can help out because I know how to do it. That's my specialty: to find employment."

This past Christmas holiday season, Karrandja and 200 of his friends who were human resources professionals combined their talents to write free resumes for everyone who attended a job fair in Detroit.

The result was a jaw-dropping 2,765 resumes completed.

"When you're unemployed, you just can't afford to take advantage of a career coach," he says. "This was a cost-free service, no strings attached. And, despite our affiliation with the Arch Diocese of Detroit, this is not a faith-based program. We don't preach and everyone is welcome. The church provides me with the venue for the career fairs."

Karrandja says he has always been very active in his community. As a student at OU, he was involved with the Sigma Pi fraternity, the OU Student Congress, the Student Program Board, and was affiliated with several other campus groups.

"I became involved in a lot of student organizations," he recalls. "If nothing else, it taught me that, no matter who they are, everyone wants to be and should be treated with dignity. It taught me a lot about giving back to the community, and that's a lesson I haven't forgotten."

Karrandja says that, while the need for jobs in metro Detroit can seem overwhelming given the layoffs associated with the hard-hit auto industry, he always feels re-energized when he helps someone land employment.

"The greatest feeling is seeing good things happen as a result of our group efforts," says Karrandja. "I don't get business out of it or personal gain. My reward is helping people achieve their own success."

SUMMARY

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