

A well-kept secret

After more than 50 years of hiding illiteracy, former Maytag employee learns to read

BY BECKY MALKOVICH
THE SOUTHERN

HERRIN — The papers formed a neat stack on the table in front of Jerry Mezo.

"You'll have to fill out all these forms in order to take advantage of the programs," said the helpful clerk at Man-Tr-Con, the agency charged with securing post-employment opportunities for people like Mezo who lost their jobs when the Whirlpool/Maytag plant closed just before Christmas.

And just like that, Mezo, 61, gave up the ghost he had become so adept at hiding for more than 50 years.

"They set me in this room and, well, you can imagine, here's all this paperwork I needed to fill out to get help," he said. "It hit me that it was over. I told them, 'I can't do it. If you want me to fill these out you're going to have to help me. I can't read. I just can't read.'"

So ended the secret Mezo kept for decades from those not in his most immediate family.

Mezo of Herrin attended Chittyville Grade School where his

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Jerry Mezo has overcome many obstacles while learning to read. His desire to succeed directed him to John A. Logan's Adult Literacy Program.

Former Maytag employees, financial advisers frustrated

BY JOHN D. HOGAN
THE SOUTHERN

HERRIN — Susan Buttitta and her clients are frustrated with what she describes as the run-around from the Whirlpool corporation.

"Every time I call the company, I get a different answer concerning former Maytag workers' pension packages," said Buttitta, a senior branch office administrator with Edward Jones Investments in Herrin.

Buttitta said one client stopped by the office recently with a letter from Whirlpool officials indicating that he had filled out his pension package documents properly and would not need to fill out a second packet of information for the company in order to receive compensation.

But when Buttitta contacted the company to try to find out the

amount of his compensation and when he could expect a check, she was told that her client's paperwork was null and void and would have to fill out a second packet of information before compensation would be dispersed. The majority of clients have the option of accepting a lump sum pension payment or a payment spread out over a period of months.

This problem and others like it are corroding trust in Whirlpool's separation agreement with 900-plus employees laid off on Dec. 21 when the Michigan-based manufacturer closed its Herrin Maytag plant. It made washers and dryers.

"The biggest problem I have with Whirlpool is the inconsistency in comments I get

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MAYTAG: Pension packets are the source of frustration for former employees, financial advisers

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from the representatives there," Bottitta said.

"One day I'd told one thing, the next day something else. Our clients come here troubled and I feel terrible that I am unable to help them. These people have already lost their jobs. They don't need this added stress over their pensions."

Edward James Investments representative Gary Gray said his Herrin office is working with about 30 clients, but expects another additional 50 to 100 in the weeks ahead.

Gray said his clients should soon be receiving Whirlpool's second set of pension packets and will have to fill them out and mail them back to the company. Payments were to be received by Feb. 1, but have now been pushed back to May 1.

The delay in payment has been frustrating for all of us. My clients have been told they should soon be receiving the second packets, but who knows? It's been a nightmare really.

for Rose

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A.G. Dawes, Representative

"The reason for that is that the lump sum is supposedly a little different in the second packet of information," Gray

said. "The company figured the numbers wrong the first time around. Apparently, they used the incorrect date of termination (September instead of December or January)."

Gray said Whirlpool should have been better prepared to avoid such problems.

"The good people that have worked at Maytag have been through enough trauma with the plant closing and don't need these financial concerns. They need to know when they're going to get their lump sum payments. To not know is very debilitating and very frustrating for Susan and me, as well."

Gray said that when his clients eventually receive their pension packages from Whirlpool, he will roll over some of those funds into Individual Retirement Accounts.

Paul Lawrence, a State Farm insurance representative in Johnston City, said he has met with several clients with the same growing concerns.

"First, they were supposed to get paid by Whirlpool by the first of February, now it's May. All I know is it's that much more investment time they're missing out on. I understand my clients' frustration. I would want control of my own money as soon as possible."

Lawrence said he would help his clients invest in mutual funds and annuity products once they receive their compensation.

Jeff Rose, investment representative with A.G. Edwards in Carbonade, said his office is lending assistance to about 25 former Maytag employees ranging from

Murphysboro to West Frankfort.

"The delay in payment has been frustrating for all of us," Rose said. "My clients have been told they should soon be receiving the second packets, but who knows? It's been a nightmare really."

Lisa Lukens, representing the Man-Tra-Con office in Marion, said she has been working with displaced Maytag workers who have concerns with health insurance coverage.

"There have been cases where clients have had to pay money out of their own pocket for a dental visit, for example, when they were under the insurance that they had coverage through the company," Lukens said. "And there have been instances where people have been getting billed by COBRA (national insurer which

provides certain former employees the right to temporary continuation of health coverage at group rates) when they should still have been covered by Whirlpool."

Lukens said she's had a difficult time interacting with Whirlpool representatives over the phone.

"These people have acknowledged to me that there have been some major glitches in their computer system and say they've been working on the problem, but it's been so frustrating to my clients," Lukens said. "These are people who are dealing with the emotions of losing their jobs and the healthcare issue is a major issue to them."

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Seeking help

After that fateful day at Mar-Tra-Con, Mezo got the help that would change his life.

"They said, 'Are you going to try and get another job?' and I said, 'No, I'm going to learn how to read.' So they called John A. Logan College. I had my doubts. Getting here was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Meeting someone new, telling them, 'I've been this way all these years and I didn't know what

MEZO: Former Maytag employee calls the plant's closing 'the best thing that ever happened to me'

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back of reading skills must have been obvious to his teachers, he said.

"I never learned to read. I was a poor student. I couldn't even read enough to get by, but they kept pushing me through. Maybe I didn't ask for help in the right way, but they had to have seen I needed help every time I turned in my work. The only thing I can tell you is that it was a small school. They must've figured there was no use leaving

further behind academically at Herrin High School.

"I stopped going to school when I was about 16 or 17 because I could tell I wasn't going to make it," he said. "I decided I needed to get out in the world."

A few odd jobs later, Mezo found work at John's Magic Chef. For the next 38 years, Mezo worked in various departments — but never in receiving.

"That's where you had to do most of the paperwork," he said. "So I always avoided

He found ingenious ways to hide his lack of reading ability from his coworkers.

For instance, if a notice was posted on the bulletin board in the employees' break room, Mezo would wait until the notice caught the attention of a coworker.

"I'd walk up behind them and say, 'Well, now, what do you think of that?' Wonder what we're supposed to do or how it will affect us? Or if I had to make a ticket for something, I'd tell them my writing was too bad or I wrote

do some really fast thinking," he said. "I don't think anyone knew I couldn't read."

Work was not the only place where Mezo relied on his wiles in a MarTag world.

"If I went to a friend's house to a party, I would never play board games because you have to read to be able to play. So I'd take a look around to see what excuse I could use. I'd count the people, and say, 'If I play, it'd be an odd number, so I'll sit this one out. I could always get around it, but you end up

And "left out" was how Mezo felt for many years.

Despite a happy marriage that has endured 30 years, Mezo said his inability to read set a course for the life that was not always happy.

"It holds you back. I feel like I was left out of a lot of stuff. You feel down about yourself. Like you're not as good as you should be. I can understand why kids join gangs. They want to feel a part of something and it doesn't even matter what it is, just a part of something where they

"He is remarkable," said Linda Falat, adult education instructor for JALC. "Being able to exist in life without knowing how to read, doing all the things he did — getting a job with a good salary, raising a family, learning the coping skills he needed to survive — takes a lot of smarts."

Mezo works with his tutor, Ed King, three hours a day, three days a week at Herrin Public Library. King, also of Herrin, said he is impressed by Mezo's dedication to his studies.

"I'm not a teacher, but I've never seen anyone commit themselves like Jerry has. Once he understood what he had been missing, his commitment has been absolutely unbelievable. He's learned how to go shopping on his own, use an ATM card, all the things that other people take for granted," King said.

Reading a children's book to his grandkids is something Mezo just mastered. The first book he read on his own was "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" He's moved on to "The Smallest Mouse," an accomplishment he couldn't have imagined just a few short months ago.

He also, with help from his teachers, made his first get well and Valentine's Day cards for his wife, Cheryl. They also helped him learn how to read a menu so he could order for his wife at a romantic dinner.

"Yes, I'm proud. This is going to sound funny, but Maytag closing was the best thing that ever happened to me. I feel a lot better about myself," he said. "But I'm mostly grateful to everyone who has helped me — from John A. Logan College to the Herrin library to my teachers.

"Now I'm going to keep going as far as I can go. I want to read it all."

Falat said Mezo's journey has been an inspiration.

"As a teacher, you always want to know if you are making a difference."

She recalls when he read his first book — she called every family member, friend, even the dean of her college. "It was the highlight of my career," Falat said.

Mezo encourages anyone struggling with their reading ability to contact the college.

"No matter how old or how young, get some help if you are in my position. You don't know how good it was to get help. You'll find out you can do more than you thought you could," he said.

For more information on adult literacy programs, call the college at 966-2528.

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