

ACADEMY WORKS

Skills and technologies to level the workforce playing field.



Mayor Michael Nutter with Janet Fiore at the Access Achievement Awards

Janet Fiore receives Mayor's Access Achievement Award

In recognition of her work in the area of employment and disability, on October 21st **The Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on People with Disabilities** recognized Janet Fiore, CEO of **The Sierra Group**, with an Access Achievement Award for her hard work and dedication to people with disabilities. "My passion is preparing people for the high-tech demands of business as cutting edge technology continues to blur the line between innovation and accommodation," said Fiore.

Barry Williams: Why I Entered The Academy

My name is **Barry V. Williams** and I am a graduate of The Sierra Group Academy, a program of **The Sierra Group Foundation**. If you have a disability and are looking to get back into the workforce, The Academy is a great place to start.

I was an honor student at **Peirce College** on the verge of receiving my Bachelor's Degree in paralegal studies when I had a stroke. Becoming a disabled person at this time in my life was extremely depressing. I felt sorry for myself for close to three years. Although my health had improved, this was not the life that I had intended on living.

Attending The Academy was one of the best choices I have made. My self-confidence returned as I started using assistive technology to access the tools that I used in the past. At The Academy, I also met other students and staff members who overcame similar job obstacles. Through them, I learned to be patient and compassionate for my fellow person. I learned to deal with my disability and ways to compensate with assistive technology. Specifically, I learned to use the **Livescribe Pen**—an assistive device that is a pen and a recording device—to help me with my short-term memory. Now, I am able to sit in meetings with a client or with my boss and take notes while recording portions of the

meeting. I can then bring the notes back and transpose the content of the conversation or meeting into whatever legal work I have to produce.

Although I am still the same cocky person, I now have a completely new perspective! Thanks to my great experience at The Academy, I was able to return to Peirce College and should be receiving my degree in December. Also through The Academy, I was able to secure a job at **The Law Firm of Eric Shore**, where I work on disability cases.

Everyone has a story to tell and a path to take in life. If you want it bad enough, you can achieve it! I know coming to The Academy at Liberty Resources was a good choice for me. I know I am a better person and professional because of the time I spent there.



Barry Williams returns to The Academy after receiving a job offer. From L-R: Academy Director Stu Bush, Sierra Group CEO Janet Fiore, Academy graduate Barry Williams and Sierra Group CFO Michael Fiore.



Fred Kirschbaum of Exelon (left) provides Academy student Sidney Archie with advice after a mock interview at Disability Mentoring Day

Disability Mentoring Day

Held on Monday, October 26th, The Academy's Disability Mentoring Day attracted over 20 employers and 45 job seekers. We are pleased to report that five interviews and employment referrals occurred after this event. We also had a visit from the Editor of the **Philadelphia Business Journal**. Thank you to all who participated!

Special thanks to our business partners:

- Aqua America
- Beneficial Bank
- Bluewolf
- Burgess Communications
- Client Assistance Program
- Conestoga Bank
- Delaware Valley Planning Commission
- Dow Chemical Company
- Epilepsy Foundation
- Eventricity
- Independence Blue Cross
- Lowe's Home Improvement
- Liberty Resources, Inc.
- Magee Rehabilitation
- Marriott
- PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- PAETEC
- PECO
- SecurElement
- The Philadelphia Business Journal

The Key to Employment: Understanding the Philadelphia Labor Market

by Michael Fiore, MBA

Critical thinking, professional writing, and clear communication skills allow adults with disabilities attending The Academy to find competitive employment in this tight economy. Solid computer skills in Windows 7, Microsoft Office, and cloud computing concepts are no longer optional for the modern job-seeker and they are an absolute requirement for a candidate with an employment gap due to a disability. Businesses demand all of these skills throughout the entire hiring spectrum. One of the realities of the high unemployment rate is that businesses can be more selective when making a hiring decision.

According to the **Philadelphia Federal Reserve's** September 2011 Business Outlook Survey, business activities and manufacturing continue to slow (albeit at a lesser pace than previous months) and regional

employment is only starting to slightly rebound. While the regional unemployment rate is 9.3% according to the **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics**, the unemployment rate for those without a college education is nearly double that figure. The value of a vocational skill program that allows adults with disabilities to gain competitive skills using technology as an equalizer lies at the heart of our customized training program.

The Academy receives support for students through the **Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)**. OVR allows adults with vocational impairments to update their training, build competitive skills, and ultimately succeed in the marketplace by meeting the expectations of our business partners.

Friends in High Places

Right: Business partner and Co-Chair for Economics PA, Cindy LeMaster (formerly of Beneficial Bank) spent time with Academy students sharing how our current business climate demands innovation at a personal level when trying to connect in the labor market. **Sierra Group CEO Janet Fiore** often encourages her business contacts to share a day with the students to help them prepare for employment while networking with business leaders.



Cindy LeMaster and Janet Fiore

Preparing Students for the Competitive Interview

by Jackie Pickering, CRC

The Academy's *Taking the Next Step* class builds on the work that students have completed in their Reading, Writing, and Basic Business Communication classes. It breaks the interviewing process down into comprehensible increments such as what employers are looking for in employment candidates and how they evaluate potential employees. Then, from a solid understanding of what employers need and want, students receive assistance to build resources that will assist them in highlighting their most marketable skills and experiences.

The instructors start with the development of a simple introductory statement (or 60 Second Commercial). This not only helps the students with a basic networking technique, but it becomes the foundation for answering that initial difficult interview question: "Tell me about yourself." Students also learn how to construct a powerful cover letter that will provide them with greater success in confirming an interview.

Once students have successfully handled these first steps with supportive coaching, we begin reviewing other interview questions and interviewing techniques. Instructors provide students with a handout on "The 40 Most Difficult Interview Questions," which contains sample responses to each question. We review, brainstorm, and discuss the best way for each student to answer the questions based on his or her

unique skills, experiences, and vocational goals.

When students have become comfortable answering the basic interview questions, we review Behavioral Interview Questions, where the student/job seeker is tasked with giving specific examples of their response to different work situations. For example: "Tell me about a time when you had to use your fact finding skills to solve a work problem." Students are taught to employ the STAR Method of citing a specific *situation*, the *tasks* they needed to accomplish, the *actions* they took and the *results* they achieved. This simple

technique allows students to focus their responses and thereby answer the employer's question both effectively and concisely.

Students then receive coaching on what questions they should ask during an interview to express their interest in the position and in working with the employer. They learn to write and personalize thank you letters following an interview to ensure that the employer truly considers them as a candidate for the job opportunity. Once all of these steps have been reviewed in detail, students feel confident in presenting themselves to prospective employers.



Student's Strong Data Skills Wow the U.S. Mint

Above: Instructors and students congratulated Greg Marshall after he received a job with the U.S. Mint. Meeting with his classmates, Greg told them, "Focus on Microsoft Excel skills because businesses really need people with strong data management and manipulation skills." Everyone agreed that strong data skills are a plus—especially at the Mint. Way to go Greg!

Sharpen your **skills**. Leverage the **technology**. Get the **job**.



Sierra Group *CEO Janet Fiore* and
Academy Assistant Instructor
Maria Dewan with *Terry Dailey, CRC*

Terry Dailey, CRC (retired OVR job placement counselor–York District) gave a guest lecture to students on *Selling Yourself at the Interview* during a recent Business Communications Class at The Academy. Terry emphasized that knowing the needs of the modern marketplace is critical during the training and education process. Students were encouraged to leverage technology skills as their “differentiated skill” in the marketplace.

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