



If You Can Remake Yourself Here...

career

... YOU CAN DO IT ANYWHERE. HOW FIVE CAREERS WERE REINVENTED IN THE TOUGHEST PLACE FOR SECOND ACTS.

By Nina Easton

ADDITIONAL REPORTING
BY KRISTY ERDODI

IN SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN, where the assembly line revolutionized manufacturing, there's another kind of rebirth taking place. The fittest in a modern-day survival race are reinventing their careers, writing dramatic new life chapters—and, believe it or not, staying put. With the Detroit Three downsized and unemployment in Michigan hovering above 13%, you would think people would flee to higher ground. And many have. But plenty of hardy souls have found faith in the region's resilience—and their own. In Detroit you will find a guy who creates a new twist on the lemonade-out-of-lemons bromide: building furniture from the remains of demolished houses. Here you will discover laid-off corporate executives opening up companies on their own, and assembly-line workers going back to school for nursing credentials. Here you will find blue-collar and white-collar workers catching the green wave. "This city is a blank slate," says Detroit's Nicole Rupersburg, 29, who relaunched herself as a culinary tour guide after being laid off. "It's not a world of wealth and prestige and structure," she says. "Detroit is what you make of it, and here you are what you make of yourself." What these people have in common is a willingness to take a chance on new paths and get the skills to navigate them. In the five success stories that follow, workers in even the toughest business environment show how you can reinvent yourself.



2/ Learn How to Go It Alone

GERARD COX, 47, FOUNDER AND COO, VELESCO PHARMACEUTICAL SERVICES, PLYMOUTH, MICH. For a new entrepreneur, the solitude was painful: "When you leave a big company, the way you spend your day is pulled out from under you."

Gerry Cox was having lunch with a college buddy, someone he hadn't seen for a quarter-century, when it dawned on him: all the friendships he had neglected while climbing the upper echelons of corporate America. He had risen to finance director of drug giant Pfizer's R&D unit in Ann Arbor but lost his job in a major downsizing. Now he was on his own. Having rejected a Pfizer offer of a job in New York City, Cox decided to pursue a longtime dream of starting a new company. So Cox and former Pfizer scientist Dave Barnes went through entrepreneurial "boot camp" at Ann Arbor SPARK's Business Accelerator, where they refined their plan to offer early-stage drug-testing services to medium-size drugmakers. The new firm, Velesco, hired laid-off Pfizer scientists and got \$800,000 in loans from a state development fund. Velesco's timing was good, and profits are taking off. In making over your career, Cox coaches, "You have to be mentally strong" and focus on the right business niche. "If you spread yourself thin in this environment," he says, "you struggle."