Second career offers new lease on life
Driven by love or necessity, mid-career workers are turning to trades
By Denise Deveau, For Canwest News Service
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Toronto dentist Dr. Karen Aiken does landscape design on the side. She's one of many professionals picking up a trade.

Having a successful dentistry practice wasn't the only thing Dr. Karen Aiken wanted to do with her life. So five years ago, she decided to pursue her passion for gardening and took landscaping courses at Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

"I always loved gardening and designing things, so I thought I would give it a try," she says. Now she balances her dentistry practice with landscaping work in the summer; she has won a Post City Magazines award for designing Heart Park in Toronto, North America's first heart-shaped urban park.
Robert Hudyma opted out of his career as a geologist and turned his cooking hobby into his day job after training at George Brown College in Toronto. "I was always torn between the two," says the co-owner of Catered Affaire in Toronto, who still travels north to collect minerals in his spare time.

"People asked me what I wanted to do. It was always both," he says. "It's fascinating because cooking is so creative and fast--you prepare something and it's gone. Geology on the other hand has a degree of permanence to it. It's a perfect balance."

Aiken and Hudyma are among the lucky ones who were able to pursue a new skill for love and money. For others, getting a new lease on life through a skilled trade has been driven by necessity. Yet many have found the effort put into upgrading their skills can pay big dividends.

Jason Boylan in Haliburton was laid off from his line job at an automotive plant over a year ago. "My job was at a dead-end point--and things are even worse now for the industry," he says. "I couldn't find anything."

Boylan tuned a negative into a huge positive by applying for funding from Second Career and going back to school to realize his dream. Second Career, officially launched June 1, 2008, is an Ontario government program that offers laid-off workers training for a new job, including financial support.

"I finally had to opportunity to fulfil my love of cooking," says Boylan, who is finishing his last year in the culinary management program at Fleming College in Peterborough. "What I'm doing is not like work. It's more fun than anything. And I've already been offered a number of jobs in all sorts of places."

The Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities in Toronto reports that as of May 31, Second Career has helped 8,653 people in school and there are another 1,500 applications in the approval process.

A good portion of those applicants (average age is 40) are from industries such as manufacturing, transportation, metal and machinery manufacturing, forestry and logging who are looking for a way to transfer and/or upgrade their skills. The top occupational training programs of choice are welding, bookkeeping, gas fitting, medical administration, lab technician and registered nursing assistant.

George Brown College reports that registration for many of its skilled trades programs has doubled over previous years.

"We don't have enough space to meet demand," says Nancy Sherman, dean of the Centre for Construction and Engineering Technologies, who speculates that many of those registering in the skilled trades programs are people coming back to upgrade their skills or looking for a second career.
Another beneficiary of the Second Career program, Andrew Machan in St. Thomas, Ont., was laid off from his line assembly job more than a year ago. Now he's in the engineering technician program at Fanshawe College in London, where he's learning all about automation--and he couldn't be happier.

"I wanted to get out of the revolving door--in manufacturing--of getting laid off, being called back and getting laid off again," he says. "I wanted a skill set that I could apply for a long time that couldn't be taken away from me--something I could rely on. That's why I took an automation course because if I did lose my job, I would be able to recover a lot easier."

The beauty of having better skills to shop around is the wealth of choices, he adds.

"It's opened a ton of different doors. I can apply to all sorts of jobs with my skills upgrade, including utilities, mining, manufacturing, water treatment and others. Now I've got a resume that's looking pretty good. I really feel like I have a shot at starting over."