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## Author Envisions A World Without Work

By Andrea Bernstein

**A**FTER 12 YEARS as an optical researcher for Grumman, Leslie Lemos-McMillen of Amityville received an award in 1995 for a job well done. Shortly thereafter, she got a "warn notice" from the company, which had been acquired by Northrop, telling her she might be laid off in 60 days.

"I got hired by Grumman right out of school," Lemos-McMillen said. "I never thought about working anywhere else. I thought that would be it for me." But when Lemos-McMillen saw Northrop Grumman handing out warn notices like "toilet paper," she knew it was time to get out.

In 1991, Mitchell Krevor of Whitestone, Queens, manager of a title insurance agency, got a phone call from the owner. "He told me to lay everybody off — including myself. To cut the final checks and lay everybody off, on the spot. It was devastating."

Joe F. of West Bay Shore (not his real name) worked in the apparel industry for 30 years, first as boss of his own small company and then vice president of production for a major corporation. Even though Joe F.'s team had turned his ailing division into a profitable one, the parent company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 1994 and eliminated the division and its work force. "I felt so good about our accomplishments," Joe F. said. "I was crushed when the Chapter 11 decision forced management to get out of that area of the business."

There are many explanations for what happened to Lemos-McMillen, Krevor, and Joe F. Cuts in federal defense spending, a contraction in the real estate industry, foreign competition in the garment industry. But author Jeremy Rifkin, while acknowledging that all those phenomena contribute to the problem, contends that the real explanation lies in the title of his recent book: "The End of Work" (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Books, 1995).

"This is not a short-term anomaly," Rifkin said in a recent interview. "Insurance, banking, retail, wholesale — all these industries are replacing whole categories of employees with computers. If you're a manufacturer, you want to become nearly workerless. If you're a service company, your goal is to become virtual. The corporate pyramid is collapsing into a small, highly mobile professional team with a temporary or part-time work force." And, Rifkin says, companies that don't re-engineer, such as Joe F.'s employer, will go under.

"Ten to 15 years ago, no one would have expected that Long Island's fate may be similar to what's happened in the Bronx," Rifkin said. "You need to understand what happened there to understand what's going to happen in Long Island." In his book, Rifkin shows how, after mechanization in the cotton industry displaced millions of African-American sharecroppers in the 1950s, most of them moved to low-level industrial manufacturing jobs in northern cities. But there, too, mechanization eventually forced those workers into joblessness, creating what Rifkin calls "a permanent underclass."

"When we think of quintessential suburban communities like Long Island, we think of them as having a different fate in store. Not so," Rifkin said.

Michael Falcone, Suffolk County's commissioner of labor, confirmed that technology is changing the nature of work on Long Island. "For many years Long Island was the cradle of aviation," Falcone said. "Those days are gone, never to return. We are finding it very difficult to adjust to the loss of thousands of jobs in aerospace and manufacturing, coupled with global competition and the development of high technology."

"Ten years ago, people who lost jobs at Republic-Fairchild could go to Lockheed or Grumman," Falcone added. "Now people who are losing their \$60,000-a-year jobs at Grum-

man might find jobs that pay \$30,000 or \$35,000. They can keep their homes and don't have to be pushed off the Island — but it's tough."

The social consequences of a shrinking work force are already being seen, Rifkin argues — a rise in crime, an angry and discontented electorate looking for scapegoats to blame for economic insecurity, increasing distances between the "haves" and the "have nots."

Rifkin does have critics, such as Peter Huber, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank. "Peace has broken out," Huber said, referring to defense job cuts. "To conflate that with a jobless future is a logical mistake. A hundred years ago, the vast majority of Americans were involved in farming. Now just a tiny fraction are — but that doesn't mean they're not working at all. Jeremy Rifkin a century ago would have predicted that by 1995, 95 percent of Americans would be unemployed — and he would have been dead wrong."

And Margaret Melkonian, executive director of the Long Island Association for Peaceful Alternatives, a Garden City-based public policy group, thinks that jobs on Long Island could be created with a little government will. "There are many sectors that could provide jobs for Long Island's future," Melkonian said. "Energy, transportation, the environment. But it's not going to happen unless government dollars foster growth in those areas."

Nevertheless, Rifkin argues, even with retraining, relocation and government investment, the information age will only support a "boutique" — not a mass — work force. "Not everyone will make it in to the shrinking work force," Rifkin said. "Most people will find jobs that pay less, with no benefits."

Falcone agrees with that assessment. "Depending on who you speak to, hundreds of thousands of jobs were created last year. But those jobs pay a little better than minimum wage. They help people who need to supplement their income, or college kids. They're not the kind of job that will replace high-paying jobs."

So what's the solution? According to Rifkin, there needs to be "a massive social, cultural, and political movement that can demand participation in the productivity gains of the information age." Rifkin recommends that the movement press for a 30-hour work week and that government stimulate employment in what he calls the "third sector" — the non-profit world — through employment vouchers, tax benefits and subsidies. Those government benefits would be funded, Rifkin proposes, through a 7 percent tax on computers, cellular phones, CD-ROMs, and other high-technology products. Rifkin points to the drive for a 40-hour work week earlier this century as an example of a successful movement to change the nature of work and society.

"We need to rethink the social contract for the information age," Rifkin said. "If we don't, we're all going to go down together."

Meanwhile, Lemos-McMillen, Krevor and Joe F. have taken different paths since they lost their jobs. Lemos-McMillen is back in school, studying for a master's degree in biotechnology. Even so, she thinks she'll have to look beyond Long Island for her next job. Krevor, with 25 years' experience, mainly as an accountant, went through a program at the City University of New York that trains corporate executives to work in the nonprofit world, and is now happily ensconced as a fund-raiser for the United Way.

Joe F. is still looking for work, and he hopes to remain in the apparel industry. "It's kind of hard to change horses when you're this far down the road," he said.

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## Where the Resources Are

**E**VEN WITH the avalanche of corporate downsizing, author Jeremy Rifkin argues that displaced workers should search for new skills and training for the information age. Long Islanders can take advantage of several programs that receive funding under the federal Job Training and Placement Act.

- The Suffolk County Department of Labor contracts with 110 colleges and business schools for free courses at which displaced workers can increase their skills or get new skills. The department also offers resume-writing seminars, job placement services and information on job openings around the country. Call (516) 853-6600.

- In Nassau County such programs are administered by the towns. Oyster Bay's

program ([516] 624-6174) serves residents of Oyster Bay and North Hempstead. Residents of Hempstead can call (516) 485-5000.

- Elsewhere, the City University of New York offers a certificate program, "Making the Successful Transition to the Non-Profit Sector," an area that Rifkin claims will be a major source of jobs in the future. Call (212) 440-8137.

- Workers age 40 or older who find themselves out of work can, for a fee, use the services of Forty Plus, a nonprofit organization in Manhattan that offers support groups, job-seeking skills, information on available jobs, computers and other office equipment. Call (212) 233-6086.

— Andrea Bernstein