



Kathy Zerler / HP correspondent
Debbie Gillespie, director of Career Pathways and Community and Workforce Education at Lake Michigan College, was inspired by a friend to enroll in college as an adult. She now works with many adult students in their 30s and 40s who are getting an education in a different career path.

A fulfilling career

Debbie Gillespie brings passion to her job at LMC and her volunteer work

By **KATHY ZERLER**
 HP Correspondent

Debbie Gillespie had worked in the hospitality industry for many years when she decided that she needed a degree in higher education to establish her career.

"I didn't want to spend my golden years arm-wrestling a cat for the last pouch of Tender Vittles," she said. "I wanted a career that was more 9 to 5 — not just a job, I wanted something with opportunities for growth and professional and personal development, and to be satisfied that I did something positive and productive."

At the time, she was working more than 40 hours a week in Conference and Event Services at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center. "Going back to school as an adult while working full time-plus was tough," she said, adding that she was urged to enroll in college by her friend, Cindy Kinney, the former head of the Mendel Center.

"The message here, kids, is stay in school and finish while you're young!" Gillespie said with enthusiasm.

Her demeanor when she speaks is youthful and enthusiastic, with more than a touch of compassion for the adult students who populate LMC's workforce education department that she heads.

She said that many of her students are displaced workers in their 30s and 40s.

"Many of them had jobs that no longer exist," she said, adding that now they are getting certified on another career path while working a couple of jobs and balancing families, budgets, work and school. Understanding the challenges of that inspires

Gillespie to work tirelessly to help people find the jobs that fit their skills and interests.

Here's a tip from Gillespie: The health care industry is growing in Southwest Michigan. LMC is working with employers and responding with programs to meet those opportunities.

Gillespie completed her B.A. in business administration at Siena Heights and found a position in the LMC Workforce Development Department, where she has worked for 15 years. She works closely with LMC administration and faculty, workforce development agencies and employers to determine training needs for current and future employment. The best part of her job, she said, "is following a student from their initial contact with us through their short-term training, earning their certification, and getting a job, literally, in a few months."

She spends a lot of her time connecting LMC students with available resources, and has made and renewed many contacts in the community along the way. Being born and raised in St. Joseph and carrying a politically and historically respected surname has made many doors easier to find and to open. Add to that Gillespie's outgoing personality and organizational skills, and it is clear that she makes the most of every contact.

Debbie Gillespie is a proud member of the prominent Gillespie family in St. Joseph. Her grandfather, Frank T. Gillespie, hopped off the train in St. Joseph, landed on his feet and founded the Gillespie Drug Store on State Street in downtown St. Joseph in 1905. He lived at the now-demolished Lakeview Hotel

HIGHLIGHTS

Name: Debbie Gillespie
Job: Director of Career Pathways and Community and Workforce Education at Lake Michigan College
Town: Royalton Township

Fun Fact: While working on clues for a graveyard scavenger hunt, Debbie Gillespie came across a headstone that said, "She hath done what she could." And, that is what Gillespie wants her own stone to say.

on the corner of Lake Boulevard and Ship (across the street from where the Whitcomb is now). As the family story goes, a sharp-looking 18-year-old from Chicago named Helen Shoden came to work as a hostess in the hotel dining room, and Frank Gillespie fell in love. The couple married and had six children: Collins, Ruth, Thomas, Robert, William and Richard, who is Debbie's father.

Thomas Gillespie served as St. Joseph's police chief for 30 years, retiring in 1979. All of the other sons became pharmacists like their father, and William Gillespie served on the St. Joseph City Commission for 19 years, and was mayor from March 26, 1990, to April 12, 1993. Debbie's cousin, Gloria Gillespie, was a Berrien County Commissioner for 20 years.

As for her goal of finding a 9-to-5 career, Gillespie has filled up her evenings and weekends with a long list of volunteer work, and she works harder than ever. She is especially proud of the late Pete Racine with introducing her to

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volunteerism while she was working for them in the 1980s at the Grande Mere Inn in Stevensville.

“The Grande Mere Inn has cooked the Soup Kitchen’s Thanksgiving meal for more than 30 years,” she said, praising the Racines for their steadfast philanthropy. “I’ve cooked and carved turkeys, peeled and mashed a gazillion potatoes, made awesome stuffing and gravy, you name it. The clients at the Soup Kitchen get the same meal as my family.”

“I serve with a phenomenal board; we are truly a working board,” she said. “The Soup Kitchen is not a board where you get your name on a letterhead and show up four times a year to vote. Our board cooks and serves lunch and picks up and stores food donations, repairs things and runs fundraisers and writes the newsletter and more.”

The Soup Kitchen fits in well with her personal life.

“I am a total foodie. I love cooking and the Food Network, and going to old favorites and new restaurants,” she said. “If I had a do-over, I would like to come back as a restaurant/travel reviewer or Amy Schumer. There’s still time.”