

Mr. Ralph Jellison
Testimony for the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
December 6, 2017

Good morning Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and distinguished members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ralph Jellison. I am a Marine Corps veteran, a husband, and a father of six children.

After serving in the Marine Corps, I returned home to Sorrento, Maine and got a job working for G+G Electric. The following year, I got hired at the Champion Paper mill in Bucksport, Maine. It later became known as Verso Paper. The last five years of my employment there, I worked as a calendar operator on #1 paper machine that produced specialty grade paper. It was a really good job that paid well, and had great health and retirement benefits. I had been at the mill for 27 years when, in October of 2014, we got word that the mill was going to make an announcement. We had already been through a restructure, a redesign, and we saw the shutdown of #2 paper machine. Through buyouts and attrition, the company managed to keep many of its people employed. Since the line I worked on had nine months of orders to fill, we thought it wouldn't be us. But no such luck. The company announced that it would be shutting down at the end of the year - right around the holidays. I became overwhelmed with anxiety. What would I do for a job? This is all I've done for 27 years. Luckily, I was one of the fortunate ones to get one of the few remaining bids in the power plant. We were told that the demolition company planned on running the power plant for at least two years, and maybe longer if it proved profitable. Now I had time to get things in order and figure out what I wanted to do, should they choose to shut it down. Well, what was supposed to be two years turned out to be just four months.

So here I was – 52-years-old, with my family relying on me, and I was out of work like the rest of them. The job market had been flooded with hundreds of unemployed mill workers. I live in a small town where there are not a whole lot of options for me to just go out and find another job that paid as well as the mill. I became very depressed when one of my former bosses who had pushed hard for me to go back to school, called and said "Ralph I don't want to be the bearer of any more bad news. But don't waste your time going to school because in this field they want someone they can vest in for 30 years not ten. I'm sorry but I just would have hated to see you do this on my recommendation and then not get hired." I also had been told that the state could only extend benefits for a certain amount of time and going to school full time would have been hard on my family financially.

To make matters worse, my son had been diagnosed with Chronic Lyme disease. Now I wasn't only losing my job, I was losing my medical insurance as well. At no other time in my life had I needed it more, and Cobra insurance was not even remotely affordable at \$1,574 a month. If not for my severance package, I don't know how we would have managed financially, with thousands of dollars a month being spent on medications for my son. To lose a job is stressful but to worry about the health of your child is even worse. It was just one stressful event after another. God bless my wife for remaining positive. I remember her saying this many times. "Honey when one door closes another one opens."

Before long things started looking up. I spoke to one of the career counselors about school and she said "Ralph, would you be interested in an HVAC or fine wood working course at Eastern Maine Community College? You don't have to take algebra or any other classes and it only lasts for six months. You could develop some new skills that may help you find a new job." As it was, only the fine wood working class was available, so I signed up. Still, as great as it sounds, the thought of going back to school again after 36 years was intimidating. I can't say enough good things about the fine wood working program at EMCC. The instructors were phenomenal. Besides teaching, they also talked about valuable life experiences and reassured us that businesses out there like the older generations' work ethic. This is where I also had the chance to meet and talk to some of the younger students. I had the privilege of speaking to a very skilled, intelligent young lady. She said "Mr. Jellison, you do know that our classes are on ten-week windows of time and we also have a success center where people like me, could have tutored you through any difficult classes." I said "If I had only known then what I know now. I would have definitely tried the electrical course.

Upon completion of my wood working course, actually the day after I graduated. I got hired at the Hinckley Yacht Company in Trenton, Maine. I was elated!! My daughter Sabrina surprised me with tickets to a concert. I said "honey you don't have to do this" and she said "Dad I'm proud of you for going back to school and were gonna celebrate." Hearing my daughter say she was proud of me meant the world to me. I worked at Hinckley until I re-aggravated an old knee injury and had to get it operated on. I received short term disability for 12 weeks which doesn't pay much. Again, another setback. While I was out, I met a former mill employee I used to work with in the power plant. He was working for GAC chemical company in Searsport, Maine. I asked him to let me know when they were hiring. As it turned out, three days later, I got a call. I spoke with Ryan and he said "tell me what you did in the mill for the last 27 years. Wow you are versed in a lot of things we need here." When I got home, I checked my email and I had been accepted for employment at GAC. The door my wife had talked about had opened. Good pay, good medical insurance and close to home. My prayers had been answered.

My life was turned upside down when I was 52 years old. But this opportunity to go back to school has brought me to this point in my life. We're back on our feet and I'm providing for my family again. I can't tell you how good that makes me feel. As dismal as things looked for awhile, to where I am now. I only hope my story could be inspiration enough for someone else to better themselves after facing the same sort of situation that I did.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.