



JOB FAIR FOR FUTURE LEEDS OUTLET MALL DRAWS 4,200
Fifty-four retailers plan to hire at least 650

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By Martin Swant

More than 100 job seekers stood outside the Cahaba Grand Conference Center at 8:45 Friday morning, and by the time the Shops of Grand River hiring event began 15 minutes later, that number had more than doubled.

But that wasn't even everyone waiting for a shot at work. Another hundred job hunters were already in the conference center off U.S. 280. They sat at long tables, preparing to talk with the 51 tenants of the \$127 million outlet mall in Leeds that Daniel Corp. plans to open Oct. 28.

Officials said more than 4,200 job seekers attended the fair.

Among the first hundred job seekers was 22-year-old D.J. Riffenburg, a Trussville resident who's worked at Lone Star Steakhouse for the past four years. Riffenburg said he's not normally a morning person, but would wake up if it means getting a better job.

"Depending on what company wants to hire me, I'm a morning person," he said.

Across from Riffenburg sat Jacob Lucia, who wants to leave his current gig at a gas station.

"I'll work at midnight if I have to," he said. "Just give me the job."

Others at the job fair have been out of work for years.

Donna Nunnelley of Jasper stood in line outside as she waited for her 9:30 a.m. pre-scheduled interview with Kasper Stores. Nunnelley, 53, said she's worked in management positions at retailers for 17 years at stores such as Lowe's Home Improvement and Walmart. Her most recent job ended in 2007, when she was a general manager at Dollar General.

Although she's already been in contact with six companies opening stores at the mall, Nunnelley said she won't stop there. Her whole Friday was devoted to the job fair. But she said she's optimistic.

"I'm going to hit all the booths," she said. "I've got resumes ready."



For the past couple of years Nunnelley said unemployment wasn't a worry because her husband was working. But now that he's been out of work for a while, she's been searching again -- even if that means more time away from her family.

"If I get hired, I'll stay at my dad's house (in Pell City) and go home on my days off," she said. "I'm just looking for a door to shine so I'll know which one to walk through."

Candidates

While the Birmingham area unemployment rate for August fell to 8.9 percent, the lowest level of the year, it is still high by historical standards. In October 2007, the area's jobless rate stood at 3 percent.

Fifty-four retailers and restaurant operators have committed to open in the Shops of Grand River and are expected to hire at least 650 employees, including both entry-level and management positions. A study by Daniel Corp. reported that the mall should have an economic impact of \$125 million to the Birmingham region over the next 25 years and to Leeds over the next 35 years, said Shops of Grand River marketing director Jamie Robinson.

Companies meeting with applicants differed on how they planned to spend their time on Friday. Kathy Johnson, a training store manager for clothing brand G.H. Bass & Co., said Friday was a time for applicants to drop off resumes. She doesn't believe job fairs are conducive to giving private interviews.

"You pretty much get a face, a name, and a handshake," Johnson said. "And then you can make your calls later."

But others did plan to spend time with candidates. Representatives of the cookware company Le Creuset said they planned to interview candidates for between five and 12 openings, said Pam Hoffman, a Le Creuset store manager who was at the event.

Robinson, the mall's marketing manager, said she expected between 2,000 and 3,000 people to attend the job fair and had seen a nice flow of people even during the first hour. She said planning began for the event in June.

"The tenants are really the ones who are creating jobs and providing career opportunities to the folks in our community," said Doug Neil, vice president of development at Birmingham-based Daniel Corp.



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CORPORATION

But some left the job fair disappointed.

Scott White was surprised to learn many of the openings were only part-time. The 47-year-old said his background is in designing for engineering firms. After losing his job three weeks ago, White decided to check out the job fair. But with two teenage kids at home, a minimum wage job at a retailer isn't what he's looking for, he said.

"I'm going to keep plugging, and hopefully this economy is going to pick up," he said.