

# Fall and Recovery

Unemployment felt like standing on thin ice. Until she learned to glide.

**ADULT SKATING 1** meets at noon on Fridays at the Kettler Capitals Iceplex in Ballston. For the past 20 years, that's a time when I'd normally be hurrying around some downtown office—laughing with friends, running out to grab lunch—one face in the rush of workers flowing in and out of Washington, D.C., every day, like the tide.

But I lost my job last year in a mass layoff, and after 15 months of job hunting, I've stopped expecting a new position to materialize next week. So I signed up for eight weeks of skating lessons. I've wanted to learn how to play ice hockey for years, and this is my chance to get started in the same rink where the Washington Capitals practice. All I need to do is pass Skating 1 through Skating 5. Then I'll qualify for Hockey Skating 1.

I stand at the edge of the rink, my ankles shaky in skates I haven't worn in years. Off to one side, cloistered behind orange pylons, the Snowplow Sam class is winding up: a half-dozen 4-year-olds learning to skate, seemingly fearless. One little girl simply runs across the ice in her skates, her arms windmilling, never stopping to glide. When the kids fall, they bounce back up like Silly Putty. At the far end of the rink, a group of adults race at top speed, their scratching blades sending white chips flying—obviously the Skating 5 class listed on the bulletin board.

My class wobbles onto the ice, and our teacher, Sergei, begins speaking in a heavy Russian accent. "First maneuver," he announces. "Squat down, then skate, skate, skate. Go." Sergei is a man of few words, managing to speak English using mostly nouns and verbs. One by one, we push off from the wall, weaving like drunks down the rink.

In the past 15 months, I've interviewed for the following jobs: Editing a magazine about log cabins. (They found someone cheaper.) Editing a magazine about World War II. (They

found someone with history experience.) Writing a biking guide to D.C. (They found someone who can bike more than 20 miles a day.) Writing a report about sanitation in Zimbabwe. (They found someone else.) I didn't get any of these jobs, but I was told how many great candidates applied and how hard it was to choose just one. The papers say this is the worst recession since the 1930s.

Since being laid off, I've panicked about being unemployed, a loop of questions playing over and over in my head. Why does everyone else have a job? What's wrong with me? And other than stay-at-home parents, who else is shopping at the Lyon Village Giant on Lee Highway at 2 p.m. on a Wednesday, when people are supposed to be at work? Misfits, ex-convicts, the chronically weird?

Sergei is explaining that skating is all about pressure. Press on your heels, and your toes will be free to zigzag

across the ice. Press on your toes, and your heels can wiggle side to side, propelling you backward.

While we learn to swizzle, pushing our feet apart, then pulling them back together, I think about different kinds of courage. For example, the courage it takes to leave your homeland and move to a new country where you only half-speak the language. Is that different from the courage to throw your body into a triple spin, knowing there's only hard, slippery ice beneath you? Or the courage to run across the rink on thin metal blades, not caring if you fall?

Sergei says to jump inside our skates when we want to spin. "Take pressure off feet," he demonstrates, "then feet are free to move." It feels good to do something simple, something I can concentrate on and accomplish. I'm tired, I realize, of blaming myself for being unemployed. If I take the pressure off myself, will I be free to move?

As I leave the building, my sneakers

pushing against solid ground once again, I see a men's hockey team walking in, all swagger and matching shirts. Everyone gets out of their way. Could these be the Capitals? And who are the men in the back wearing military fatigues? As the players stride past, grinning at the parting crowd, I notice that one man out of three is missing an arm.

It's a week until my next skating class. Maybe I'll go home and write cover letters. Then again, maybe this is a good time to start my own business. That way, I could set my own schedule, and make it all the way to Skating 5. Those people looked like they were learning to fly. ■

*Three months after writing this essay, the author got a full-time job as a staff writer at a consulting firm. She plans to continue her skating lessons at night. You can reach her at [lauriemcclellan@hotmail.com](mailto:lauriemcclellan@hotmail.com).*