

U.S. graduates make unscheduled stop in limbo

With job market bleak, 20-somethings are forced to wait for turnaround

BY JENNIFER 8. LEE

When Stephanie Kelly, a 2009 graduate of the University of Florida, looked for a job in her chosen field — advertising — she found few prospects and even fewer takers. So now she has two jobs: as a part-time “senior secretary” at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville and a freelance gig writing for Elfster, a “secret Santa” Web site.

But is Ms. Kelly stressed out about the lack of a career path she spent four years preparing for? Not at all. Instead, she has come to appreciate her life. “I can cook and write at my own pace,” she said. “I kind of like that about my life.”

Likewise, Amy Klein, who graduated from Harvard University in 2007 with a degree in English literature, could not find a job in publishing. At one point, she had applied for a job as an editorial assistant at Gourmet magazine. Less than two weeks later, Condé Nast shut down that 68-year-old magazine. “So much for that job application,” said Ms. Klein, now 26.

One night she bumped into a friend, who asked her to join a punk rock band, Titus Andronicus, as a guitarist. Once, that might have been considered professional suicide. But weighed against a dreary day job, music suddenly held considerable appeal. So last spring, she sublet her room in New York City and toured the United States in an old Chevy minivan.

“I’m fulfilling my artistic goals,” Ms. Klein said.

Meet the members of what might be called Generation Limbo: highly educated 20-somethings, whose careers are stuck in neutral, coping with dead-end jobs and listless prospects.

And so they wait: for the economy to turn, for good jobs to materialize, for their lucky break. Some do so bitterly, frustrated that their well-mapped careers have gone astray. Others do so anxiously, wondering how they are going to pay their rent, their school loans, their living expenses — sometimes resorting to

once-unthinkable government handouts.

“We did everything we were supposed to,” said Stephanie Morales, 23, who graduated from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in 2009 with hopes of working in the arts. Instead she ended up waiting tables at a Chart House restaurant in Weehawken, New Jersey, earning \$2.17 an hour plus tips, to pay off her student loans. “What was the point of working so hard for 22 years if there was nothing out there?” said Ms. Morales, who is now a paralegal and plans on attending law school.

Some of Ms. Morales’s classmates have found themselves on welfare. “You don’t expect someone who just spent four years in Ivy League schools to be on food stamps,” said Ms. Morales, who estimates that a half-dozen of her friends are on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. A few are even helping younger graduates figure out how to apply. “We are passing on these traditions on how to work in the adult world as working poor,” Ms. Morales said.

But then there are people like Ms. Kelly and Ms. Klein, who are more *laissez-faire*. With the job market still bleak, their motto might as well be: “No career? No prospects? No worries!” (Well, at least for the time being.)

After all, much of the situation is out of their control, as victims of bad timing. Ms. Klein contrasted her Harvard classmates with those of her older sister, Lauren, who graduated from Harvard seven years earlier. Those graduates, she said, were career-obsessed and, helped along by a strong economy, aggressively pursued high-powered jobs right after graduation. (Lauren is a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology.)

By comparison, Ms. Kelly said her classmates seemed resigned to wait for the economic tides to turn. “Plenty of people work in bookstores and work in low-end administrative jobs, even though they have a Harvard degree,” she said. “They are thinking more in terms of creating their own kinds of life that interests them, rather than following a conventional idea of success and job security.”

The numbers are not encouraging. About 14 percent of those who graduated from college between 2006 and 2010

are looking for full-time jobs, either because they are unemployed or have only part-time jobs, according to a survey released in May of 571 recent college graduates by the Heldrich Center at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

And then there is the slice of graduates who are effectively underemployed, using a college degree for positions that do not require one or barely scraping by, working in call centers, bars or art-supply stores.

“They are a postponed generation,” said Cliff Zukin, an author of the Heldrich Center study. He noted that recent graduates seemed to be living with parents longer and taking longer to become financially secure. The journey on the life path, for many, is essentially stalled.

The Heldrich survey also found that the portion of graduates who described their first job as a “career” fell from 30 percent, if they had graduated before the 2008 economic downturn (in 2006 and 2007), to 22 percent, if they had graduated after the downturn (in 2009 and 2010).

In an ominous sign, those figures did not change much for second jobs, Dr. Zukin added, suggesting that recent graduates were stumbling from field to field. Indeed, Till Marco von Wachter, an associate professor of economics at Columbia University in New York who has studied the effect of recessions on young workers, said the effect on earnings took about a decade to fade.

Meanwhile, modest jobs mean modest lives. Benjamin Shore, 23, graduated from the University of Maryland last year with a business degree and planned to go into consulting. Instead, he moved back into his parents’ house in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and spent his days browsing for jobs online.

But when his parents started charging him \$500 a month for rent, he moved into a windowless room in a row house in Baltimore and took a \$12-an-hour job at a call center in the city, making calls for a university, encouraging prospects to go back to school. “There’s no point in being diplomatic: it is horrible,” Mr. Shore said.

“I have a college education that I feel like I am wasting by being there,” he



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added. "I am supposed to do something interesting, something with my brain." For a while, Mr. Shore ran Longevity-Drugstore, an online drug retailer that he started, but it went nowhere. To stretch his paycheck, he made beans and rice at home and drove slowly to save gas. Eventually he quit, got work as a dock hand and is now thinking of becoming a doctor.

Perhaps not surprisingly, volunteering has become a popular outlet for a generation that seeks meaning in its work. Sarah Weinstein, 25, a 2008 graduate of Boston University, manages a bar in Austin, Texas, because she could not find an advertising job. In her spare time, she volunteers, doing media relations for Austin Pets Alive, an animal rescue shelter.

"It'd be nice to make more money," Ms. Weinstein said, but "I prefer it this way so that I have the extra time to spend volunteering and pursuing other things." Volunteering, however, goes only so far. After three years without an advertising job, she is now applying to graduate school to freshen up her résumé.

Meanwhile, people forced out of the rat race are re-evaluating their values and looking elsewhere for satisfaction.

For Geo Wyeth, 27, who graduated from Yale in 2007, that means adopting a do-it-yourself approach to his career. After college, he worked at an Apple Store in New York as a salesclerk and trainer, while furthering his music career in an experimental rock band. He has observed, he said, a shift among his peers away from the corporate track and toward a more artistic mentality.

"You have to make opportunities happen for yourself, and I think a lot of my classmates weren't thinking in that way," he said. "It's the equivalent of setting up your own lemonade stand."

