The Schenectady man recalled how he lost his job in 1994.

"I just stopped going to work," he said. "I didn't call. They don't know what happened to me. I showed up three months later like nothing had happened."

Fifty-seven-year-old Marty (not his real name) said he was going through a divorce at the time. He also suffers from depression, anxiety and schizoaffective disorder, which caused him to be paranoid and delusional.

He ended up being put on disability. In the last 17 years, he has not held a job for longer than a year because he says he has trouble getting along with others.

"I have a hard time being around people all the time," he said.

He ended up taking classes for an assistant chef certificate at Schenectady County Community College, where he found out about a program called RealJobs NY that helps people with mental illnesses find work. After seven months of searching, he finally found a job as an assistant chef at a local restaurant. He credits RealJobs NY with his success.

"They kept me focused on it and kept pushing me," he said. "A lot of times I just wanted to give up."

He is working 20 hours a week, which he said is all he can handle. "It gets me out of the house," he said. "I can't do a full-time job. It's too much."

Marty is one of 85 people in the Schenectady County area that RealJobs NY has helped find work during its two years at SCCC, according to Rebecca Yates, program coordinator.

GRANT FUNDED
The program, which is funded by a U.S. Rehabilitation Services Administration "Projects with Industry" grant, helps people with resume writing, job searching, interviewing techniques and computer skills. It also has a peer support group and a business advisory council.

Other partners in the grant are the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services and the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University.
To be eligible for RealJobs NY, people must have a diagnosed mental illness. They check in a couple times a week with program officials, who assist them up to the point of finding work but do not contact the employers themselves. The program is also based locally at SUNY Adirondack in Queensbury.

Stephen Traver, director of vocational services for the state Workforce Development Institute and author of the grant, said community colleges are a good resource for the mentally ill. "It is less stigmatizing to those who have tried and failed in a traditional center," Traver said in a statement. "They are more likely to come to a program that is not housed in a mental health setting."

"Jillian," who also asked that her real name not be used, had been out of the work force since 1995 after she went through a major depression.

She had been feeling sad and gloomy and isolated herself from others.

Jillian, 54, was a dedicated state worker. However, she was injured on the job and started self-medicating with over-the-counter pain killers and sleep aids, becoming addicted to them. The medication exacerbated the depression symptoms and ultimately cost her the job.

"I was a productive member of society and all of a sudden my life changed," she said.

WHAT CAME FIRST?

Jillian's situation is typical of people with mental illness, according to Chrissie Classen, vocational counselor for the program. It is difficult to tell what came first. Having difficulty at work can trigger depression, which can affect job performance and lead to more problems. Losing a job can worsen the depression, Yates said. Without the structure of employment, people get lost in their own concerns.

Jillian took some business classes at SCCC and found the program. Because she had not been working, she didn't know about online job posting sites like monster.com.

With the help of RealJobs NY, Jillian was able to get her resume polished and post it on the website. Within a few weeks, she got a call from her current employer and went for an interview. She has been working 15 hours a week in the federal job since.

She had a little depressive episode for about a month around the holidays but has since recovered. She is working on socializing a little more at work. Now, she is enrolled in the SUNY-Delhi program in business that is offered through SCCC.

Marty admits that he still has trouble getting along with people but is taking it day by day with his new job.

Only about 12 percent of people with mental illnesses who seek employment are working, according to Oscar Jimenez, director of community and economic development with NYAPRS.
About 64 percent of people participating in RealJobs NY were employed at least three months after being placed in a job during the 2009-2010 period.

"There's an advantage of having someone in your workforce who has a real ability to solve issues in life and can translate those skills on the job," Jiminez said in a press release. "They bring a unique perspective."

Residents of Albany, Schenectady, Saratoga, Warren or Washington counties who are interested in the program, may contact Yates at 381-1292 or yatesrs@sunysccc.edu or Stephen Traver at straver@wdiny.org or 272-3500.

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