

The Miami Herald

Business Monday

February 27, 2006

OFF THE CLOCK

Professionals spend time off in academia

Some dedicated and busy professionals teach classes in schools and universities part time.

BY SHARON HARVEY ROSENBERG
Special to The Miami Herald

Every morning Andrew Yap, president and chief operating officer of a family-owned company, wakes up to a full schedule.

During business hours, Yap is a top executive at LEASA Industries, a Miami food products company launched by his father. But on weeknights and Saturday mornings, Yap stands at the head of a classroom where he teaches marketing, management and international business courses at Florida International University.

As both a teacher and a full-time working professional, Yap is not alone. Other local executives, medical experts, lawyers and journalists frequently step out of the office and into the classroom in order to teach students at grade schools, universities, and noncredit adult programs.

Yap, who teaches up to five courses a semester, brings his business experience to the classroom. One semester he required his students to create business plans for small to medium-sized companies in South Florida. For the assignment, students interviewed top executives, consulted with rank-and-file employees and designed reality-based marketing plans.

"They learned a lot more from doing real-life projects than from reading from textbooks," said Yap, who has won several "excellence in teaching" awards from FIU.

CLASSROOM DIVERSITY

Professionals in a wide variety of fields supplement the faculty of American Heritage School in Plantation. Of course, some of the doctors, lawyers and business executives who teach at the private school have children who are enrolled, but their classroom contributions go far beyond the usual PTA meeting.

Consider Dr. Nicholas Suite, chief executive officer of Neurology Associates Group and head of the Medical Professions Program at American Heritage. Every morning before reporting to work at his private practice, Suite teaches an early morning class -- 7:45 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. -- to high school students.

As a part-time teacher at American Heritage where his children are enrolled, he offers classes on genetics/modern biology and pathology, with lab work involving skeletons and test tubes. For lessons on frontal lobotomies, Suite has shown up for class with a human brain -- a prop that is popular with students.

Many local professionals are also involved in adult education.

For example, radio journalists Lyn Millner and Dan Grech jointly teach a class for the Florida Center for the Literary Arts, a program run by Miami Dade College. Millner and Grech, who have experience in radio and print journalism, are teaching a six-week course entitled "Writing for Radio: Telling Stories With Sound."

Teaching is a family tradition, said Grech, a radio reporter for Marketplace, a daily business show produced by American Public Media. His mother and her siblings were educators in Philadelphia and on his father's side, Grech comes from several generations of soccer coaches.

"This work that I do in the evening [as a teacher] is almost like developing my future career," said Grech, a former Miami Herald reporter. "I don't do it at all for the money, but because I love teaching."

The classroom experience also offers perks, according to Roberta Kressel, executive vice president of human resources at BankUnited. For the last three years, Kressel has taught a series of 11-week human resources certification classes at Barry University that are designed to prepare HR professionals for an exam. Passing the three-hour national exam provides an industry-recognized certification that is quickly becoming a hiring requirement in the HR field, Kressel said.

STAYING ON TOP

To prepare for the weekly three-hour class, she spends several hours each Sunday pulling together course materials and a lecture. "It's a huge commitment," she said.

But the preparation keeps her on top of major industry changes in compliance requirements and legal trends. What's more, the classroom creates another avenue for her own networking and recruiting for BankUnited.

The university classroom is also an avenue for personal growth, said Kenneth Thomas, a bank consultant and a regular lecturer on finance at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. For the last 35 years, Thomas has taught at the business school part-time.

And since 1987 he has traveled from Miami to Philadelphia almost every week to either teach or attend faculty meetings.

Last Wednesday Thomas boarded a plane from Miami with a stack of 15 to 20 newspapers and international finance publications. "Teaching, of course, forces you to stay up to date and to stay on the cutting edge of the field," he said. "That's the beauty of being involved in academia."

When Thomas steps out of his normal role of consulting for banks about federal regulations, community development and branch growth, he enjoys interacting with Ivy League professors, researchers and students.

Yap, the Miami businessman, agrees. Armed with a master's degree, he has enjoyed the classroom so much that he recently enrolled in the doctorate program at FIU. Those doctoral studies have forced Yap to reduce his teaching load. But that's the only downside, he said.

Yap said teaching improves his confidence and workplace skills: "It helps me to do my job better."

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