In today’s challenging job market, flexibility truly is key. Accounting and finance – the building block of any business – are trades that provide a certain occupational agility. And for WITC grads Kara Fryer and Norb Christman, it provided a formula for success.

It may seem like a huge leap across the career spectrum: cosmetologist to accountant. But for Kara Fryer, it all added up. A single mom of two, Fryer had completed the cosmetology program at Gogebic Community College in Ironwood, Mich., and was immediately employed by the college as the salon manager.

“I ended up working two jobs because the work at GCC was only during the school year,” Fryer says. Leaving the cosmetology field wasn’t easy, but Fryer wanted to be able to spend more time with her family and friends.

The next stop for Fryer was A to Z Plumbing, where she served as the office manager. It was there that she was unexpectedly bit by the accounting bug. “I was doing some accounting work and I really liked it,” Fryer says.

Part of her duties included payroll, accounts payable and accounts receivable. Fryer found that she really enjoyed the work and knew she could take her skills to the next level. “I wanted to understand it better. So I enrolled the Accounting program at WITC-Ashland,” Fryer says.

Once there, Fryer immersed herself in her studies. It wasn’t always easy, and some sacrifices had to be made from time to time. “I was really dedicated,” Fryer says. “It was hard to juggle school, family and friends. In the end, I had to choose what was most important. I had a responsibility.”

Fryer’s primary responsibility was to her family and providing a solid foundation for her children. And, in the end, her dedication certainly paid off. Even before graduation, Fryer had found a great career.

Now the office administrator for Port Superior Marina in Bayfield, Wis., Fryer is doing what she loves.

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Kara Fryer

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“Once I started working, I saw everything coming together, how everything I had learned was connected,” Fryer says. “I was able to start working on projects with little or no direction – WITC’s program is that good.”

Fryer continues to discover more about her chosen profession, and she knows she’s not done learning. Eventually a bachelor’s and master’s degree are on the horizon. Fryer is pleased with the flexibility her Accounting degree affords her.

“Knowing the financial aspects of business is a huge edge,” she says. “There are a lot of opportunities. I’m not at a standstill.”

Much like Fryer, Norb Christman found himself at a crossroad. After running his own hardware store in Ladysmith, Wis., for 20 years, the store needed a substantial financial investment or Christman would have to close.

Looking at the closing of the hardware store not as a failure, but as the end of a successful 20-year career, he was now able to pursue the next chapter in his life.

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People may not realize that finance is not just numbers, it is working with people,” Christman says.

“Norb is a consummate professional, responsible and capable of completing independent work,” says Harris. “He takes a leadership role among his peers and is very motivated to succeed. In addition, he possesses strong mathematical, oral and written communication skills. Norb exemplifies what WITC is all about.”

He completed his degree with a perfect 4.0 grade point average, which placed him with high honors upon graduation.

Christman reflects fondly on his days at WITC as “fantastic” and notes that many fun times were mixed with a lot of hard work. Christman also continues to work with WITC, serving as a member of its advisory committee and taking continuing education classes to stay current with his career in finance. Immediately after graduation, he was offered a job with an investment firm where he worked for a year. He then accepted a position as a loan officer at Pioneer Bank in Ladysmith, where he has been for five years.

“People may not realize that finance is not just numbers, it is working with people,” Christman says.

He enjoys developing relationships with the commercial, agricultural, municipal, non-profit and individual customers of the bank. Christman is also able to incorporate his old passion of researching the financial “big picture” and relating it to his customers on the local level.

“When all the pieces of the loan puzzle come together, there’s no better feeling,” he says.

Never Too Old to Learn

By Deborah Anderson

At a time when there are dire reports of the number of high school students dropping out of school, 80-year-old Alice Smith decided it was time to pursue her General Educational Development (GED). And, she says, when others her age are getting a “little confused upstairs,” she saw it as a way to keep her mind sharp.

Many years ago, Smith had to drop out of school at the age of 16 to help her dad on their Rice Lake farm, when her two brothers reported to the army during WWII. Then came a full, busy life including marriage, eight kids, 19 grandchildren, and 16 great grandchildren. Since her husband, Harry, passed away a few years ago, she has filled her days going to the Rice Lake Senior Center, church services and bingo, as well as spending time with her family. But in the back of her mind, she never gave up the idea of that high school diploma.

In September 2007, she started working with the staff of the Student Success Center at the Rice Lake campus of Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College. With the help of Karen Lutz, Anne Freagon, Donna Stelter, Deb Helquist and Robert Jasper, Smith improved her skills in reading and writing, studied science and social studies, and learned algebra and geometry. Gradually, she studied a subject, took a test, passed it and moved on to the next subject. Then in March she took the last – and hardest – math test.

Smith was quite a favorite of the Study Skills staff, and when they found out her passing score, Lutz and Freagon decided to surprise Smith at her apartment with the good news. When she saw them coming with flowers and a big balloon, she knew she had scored.

Her family, who at first kidded her when she started her quest for a diploma, is now proud of her and saying, “Good for you, Grandma!” Smith says her family is the most important thing in her life, but WITC has become important to her too.

“I’m a part of this place. It’s a whole new world when I come here, a learning world,” she says.

Smith celebrated her accomplishment with a trip to Madison to spend a week with her daughter, Gloria, which included eating out and shopping – her favorite pastime. In the future, Smith is thinking she would like to improve her computer skills, and maybe even audit a psychology class. There’s nothing to stop her.