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## Making A Real Difference

July 02, 2008

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By [Myriam DiGiovanni](#), [Jim Rubenstein](#), [Michelle Samaad](#)

### Summer Internship Helps Pay For College Expenses for Atlanta Senior

ATLANTA — As he heads off to college in the fall, more than anything, Ulus Hambrick was hoping to land an internship this summer—a paid one would be icing on the cake.

The \$17 million 1st Choice Credit Union had developed a relationship over the years with Tech High School here, where all students are required to secure an unpaid internship. Sheilah Montgomery, president/CEO, selected Hambrick to intern at the credit union. In the past, internships were unpaid but this time, Montgomery decided to pay Hambrick.

The senior high school student has been accepted to Hampton University where he will major in finance and minor marketing. He said he wasn't expecting a paid internship but is appreciative that the money earned will help him with books, tuition and other college expenses.

"I had the opportunity to sharpen my professional skills in a corporate setting," Hambrick said, adding the experience has helped to focus his path more towards a career in finance.

Hambrick worked in the credit union's collections, lending and home counseling departments. He recalled when it was time to renew the Home Counseling Grant and the many statistics and different type of documents that needed to be compiled. Hambrick said the experience taught him the importance of being organized and prioritizing different tasks within a project.

"[Most] important, Mrs. Montgomery taught me to always prepare for the unexpected. [Her] motto is 'be prepared for the unknown,'" Hambrick said.

Everyone he encountered at the credit union encouraged him to pursue his goals.

"From the CEO [to the] credit union's security guard, [they've had] an impact on my life and my overall aspect of success."

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### Downtrodden Member Turned Down By Banks Thankful That Her Credit Union Took a Chance

SEATTLE — It was so difficult for Jessica Ham to find a bank that would let

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her open up an account that she resorted to keeping her money in a cigar box at home.

Ham is not ashamed to acknowledge that a few years ago, she mismanaged her money while a customer at a commercial bank. Subsequently, financial institutions turned down her checking account applications after spotting mishandled activity on Chex Systems.

"Like a lot of people do, I made some mistakes with my account. I felt like a total heel for blowing out my checking account," Ham said. "It was a real challenge to open up another account."

With nowhere else to turn, one day she walked into \$500 million Seattle Metropolitan Credit Union to fill out an application. Bracing herself for rejection, Ham was surprised to hear that the credit union would allow her to open up a savings account. There were some restrictions, however. Ham could not have an ATM card and all direct deposits were held for a period of time.

"It was a place to store my money and that's all I needed at the time," she recalled.

Over the course of time, Ham was diligent about managing her money and was later given an ATM card and opened a checking account at the credit union. She still had five-day holds on her deposits and was not allowed overdraft assistance. After proving again that she could control her spending, the restrictions were lifted, she said.

Her responsible habits paid off. She applied for and was approved for a car loan. Because she had not established a credit history, Ham needed to put down 20%. Seattle Metropolitan CU believed in her renewed money management skills that she received two loans—one for the down payment and one for the car.

"I know it sounds unorthodox but they took the time to look at me as a person. They gave me a chance to prove myself."

The credit union was involved in yet another life changing event. Ham, who was previously employed as a contact center representative at Washington Mutual Bank, was laid off in July 2006. In her search for another job, she remembers thinking that she did not want to work for a bank anymore. On a whim, she applied for a teller position at Seattle Metropolitan CU. The hiring manager saw that she had contact center experience and Ham was offered a job as a representative. That was August 2006.

"Yet again, I turned to the credit union and they helped me," Ham said.

Ironically, Ham is a member of three credit unions but said one of the larger ones she joined "acts like a bank." Her experience at Seattle Metropolitan has proved to be an eye-opening experience, she explained.

"Because we're nonprofits, we're allowed to be an advocate for members," Ham said. "I feel a lot more free to be able to advise what will be the best thing for member. It makes me feel good that I can provide a stepping stone to where [a member] wants to be."

Looking back on her days as a Starbucks employee when she would bring her jar of tip change to the credit union, she remembers never encountering any huffy attitudes from tellers who would sort the money and deposit it into her account.

"Because of the credit union philosophy, we have the ability to be teachers and help improve someone's life. That's at the forefront of what we do."

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#### **Quick Work Saves Member From ID Fraud in S. Carolina**

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Based on her 15 years with State Credit Union in Columbia, S. C., Carol Witt, vice president of operations, is pretty good at spotting a card scam.

In April she helped avert what would have been a costly ID scam on an unsuspecting member whose credit card became compromised when a thief tried to change his PIN number. "The guy was grateful for what we did for him," said Witt, who was joined in catching the fraud by the CU's plastics supervisor, Kim Riser.

According to Witt, her department first received a fax requesting that the CU update a member's South Carolina address, phone and e-mail information on his credit card account to a New York address and new numbers. The request was in writing and referenced the member's current address, credit card number, Social Security number. The date of birth and the signature on file was matched the CU's records, so the address change was made.

The member is still mystified as to how the perpetrator had so much information on him, but he had lived years ago in New York though had visited family there recently.

Five days after the fax, the perpetrator called in to request a change in his PIN. "It was all printed out, which was suspicious right away," said Riser. The PIN requests ended up coming from a laundromat in New York which sealed the case. "Ironically, during a telephone conversation we had with the member, we received yet another fax from the 'member' requesting a replacement credit card and PIN."

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#### **Payday Alternative Loan Closes Gap for Medicaid Shortfall, College Textbooks**

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Brenetta Jackson found herself in a financial bind when she needed extra cash for her prescription medicine following a stay in the hospital.

Not knowing where to turn, she sought out Joell Dickerson, her favorite staffer at the \$355 million Mazuma Credit Union. Dickerson, a financial counselor, heard the worry in Jackson's voice as the longtime member explained that hospital expenses had eaten up a large chunk of her Medicaid leaving hardly any funds for medicine.

After exploring several options, Dickerson suggested an XtraCash loan. The short-term loan is the flagship product of XtraCash LLC, a payday loan alternative CUSO launched in March 2007 at Mazuma CU. The credit union charges a \$15 fee for every \$100, which is lower than Missouri's \$18 average, according to the CUSO. A payday loan user will receive a \$2 per \$100 discount if they pay from a Mazuma checking or savings account and an additional \$2 per \$100 discount if they enroll in the credit union's educational program.

Jackson, who receives a monthly Social Security check, requested and was approved for \$425 to purchase her medicine, Dickerson said. Beyond educating Jackson on the XtraCash's short term purpose, it was also important that the member received more information on basic financial education to help out in the long run.

"We don't want the negative stigma that comes with [other] payday loans," Dickerson said. "We're willing to work with the members. We try to do all we can to work with them to get from out under the loan."

Brenetta Johnson, Jackson's daughter, also found herself in a recent cash strap. Her college-age son needed \$200 for textbooks and as did Jackson's daughter, also in college. Just as she did with her mother, Dickerson sat down with Johnson, explained how the loan worked, emphasizing that XtraCash loans are for emergency purposes. But Dickerson said she always strives to treat members with dignity.

"There are no judgments made," Dickerson said. "No one is ever made to feel inferior."

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### **Vantage CU Staffer Helps Missouri Couple Overturn Bad Financial Decisions**

BRIDGETON, Mo. — At one point, Denita and Walter Robinson were reaping the consequences of a series of bad financial decisions that stood to threaten their livelihood.

These obstacles took them off track from their goals: owning a home, having enough funds to pay for their daughter's college expenses and starting a business.

The Robinsons, both 43, said they needed serious help in getting back on track. Enter Whitney Murphy, a member services representative with the \$543 million Vantage Credit Union. Murphy listened to the couple's plight and recommended ways to improve their money management skills and reestablish their financial footing.

"Life is a journey," Denita said. "Through life, people often endure bumps and hurdles—directly or indirectly related to personal decision-making—that could potentially threaten their livelihood and pursuit of happiness. Ours was such the case."

At the age of 41, the Robinsons became homeowners for the first time and thanks to more prudent budgeting, they were even able to purchase furniture for each room. With Murphy's help, a savings plan for a college-bound daughter opened with regular contributions. The couple also established business relationships that helped to further their ministry work in helping needy young people throughout St. Louis. They were also able to provide financial help to two of their adult children.

"Both my spouse and I are well-traveled people," Denita said. "Our occupations have afforded us opportunities to deal with many financial institutions in various states. Without any hesitation and beyond any shadow of doubt, we both can honestly say that our banking experiences through the Vantage have surpassed them all."

The Robinsons said they will be forever grateful to Murphy for listening without judgment.

"Her commitment [was] to helping us as members grow personally, more importantly, to demonstrate her willingness to believe in our potential," Denita said.

Despite the many choices the couple had to turn to for their financial needs, they say the vibe at Vantage is different, and that's why they stay.

"To us, Vantage is not just another large institution seeking to get all it can from its members without giving anything in return," Denita said. "It is comparable to a loving family seeking to inspire and give all it can for the betterment and benefit of everyone."

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### **Truliant FCU Relieves New Member's Credit Card Surprise Sticker Shock**

WINSTON SALEM, N.C.- Sometimes helping a member means giving them one less thing to worry about.

For Jen Bailey, a new membership at Truliant Federal Credit Union gave her some peace of mind.

It all began with a letter stating her credit card rate from a bank was jumping from 15% to 29%.

"I was just so stunned and confused," said Bailey. "I didn't even understand it at first until I mentioned it to some co-workers and they had received the same letter. We figured out that the bank had sold our credit card accounts."

The bank giving her an ultimatum of only two options to avoid the higher

rate: either stop using her credit card or pay off the balance only added to her stress.

"I was carrying a balance and this new rate was almost double what I was paying so I was relieved when a co-worker who had her accounts at Truliant suggested I talk to them," said Jen.

The big selling point that got Bailey to make a switch and become a member- Truliant never sells its credit card accounts.

"Within a week I had a convenience loan that was under 9% to pay off that credit card balance," said Shapiro. "When you think about it now, looking back, the letter was a good thing because it got me to get smart about my money and led me here."

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