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Rural mothers are learning lines for TV

In depressed areas of the Midwest and South, stay-at-home workers happily transcribe reality show footage.

By P.J. HUFFSTUTTER
Times Staff Writer

SWEET SPRINGS, MO. — When Marsha Snider tried to find a job earlier this year near this rural town of 1,550, she vied with hundreds of unemployed factory workers in the region — all hungry for a way to help their families make ends meet.

But a few months ago, the mother of six found opportunity in an unexpected place: Hollywood.

Now, she sits in front of her computer and spends her days transcribing thousands of hours of raw videotape footage filmed by the producers of reality TV shows — noting every verbal gaffe, random profanity and blush-inducing act.

The producers then use Snider's transcriptions as a way of sifting a mountain of location footage, and begin to piece together the show's story line.

"I never used to watch those shows. Now I'm hooked because I see all the behind-the-scenes stuff," said Snider, 37. "I never thought I'd say this, but Hollywood actually has helped ensure that my husband and I can make our mortgage payments, and buy Christmas gifts this year."

She's not alone. Snider is now one of 60 housewives and stay-at-home moms, mostly in economically depressed regions in the Midwest and the South, who work for Teresis Media Management Inc.

The Santa Ana technology firm was founded by Keri DeWitt, who grew up in this part of Missouri, about an hour east of Kansas City.

When she started her company in 2003, DeWitt initially chose the same path of other U.S. companies eager for cheap labor and contracted with a firm in India to handle the work.

After all, she said, bigger technology corporations have relied on a global workforce for decades; and recent advances in telecommunications have made it possible for smaller firms and start-up businesses like Teresis to do the same.

But she said she soon realized that outsourcing such transcription work, which relies heavily on accuracy and often comes with tight deadlines, was a mind-boggling chore that didn't end up saving her money in the end.

"I'd get back transcriptions that left out great gaps in conversation, or the workers simply couldn't understand the American colloquialisms and slang, such as 'back in the day' or y'all," DeWitt said. "If they didn't know the name of a town, they'd spell it out phonetically. And if someone had a thick accent — a Bronx accent, or a Southern accent, or a hard Northeastern accent — they simply couldn't do the work."

Trying to figure out a solution, DeWitt talked to friends and family in her hometown of Marshall, Mo. She learned that there was a dearth of jobs, particularly for mothers who wanted to work from home.

When DeWitt was growing up, her own mother worked two jobs: a day shift in a convenience store and a night shift at a fabric-dye factory. In 1989, her mother fell asleep while driving home from the factory job and was killed when she hit another car head-on.

"I knew that there were a lot of women back home in the same financial situation; people who used to be really solid middle class are having to stretch to survive," DeWitt said. "I thought that if this had been available to my mom, she wouldn't have had to work those crazy hours. So if I could send these jobs to India, why couldn't I send them back to my hometown?"

Last winter, DeWitt began recruiting staff with the help of the Central Missouri Technology and Skills Training Center in Marshall.

The requirements were simple: Workers needed to have high-speed Internet access, a computer and an electronic foot pedal to pause the footage when they needed a break.

And in the hyper-competitive world of reality TV, each Teresis worker must sign a nondisclosure agreement, barring them from discussing with others what they see.

Many of these firms are small and specialize in shows broadcast on cable channels, DeWitt said. LMNO Productions, which has tapped Teresis' transcribers to work on shows such as "Lance Armstrong: Running for Life" for the Learning Channel, will send the footage to the Orange County firm.

The rural transcribers then log into Teresis' secure database and download the footage onto their own computers. The video slowly plays back across the top of their monitor. Then, editing software allows the transcribers to type notes on each movement they see on the screen.

Though each tape is different, many are 30 minutes to an hour long; the transcribers usually have two days to finish a single tape.

"There's a difference between someone understanding American dialects and someone who understands English," said Jeff Rice, senior vice president of post-production for Encino-based LMNO.

"If you have an editor that's trying to find that one moment where a person said a particular word, and you have 1,000 hours of tape to search, you want to make sure the transcribers understand our accents well enough to spell words correctly."

In March, DeWitt hired fewer than a dozen women.

As the number of production companies and reality shows grew, so did the number of jobs in Missouri — as did word of the work. Earlier this year, one of Snider's closest friends, Crystal Stauch, 28, joined up. So did Stauch's mom, Carolyn Pearson, 52.

‘It's shocking what you can hear and see.’

—CRYSTALSTAUCH
Show transcriber

"Sometimes, it's completely boring: a shot of a building, or a bunch of feet walking back and forth in front of the camera," Stauch said. "Though sometimes it's shocking what you can hear and see: People smoking drugs, or talk about a person's gay partner, or a lot of profanity. When it gets really bad like that, I just note that it's bad language and move on."

Most of Teresis' workers hail from Missouri, and many of them are in the same situation as Snider. Her husband was laid off this year when his company, a small manufacturer of horse trailers, went out of business.

It took several months for him to land a new job, so "having this financial buffer made the difference between being able to pay the bills and having enough money to buy our eldest daughter her high school class ring," Snider said.

By many standards, the pay is modest.

Transcribers are paid 7 cents a line, so the more footage they wade through and the faster they type, the higher their pay. Pearson estimates that she's pulling in \$8 an hour.

"I'm old and I'm slow," said Pearson, who also holds down a full-time job with a multicounty employment agency. "Then again, I'm only using this as extra income to pay down my medical bills."

Stauch and Snider say they're pleased to be averaging \$15 an hour — taking home as much as \$2,000 a month.

In a town where the median household income is about \$34,000, and the median price of a house is just a bit more than \$47,000, "people here consider that huge money," Snider said. "No, the job doesn't come with benefits. No, there's no retirement. But at least this work is fun and gives us a flexible work schedule. Besides, what are our other options?"

pj.huffstutter@latimes.com