SERVICE WORKERS FEEL THE PINCH

Left behind in the tech boom

By Patricia Pyke

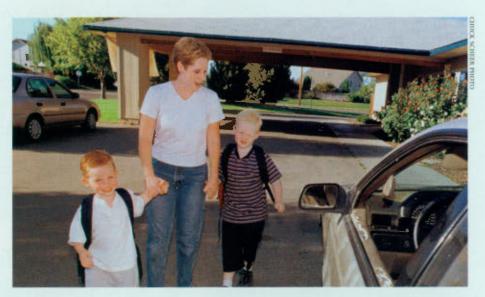
any Idahoans never caught a ride on the high-tech wave that swept through the Treasure Valley, filling local roads with sport utility vehicles and transforming farmland and foothills into subdivisions dotted with half-million dollar houses.

Olivia Hibnes is one of them. Hibnes, 24, has usually worked 40-65 hours a week at low-paying food-service and clerical jobs. Her schedule of studying and working long hours to pay for day care for her two sons, basic expenses and keeping her 1989 Dodge Colt patched together allows for about three hours of sleep a night.

She says her personal philosophy is "don't lose your faith, don't ever give up." She has applied that motto by earning her GED in the Adult Basic Education program at Boise State and taking advantage of other resources — training classes, job placement services and public assistance — in an effort to better her life.

"Half of society is made up of people making less than \$10 an hour, not because they're low class, but because they're trying their best to make ends meet," says Hibnes.

Hibnes' struggle to stay afloat is typical of many Idaho workers who lost ground during the technology boom years. That's the indication of data from census records and national and local research compiled by Boise State



psychology professor Linda Anooshian. She authored a series of four reports, "Growing Up Poor in Idaho," for Idaho Kids Count 2001, part of a nonpartisan, national Kids Count network designed to inform the general public and policy makers about the well-being of children.

"The economic boom that has been all over the newspapers until recently has not been an economic boom for most people," says Anooshian. "Most jobs added to the Idaho economy have not been high-paying, high-tech jobs but rather have been low-income service-sector jobs."

Anooshian acknowledges that the data is startling.

 More than half of Idaho children live in households classified as lowincome (200 percent of poverty level or less).

• From 1998 to 2000, the average

Olivia Hibnes picks up her sons from day care after a long day of work and study.

childhood poverty rate was 21 percent in Idaho and 19 percent nationally. (Poverty level is defined as a gross income of \$716 per month for a single person and \$1,471 for a family of four.)

 Most of Idaho's poor children have parents who work.

Behind the statistics, the reports explain, are thousands of Idaho children who fall behind in school because they are too hungry to concentrate, whose ear infections go untreated without access to health care, and who suffer disproportionately from sexual abuse, neglect, crime and teen pregnancy.

The reports note that poverty is lower in the Treasure Valley and other

urban counties than in rural areas. Anooshian attributes the difference partly to economic diversity in urban areas, which enables poor people to work two or three jobs, and the decline of traditional industries such as timber and mining in rural areas.

Amidst Idaho's conservative political culture, where programs assisting the poor are among the least funded in the nation, people frequently tell Anooshian that poverty and homelessness are not real problems in the state.

"People don't want to think about poor people," Anooshian says. "We have a lot of what are nowadays called 'the invisible homeless.' You see them but you don't recognize them as being home-

Take Hibnes for example. Articulate and quick to smile, she seems like a regular college student. Making lattes and coffee drinks at Moxie Java in the Student Union, she interacts amicably with customers. After work, she diligently studies from a math textbook. She's divorced, but her ex-husband is supportive of their children.

You'd never know that, despite her best efforts at scrimping and saving, she lost her rented house a couple months back and had to move in with her parents. Her sons are living with their father and she sees them every day.

Not having a stable place to live can present barriers to employment and education for many low-income workers. Nancy Shallat, a Boise State social work field instructor and former school social worker, sees housing as a major challenge for many families.

"The definition of homelessness by the government is not having a stable or secure residence," says Shallat, who has seen kids' lives disrupted as they are shuffled among family and friends and living in cars, vans, trailers and motels. "In order to have a two-bedroom apartment in Boise, you have to have ... more than a minimum wage job."

Minimum-wage and low-end wage earners may find themselves further affected as the high-tech surge ebbs and layoffs affect consumer confidence.

When the economy was growing robustly, periodic job losses in one industry were absorbed by the Treasure Valley's diverse eco-



Nancy Shallat and social work student

Larry Rayne (center) work with job seeker nomic base of manufactur-Nick Peterson. ing operations, corporate offices, government agen-

cies and agriculture, says Boise State economics department chair Don Holley.

If unemployment increases and consumer spending dips, Holley says, "the weaker the economy, the more difficult it will be to absorb [layoffs] and the more likely it will affect the service sector. For every job lost in the economic base of the community we would lose at least one job in the service sector economy."

At El Ada Community Action, a community agency in an old warehouse down by the Boise River, it's not unusual to see day laborers lined up at the employment dispatch office. However, some of the clients looking for jobs are blue-collar workers who until recently held stable employment.

"I got laid off about a week ago," says Nick Peterson, 22, who held a steady job as an auto mechanic for two years and worked regularly in construction before that. "This is the first time I've been out of work for longer than three days."

Meanwhile, Hibnes has high expectations for herself to succeed. As part of her strategy to climb the ladder of economic prosperity, she has been studying for the Air Force aptitude test and plans to leave Boise for 12 weeks to train with the Air National Guard. She hopes to become an emergency medical technician or respiratory therapist and eventually a paramedic.

"I want a better life," she says. "I don't want to make \$20,000 for the rest of my life. I will have better."