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Locals experience world as Virtual Assistants

BY TERRY PELLMAN
Staff Writer

HOUSTON — Thanks to computers and the Internet, the world of business knows no restrictions from mere geography. And no one knows that better than three local women who work as Virtual Assistants. Jessica Riesenbeck is a Houston resident and graduate of Houston High School. Riesenbeck is a Certified Professional Virtual Assistant (CPVA). Another Houston resident Gretchen Christy, and Sidney resident Alicia Rittenhouse hold the same certification.

'Never imagined it'

Operating her business by the title Virtual Services, Riesenbeck works out of her home but with clients anywhere in the world, such as her customer in England. As for working with such interesting and far-flung professionals, Riesenbeck exclaimed, "I never could have imagined it."

Although the contacts are done by long distance, the decision for Riesenbeck to enter into a working relationship is still one of mutual agreement.

"When I talk to potential clients, I interview them as much as they interview me." She explained the needs, goals and even personality of the client and Virtual Assistant must be compatible for the working relationship to succeed. For example, she has been in the position of turning down a potential client due to the fact the client would need for her to be available during hours that would not meet her family's needs. Using her computer, phone and fax machine, she assists small business-

es and assorted professionals with managing their time, travel and tasks. Riesenbeck's business can be found on the Web at www.jcrservices.com.

One of her clients is an agent for celebrity speakers. Riesenbeck may take the process from original inquiry to contract completion. "It's just a wide variety. I make sure they have time to spend on important things that need their time. And the little things that tie up their time ... I take care of."

Yet another client is an events coordinator who works with large corporations. Riesenbeck was brought into a project working with some of the country's largest corporations, an experience she found very fulfilling.

She continued, "As a Virtual Assistant, I provide administrative and sometimes personal support to small business owners. It works well with clients who are small business owners who work from their home or small office."

"They can hire me on an hour-by-hour basis. We specify a retainer amount for each month. The minimum is 10 hours, up to 40 hours, depending on what their needs are."

Completed training

Riesenbeck became a Virtual Assistant nearly five years ago, after completing the five-month AssistU program. Riesenbeck said the program is difficult to get into and difficult to complete.

Riesenbeck began the business four years ago, hoping to become her own boss and be able to work primarily during the hours her children would be at school. Her job at that time was not providing the flexibility she desired in her



SDN Photo/Terry Pellman

VIRTUAL ASSISTANT Jessica Riesenbeck, of Houston, corresponds with a client.

schedule, so she began researching alternatives, sorting out true opportunities from work-at-home scams. Now, being a Virtual Assistant allows her to set her own hours.

'It's wonderful'

As she put it, "It's wonderful. I could never go back to being an employee again."

Riesenbeck knows not many people at the local level are familiar with such an endeavor, but the concept is much more widely known in larger metropolitan areas where a lot of the clients are located.

Riesenbeck, Rittenhouse and Christy are among the nearly 1,000 individuals trained as Virtual Assistants by AssistU. That online training platform was founded by Stacy Brice in 1997.

For a business or professional needing assistance, but not necessarily a full-time administrative assistant, a Virtual Assistant may be just the thing. You do not need to provide office space and office equipment for such an assistant, nor do you pay for hours not spent working directly on your needs. The type of assistance

provided by a Virtual Assistant will vary by the needs of the client and the interests and expertise of the assistant. Some Virtual Assistants will concentrate on organizational projects, such as planning events or arranging appointments and meetings.

Others may be more inclined to provide very technical support such as maintaining Web sites or managing databases. Or the services are likely to include combinations of such assistance.

For example, a professional public speaker may prefer to spend her time concentrating on the content and presentation of speeches. While the speaker is polishing a speech, the Virtual Assistant may be making travel arrangements, sending out announcements to the press and potential audience members and preparing the next issue of the speaker's newsletter.

Christy, of Houston, is Riesenbeck's sister-in-law. She has been working as a Virtual Assistant for one year.

"The greatest part about it is you get to choose the work you want to do and

the clients you want to work with. Being your own boss ... the flexibility."

The mother of one small child and soon to have another, Christy finds the arrangement optimal for taking care of a family.

"It's all around the best decision I could have made. You still have to be out there and be known ... you still have to find the clients. Clients don't come to you. Referrals are great, but you have to get your face out there in front of others. So that's probably the most challenging part."

Although AssistU has been in existence for some time, Christy sees the work as just becoming known. "It's still a newer industry. We still need to get out there about what we do."

"If you're one of those small business owners that doesn't want to hire an office staff and have to go over all the things that come with an employee, it's awesome. It's great."

'Couldn't be happier'

And as for the flexibility to meet the needs of her family, she said, "I couldn't be happier."

Her Web address is www.gcvirtuallsupport.com. Rittenhouse enjoys working with a variety of clients to avoid having the work become repetitive. "All of my clients are different," she said.

And working as a Virtual Assistant requires the ability to work in an unconventional manner. "I have never met any of my clients." But Rittenhouse does speak to each weekly by phone.

Rittenhouse also received training through AssistU. Like her friend Riesenbeck, Rittenhouse finds the work family

friendly and compatible with the school hours of her 9-year-old. After now having worked as a Virtual Assistant for nearly three years, she said, "It's wonderful." Being a single parent, Rittenhouse must see to it household needs, such as insurance are met, but her work has made that possible.

Rittenhouse became interested in the field as a result of conversation with Riesenbeck, who would call on her for technical assistance with computer-related matters. After working together, Riesenbeck encouraged Rittenhouse to look into the field of Virtual Assistance.

'Technical VA'

Rittenhouse said, "I am more of a technical VA. I handle Web site resets ... I handle 'shopping cart' supports ... social networking management."

Her Web site address is www.aliciarittenhouse.com. Rittenhouse has worked with a number of business coaches and Internet marketers. Her clients are also "... spread out everywhere," including one in Mexico. In fact, just two are located in Ohio. She acquires clients through what she refers to as "social networking" by way of technology-based sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Virtual Assistants may be referred by word-of-mouth or found on the Internet through search engines such as Google or on sites such as Facebook. You can also check on business forums and chat rooms, or check in with the "Virtual Assistance Chamber of Commerce." AssistU has a directory that can be utilized by people in need of an assistant.

Balloon launched by Russia first-grader lands in Virginia

RUSSIA — A balloon launch by Russia Local School elementary students on March 9 resulted in one making a 466-mile trip being found in a Virginia vineyard three days later.

The discovery of the balloon launched by first-grade student Jacob Tillman was featured in a television

newscast in Harrisonburg, Va. Tillman is the son of Lester and Jeanne Tillman of Russia.

The balloon launch was part of the annual Right to Read Week festivities. All students, kindergarten through fourth grade, launched 175 balloons with their first name and infor-

mation regarding their favorite books, why they love to read and their favorite place to read, according to teacher Andrea Raterman.

News reporter Haley Harrison with WHSV-TV in Harrisonburg said the balloon was found in a vineyard in Mount Crawford, near Harrisonburg, on

March 12. The winemaker showed Tillman's letter to viewers stating he would reply. The report can be accessed at the station's Web site at www.wHSV.com/news/headlines/41245302.html.

Raterman said launch organizers thought students would be excited to receive

information from surrounding towns and other locations around the state. As part the week's activities,

educators placed a map of Ohio in the hallway to mark the locations of where the balloons land.

Sunday fundraiser benefits China adoption

RUSSIA — On Sunday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., "Lunch 4 Lily" will be held at the Russia Community Center.

The purpose of this soup and sandwich fundraiser is to help offset a portion of the overall adoption expenses for the upcoming travel and adoption of Lily Ying York. Lily, 4, currently lives in Inner Mongolia, China, and will soon be adopted by Ken

and Shelly York of Russia.

This will be the second China adoption by the York family. Elijah Xian York was born in China and brought to the York

family in January 2008.

All profits from this fundraising meal will be matched dollar-for-dollar by a grant from LifeSong for Orphans, with the

opportunity for a tax-deductible gift toward the York adoption. Details will be given at the event or by contacting the York family at 295-2228.

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Photo provided

LILY YING York, 4, of China, is awaiting adoption by Ken and Shelly York of Russia. A benefit to help with adoption expenses will be held Sunday.

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<p>• HUNTER'S RIDGE - TROY • I-75 to Exit 74 to State Route 41 east to left on Market St. to right on Troy-Urbana Rd. to right on Hunter's Ridge Dr.</p>	<p>• ROSEWOOD CREEK - TIPP CITY • I-75 to Exit 69 to County Road 25A South to right on Kessler-Cowlesville to right on Rosewood Creek Dr.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Stop by any one of these subdivisions to tour Miami County's finest homes</p>

See the March 11th Edition of the Troy Daily News for more information on the homes and a map of the tour.

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