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## You're Hired'

*RACHEL RASKIN-ZRIHEN, Times-Herald staff writer*

For many people, interviews are the most difficult part of looking for a job. It is also, often, the most important part - which is why career coach Brenda Ferguson Hodges of Vallejo focuses on doing it successfully in her private practice and in the book she wrote about the subject. "Inside Interviews - Secrets to Doing Everything Right, so... You're Hired!" is a recently self-published handbook for job seekers Ferguson Hodges wrote over several months.

Ferguson Hodges, 52, has more than 20 years' experience in corporate America as a human resources specialist, working with such firms as Lucas Films, Ltd., Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente and Blue Cross of California. She has been remarkably successful on both sides of the interview desk, she said, saying she once beat out 500 applicants for a job.

"I've gotten every job I've ever wanted," Ferguson Hodges said. "But I always knew I wanted a career helping people in some kind of way."

Originally from Richmond, Ferguson Hodges earned a sociology degree with a minor in business administration from California State University, Hayward. She said she got her first job with Blue Cross as a compensation analyst, writing job descriptions. But she wanted to recruit workers, and applied for and won that position.

"I really enjoy calling people and offering them positions. They're so happy when they get a job, and that's the most rewarding thing for me," Ferguson Hodges said.

During her years in human resources, Ferguson Hodges developed several strategies and tips for successful interviewing, and now offers them to private clients.

"I started my own business in August," Ferguson Hodges said. "I saw the state of the economy with the downsizing and outsourcing, and I thought with my experience and expertise I'd be able to help people find jobs. I know how to help people learn how to stand out from their competition. I have secrets and tips. That's why I wrote the book."

Ferguson Hodges said her corporate job had become less fulfilling, so she "followed her passion," and started her career coaching business. She said she realized what her passion was while writing her book in her spare time, and is now among few career coaches in the immediate area. And her focus is slightly different than most in her field, she said.

"Most career coaches take on the whole job search process, and I do that, too, but my particular focus is on how to interview. Too many people go in nervous and unprepared and don't know how to stand out," she said. "That's why I call myself the Interview Queen,' because I've always called myself that."

Ferguson Hodges said confidence is the main ingredient in successful interviewing. Confidence can be communicated in appearance and body language as well as in actual words.

She said she's been successful helping many different types of people find the work for which they're best suited, including those seeking to change careers.

"Knowing who you are is crucial," Ferguson Hodges said. "The book includes exercises in recognizing

one's skills, strengths, aptitudes and passions."

These are things important for job seekers to know before they apply for a job, said local employment agency manager Autumn Solbrack.

"A career coach can be very beneficial in helping people know what they're best at and what their strengths are," said Solbrack of Alkar Human Services. "We get people coming in here asking us to direct them, when they should really be selling their strengths."

Ferguson Hodges said she can help clients find what kind of work they'd most enjoy and recognize marketable skills they might not realize they have, she said.

Ferguson Hodges, a married mother of one, said her desire to help people may have been inherited from her mother.

"I grew up knowing I wanted to help people, I just didn't know how I was going to do it," Ferguson Hodges said. "At first I wanted to be a doctor, but I found out in college that medicine was not for me. I don't like blood. So I decided on sociology. I attended a job fair, and realized I wanted to work in human resources.

"My mother was a helper," she said. "I have a knack for counseling and listening, coaching and advising. It's in my system, in my bones. I feel good doing it. You just know when it's right."

It's that knowing it's right feeling that Ferguson Hodges enjoys helping her clients achieve.

"I find out what people's core being is, and reassure them that it's OK," Ferguson said. "I can help them develop a strategy for doing what will make them happy."

Ferguson said she knows quitting her corporate job was chancy, but decided it was worth it.

"When I first thought of this, I knew it was a risk, but a little fear is natural," she said. "I felt totally confident that I'm going to make it work. I'm at a place in my life that I want to enjoy what I do. I know I can help people with what I've learned in my career, and I've received signs that it will work. Life's too short. This is my dream, and I'm going to live my dream and do what I want before anything happens."

Ferguson Hodges offers a free 30-minute starting consultation for new clients, with continued session averaging about \$50 per hour.

For information on The Interview Queen and/or her book, call 649-8077. A Web site, <http://www.theinterviewqueen.com> is expected to be operational next month.

Photo: Brenda Ferguson Hodges discusses her recently published book, *You're Hired*, which offers secrets to the interview process. Photo: J.L. Sousa/Times-Herald

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