



## **The Ultimate Investment: The Benefits of Earning and Learning with a LiLA Account**

by Mark Griffin

We've all been there...Stopped dead in your tracks in the middle of the frozen foods aisle of the grocery store, desperately wanting to add a second container of mocha fudge raspberry ripple to the lonely half gallon already nestled amid the other overpriced delicacies in your cart. In the name of self restraint, you refrain from indulging in a second helping, knowing fully well that it will positively annihilate your budget (not to mention your diet). Yet, what if this happened to be one of those rare and wonderful days when the grocery gods smiled upon you and a coveted "Buy One, Get One Free" coupon fluttered down from the heavens and your weary shopper's soul was saved?

If only that miraculous two-for-one scenario could be extended to include your long cherished dream of finally earning that elusive college degree. Come to think of it, whatever happened to that last semester of advanced brain surgery you had to cast aside in favor of earning a living? Or what about that challenging university course on Victorian era novelists you've been putting off till your workload lessened? As long as we're thinking along those lines...What if there were a way that you could work forty hours a week, pay the rent and still be able to sock away money for your education? Better still, what if your employer agreed to match any deposits you made to your educational piggy bank dollar for dollar?

Instead of investing in mutual funds, an unpredictable stock market or in the latest get-rich-quick scheme, isn't it about time that you invested in the most precious commodity of all? Yourself. If you just roared out a resounding, life-affirming "Yes!", then by all means get a hold of a Lifelong Learning Account, better known to her good friends as LiLA.

"The broader vision for LiLA is to create greater access to education for everybody," says Auta Main, the LiLA Program Manager for Maine's Bureau of Employment Services. "Our focus with this program is really very much on the rank and file employees and our front line workers...There have been several studies done across the country revealing that when an employer helps an employee with their education, there's a huge increase in retention and that employees tend to stay at a place of employment when the employer is somehow assisting them with funding their education."

According to Main, the procedure for establishing a LiLA account is as uncomplicated as opening up a checking account or as painless as registering for a library card. "If you work for an employer that doesn't yet have a LiLA program in place, you could first approach your employer about sponsoring one," Main says. Assuming your employer has already sponsored a LiLA program, then typically how the process works is that you would open a LiLA account, in the form of a NextGen account (administered by the Finance Authority of Maine, a LiLA Program partner), fill out one of the employee participation forms and indicate how much money you would like to invest per month in your LiLA account, knowing that your employer will match it up to a certain, agreed upon amount...For an employer, the process is very much like sponsoring a 401k program."

Larinda Meade, Director of the Bureau of Employment Services for Maine's Department of Labor, brought the concept of LiLA to The Pine Tree State. Based upon and inspired by a model

program developed by CAEL (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) in Chicago, Maine's own LiLA program was launched in 2005 and is already being welcomed throughout the state with kind of genuine enthusiasm and positive word of mouth that made the program an outstanding success in Chicago, Indiana and San Francisco.

"Basically, what makes Maine very different is that we're the first statewide pilot for LiLA because we're working through the network of career centers all over the entire state," says Main. In addition, the career and education advising component of the LiLA Program is provided by the Maine Centers for Women, Work and Community whose 18 offices also span the state. The Maine LiLA partnership also includes industry and trade associations, post secondary institutions, community based organizations and local workforce investment boards. "The big, driving force is that statistically in Maine, we fall behind all of New England in terms of the number of people with college degrees. In Maine, we're at about 24% [of college graduates] and the rest of New England is at 36%. Having a successful LiLA program here could also help recruit businesses to Maine if we had a higher level of education in place."

From the perspective of an employer sponsoring a LiLA program and encouraging staffers to pursue their educational goals, there are some important managerial benefits to be reaped as well. As Main observes, "If it's an industry where there's a lot of turnover, like the restaurant business, and an employer is helping somebody get through a degree program over the course of four or five years, then that employee is likely to stay that four or five years whereas if that employer wasn't helping them, they might jump ship to another restaurant. I also think there would tend to be a loyalty to an employer that's willing to support you in that way."

Jodie Heal is the Chief Financial Officer for Ask...For Home Care, a South Thomaston-based home health and elder care agency that recently began sponsoring a LiLA program for it's employees. "As an employer, it's a great recruiting tool for us to be able to offer possible employees the opportunity to further their education," Heal says. "We also like to use [LiLA] to encourage our current employees and home care aides to further their education as well...Most of the education opportunities for our workers involve certificate courses or classes, so for them to be able to continuously save toward those classes and have us match those funds, that's a big asset to them. It's also a major retention tool for us." Heal says that administrators at Ask...For Home Care displayed no trepidation about instituting the LiLA program when they were initially approached. "We're very interested in new, upcoming and innovative ideas," says Heal. "We thought this was the perfect opportunity to help the LiLA program across the state as well as across the country. It's something that we definitely believe in."

To date, four Maine-based employers (including *The Employment Times*) have signed on to sponsor a LiLA program and Main anticipates that within the next year, this leading edge enterprise will experience substantial growth. "There are actually a lot of things happening with LiLA right now," Main acknowledges. "I would expect by the end of the year, we'll probably have 50 LiLA employees...From a personal standpoint, I really like what LiLA does. It feels like it creates opportunity for people that probably didn't have opportunities like this before or didn't feel as though they did. I think that vision that we have for educating people and creating greater access is really important."

For additional information on Maine's LiLA Program, please call (207)-624-6458.

[Mark Griffin recently served as an editorial consultant on the anthology, "Humor Us: America's Funniest Humorists On The Power of Laughter." Connect with the author at [MarkGriffin@mpbn.net](mailto:MarkGriffin@mpbn.net)]