

# Local 1180 Program Helps Member Eliminate \$236,610 of Student Loan Debt

To date, NSDFC has helped 470 Local 1180 members with debt totaling \$7,444,000. They have reduced that total debt to \$3,444,371, saving the average member \$43,580.

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

**SHEILA NEWBERRY (Assistant Coordinating Manager — Woodhull Hospital) recently hit the jackpot to the tune of nearly a quarter million dollars. She wasn't at a casino in Atlantic City. She didn't travel to Las Vegas. She didn't even play any lucky numbers in the Powerball.**

**Newberry did go to a Local 1180 membership meeting in September 2022 — a meeting she hadn't plan on attending — that changed her life.**

While driving home with her husband Victor on the afternoon of the meeting, a co-worker called Newberry and asked if she was in the vicinity of the Brooklyn Marriott where the Local 1180 meeting was taking place. As fate would have it, she was in the vicinity. Newberry's husband encouraged her to attend, and that is where her luck began.

In late 2022, Local 1180 implemented a new benefit for members and retirees with National Student Debt Forgiveness Center (NSDFC) that helps members eliminate portions of their college loan debt. Local 1180 promoted this benefit to members on the union's website, at meetings, and in weekly email blasts. Natalie Luongo, NSDFC's founder and a student loan consultant, was at that September meeting to further explain her company's services. As it turns out, Newberry had actually met Luongo years prior at a Woodhull Hospital presentation but thought student loan forgiveness was a scam, so she didn't pay attention to what NSDFC was offering.

This time, knowing Local 1180 was behind the program and offering it as a benefit, she approached Luongo about her student debt situation.

"I saw Natalie when she did a presentation about NSDFC at the meeting, and after it was over I went over and said, 'Hey, I know you,'" Newberry said. "I talked to her about the program and she told me that my union was offering this as a benefit to members. We talked about the debt I had accumulated and she said she could help me."

NSDFC, which specializes in federal student loan forgiveness programs and income-driven repayment plans, works with borrowers to help find the best option based on their unique circumstances for reducing monthly payments, partial debt forgiveness, or in the case of Newberry, total remaining loan forgiveness.

The two spoke at the membership meeting and according to Newberry, the conversation was one of the most beneficial she's ever had.

"I was so overwhelmed with all the loans I had, the paperwork I had to fill out, and just the whole process of student loan debt but Natalie told me not to worry," Newberry said. "She told me that her company would take care of everything, and they did. I just never imagined at that time how much they would really take care of."

Newberry, the youngest of 11 children, dropped out of high school after 10th grade because she believed she wasn't learning anything; the students at her high school spent more time hanging out in hallways than attending class. One of her older sisters (Diane), however, was not going to let Newberry continue her life without even a high school diploma, so she went on to earn her GED.

Through a series of fortunate circumstances, one of Newberry's co-workers at the time asked her if she would be interested in taking the entrance exam to attend the College of New Rochelle and work toward a bachelor's degree, something that would help Newberry advance in her career. Newberry said no but agreed to accompany her friend to take the test.

"I didn't know my friend had plans for me that I didn't even have for myself. She was planning all along for me to take that test, too," Newberry said.

Although she was hesitant to take a test for which she felt unprepared, once at the college, Newberry agreed to give it a try. While her friend unfortunately did not pass the test, Newberry passed with flying colors.

She enrolled at the College of New Rochelle to work toward her bachelor's degree, and this is when she began accumulating student loan debt. Her debt load grew when she went on to obtain her master's degree in public administration from Metropolitan College of New York, graduating in 2009. At this point, Newberry had multiple loans from her bachelor's and master's degrees. She knew it would take some time to pay off the balance, but figured the monthly payments would just come from her paycheck.

In addition, her youngest daughter attended Virginia State University for four years, and Newberry took out a Parent PLUS loan to help pay for her tuition as well.

"I had enough of my own debt but it was manageable until my daughter needed help paying for her tuition, too! A Parent PLUS loan on top of my own loans was a lot," Newberry said. "That's when my debt really started climbing. I was originally paying about \$272 monthly when I was just paying toward my undergrad loans, but I knew that was going to be a lot more with all the other loans."

Her total debt from her bachelor's degree was \$130,977, while her master's degree tacked on another \$35,980. The Parent PLUS loan added \$57,541, and by that point, interest had accumulated to \$12,112, but was still growing. Her total debt load prior to using the Local 1180 benefit and signing up with NSDFC? \$236,610!

"Sheila came over to speak to me after the 1180 general membership meeting," Luongo said. "As she explained her situation, I mentally checked off boxes for a new program called Limited PSLF Waiver. I knew she was going to qualify for a complete wipeout but we had a huge hurdle to overcome — TIME. The Limited PSLF Waiver program was over Oct. 31 and we spoke in September, leaving us a small window to get this done."

As Newberry began working with NSDFC, they provided her with documentation for signatures, verified all her information, obtained updated employment certificates, all while submitting everything before the Oct. 31 deadline.

The Public Student Loan Forgiveness Program, more commonly known as PSLF, was originally passed by Congress in 2007, was an incentive to draw educated workers like teachers and nurses into public service fields. However, it was plagued from the start by miscommunication from loan servicers and convoluted program requirements. A 2021 report from the nonprofit organization Student Borrower Protection Center noted that PSLF had a 98% rejection rate, so it was no wonder Newberry thought forgiveness was nothing more than a ruse.

She remembers the day she received a letter from MOHELA, her student loan servicer, letting her know that the balance of her student loan debt had been completely canceled.

"Congratulations! We completed our review of your repayment and qualifying employment history under the PSLF Program rules. We determined you have successfully met the requirements of the PSLF Program and your loans listed below have been forgiven. Thank you for your public service!" the letter read.

For anyone, this would have been a happy moment but for Newberry, receiving that letter was life changing.

"At first I didn't believe it. So, I called MOHELA my loan servicer to make sure I was understanding what the letter was saying. I started crying when I found out. I hit the jackpot. You know, it's amazing. Every time I tell somebody, they look at me and say, 'Are you kidding me? No, you're not telling the truth.' I said, 'Why would I lie about something like this?'"

Newberry's husband of 30 years couldn't believe it either.

"I called Victor to tell him and he was in shock. He didn't think it was true," she said. "He had me show him the letter when I got home from work and after he read it, he told me it was all legitimate. He said, 'Wow! This is unbelievable! He was truly ecstatic.' Standing in my kitchen, I began crying praising God thanking him for my blessing."

Victor had student loans himself, and although they paled in comparison to his wife's, they, too, were forgiven.

Victor, a former City bus driver, has been retired on disability for a while. Newberry said that even though she isn't quite ready to retire, the burden of student loan debt being lifted off her shoulders will allow for a much smoother transition to retirement when the time comes.

"I know it's amazing. I know it's true. Only God's grace allowed this to happen. That's what I know. That's all I can say, other than without my union, without Local 1180, I would not have had this opportunity."

Newberry said it was important to tell her story so other Local 1180 members would be encouraged to take advantage of the benefit and reach out to National Student Debt Forgiveness Center. She said she's been telling everyone she can about the program and encouraging them to contact NSDFC.

To date, NSDFC has helped 470 Local 1180 members with debt totaling \$7,444,000. That debt has been reduced to \$3,444,371, saving the average member \$43,580.

"I didn't know what I was doing when I filled out the paperwork the first time by myself," Newberry said. "Natalie helped me figure out the who, what, when, where, and why. I'm so thankful to Natalie and NSDFC, and of course Local 1180 for providing this benefit to members. If it wasn't for her and Local 1180, I can't imagine how much I would have had to pay with all the interest adding up."

"I'm on the road about to retire. Now I can retire sooner," she said. "I just can't believe it. Every time I look at this [loan forgiveness] letter, I still can't

believe it, but I'm grateful," Newberry said. "My union really looks out for us by providing benefits that can really change a life."

To contact National Student Debt Forgiveness Center and take advantage of the Local 1180 member benefits, please call 646.766.1330. ■

