

Birmingham News (AL)

Life after SouthTrust

Former employees of the bank that was absorbed by Wachovia move on - and are happy they did.

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Page: 1-B

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Former SouthTrust Corp. employee Tonya Thomas started charting her new course in life within weeks of learning that Alabama's largest bank would become part of Wachovia Corp.

The administrative assistant took a 22-week business course and started developing a plan to launch a home-based venture called the Small-Office Assistant. She officially started at her new job in April, just days before she would be laid off from SouthTrust. Six months later, her business is going strong, and Thomas says she's happier than she was during her three years working for the bank.

"This was my open door to step out and take the entrepreneurial plunge," said the Trussville resident.

SouthTrust's merger with Wachovia Corp. meant at least 1,764 of the bank's Birmingham 4,000 employees would be out of a job. On Monday, all of SouthTrust's branches will reopen as Wachovia branches. The SouthTrust name will be gone, except for mentions on resumes and on keepsake coffee cups and umbrellas.

Some former SouthTrust workers, such as Thomas, have started their own businesses. Some have retired, while others have landed jobs with rival banks. Some went to work for Wachovia and some are still looking - more than a year after the \$14.9 billion acquisition was announced.

But they all share one sentiment about the merger - it was a life-changing experience. "When Wachovia made the acquisition, I was so mad. Almost a year later, I can say that was the best thing that ever happened to me," said Rob Henger. Henger, who worked for SouthTrust Mortgage, teamed up with Rast Mortgage to create Henger Rast and Associates, a full service mortgage banking company.

Henger has hired seven former SouthTrust employees and says he has "stolen tons of plays out of SouthTrust's playbook. But I don't feel bad about it because they don't exist anymore."

Opening his own business enabled Henger to take more control of his destiny, he said. Prior to working for SouthTrust, he was a partner in MortgageSouth, which was later sold.

"I make less money, but I have more fun," he said. "And not having to worry about being acquired again gives me peace of mind."

Steve Smith, a former senior vice president who oversaw SouthTrust's private banking operations in Texas and Alabama, said he formed a new bank for the same reason. Like Henger, he has also set out to hire as many former SouthTrust employees as he can. SouthPoint Bank opened a week ago and employs six former SouthTrust workers. By the end of the year, the bank will employ 10 former SouthTrust workers.

Carol Cooper, one of the SouthTrust alums at SouthPoint, describes her layoff as a "blessing in disguise." Cooper, who worked for SouthTrust for 12 years, most recently as a relationship manager in private banking, said she likely would have retired at SouthTrust.

Cooper, whose last day at SouthTrust was April 15, spent some time traveling around Europe and visiting with friends and family before deciding to accept Smith's offer and join SouthPoint as vice president of retail and commercial banking.

"This was the best fit," said the 33-year-old Cooper. "I figured if I'm going to turn my life upside down, I'm going to do it with people I know."

Besides, she said, "If I took a job with one of SouthTrust's competitors, I'd be fearful the same thing would happen."

Still, some former employees have welcomed the chance to work in the familiar territory of a regional bank as opposed to a large bank like Wachovia.

AmSouth Bancorp., for instance, has hired more than 200 former SouthTrust employees in its six-state footprint, said spokesman Rick Swagler.

That number includes some of SouthTrust's top executives, including Chief Risk Officer Bill Wells and Chief Financial Officer Al Yother. Yother's new title with AmSouth is controller.

Bill Prater, SouthTrust's former head of investor relations, considered several opportunities before deciding to join AmSouth in December as senior vice president of finance. Prater, who had been with SouthTrust for 18 years, could have applied for a position with Wachovia, but he would have had to move and adapt to a completely different environment.

Instead, he took "the world is my oyster" approach to the change. He toyed with many possibilities and even considered becoming a house builder.

"It was the most off-the-wall idea and the one my wife liked the least," he said.

52 years at SouthTrust

Ollie Sandlin, who had been with SouthTrust longer than anyone else - 52 years - also considered going to work for another bank. Several in town have asked him to join their team, even on a part-time basis. Wachovia also offered him a position and the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce pursued him. But the 70-year-old Sandlin, who started as a mail carrier at SouthTrust's predecessor, Birmingham Trust National Bank in 1953, so far has opted to take it easy.

Sandlin, who was senior vice president over business development when he left, has been spending time with his family, taking long weekends on Lake Martin, and building a new home in Birmingham.

The merger didn't surprise Sandlin, who, like others, had expected one of Alabama's Big Four banks to be acquired. But the news was still upsetting in some ways, he said.

"It was sort of bittersweet for me because I would've liked to have worked for a couple more years at SouthTrust," he said.

His actual departure was a little easier because, like others, he knew his end date well in advance.

Now instead of showing up at SouthTrust at 8 a.m., he spends time at his home with his wife.

"You start the day later, and the day just seems to pass, but I don't sit around watching TV," he said.

Sandlin's severance combined with the amount of stock he built up over the years ensures he and his wife will live comfortably without him going back to work.

Most everyone he knows from SouthTrust who took the retirement package are doing very well, Sandlin said. "I haven't had anyone say they're not enjoying retirement," he said.

As for those employees who haven't found work, Sandlin

said: "They're fortunate SouthTrust was the first major bank to be bought out. There are excellent opportunities at other banks that many of my friends have been able to go to."

SouthTrust grief

Susan Angel, a 17-year employee of SouthTrust who is still looking for a job, said she's not interested in going back to work for a bank. Angel, who moved to Arab to be close to family a couple of months after her job as a loan review analyst ended, is now looking for opportunities in the medical field.

"I just feel like banking is a very different industry than when I started in the early 1970s," she said. "Banking became more about the bottom line, not customer service."

The mood in her department - where everyone but the manager lost their jobs - was grim for the first six months following the acquisition announcement.

"It was like a death had occurred. We really knew each other well. That made it a little bit harder," she said.

That said, Angel said she still feels like she was treated well at SouthTrust. Her 401(k) plan, coupled with what she described as a generous early retirement package, have eased her concerns. Angel, who is also drawing unemployment benefits, will receive severance pay through at least the end of the year. And she expects to have a position in an area medical facility by then.

"I've been OK with the changes, and I really believe this will only make all of us better people in the long run," she said.

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Disappearing SouthTrust

Here is a timeline showing developments following Wachovia Corp. announcement it would acquire Birmingham's SouthTrust Corp.

2004

June 21 Wachovia says it will buy SouthTrust in deal valued at more than \$14 billion.

June 30 Bank it will move top SouthTrust executives to Atlanta and Charlotte.

Aug. 4 Wachovia says it will keep Birmingham call center, which then employed 261.

Aug. 5 Wachovia unveils plan committing \$5.9 billion over five years for special loans and community development programs in Alabama.

Aug. 11 CEO Ken Thompson reassures Birmingham SouthTrust workers that "no one will be left behind."

Sept. 28 Wachovia says it plans to close 175 to 200 branches as part of deal.

Nov. 1 Acquisition of SouthTrust is final.

Nov. 24 Wachovia informs state officials it will eliminate 829 jobs in Birmingham in first round of cuts.

Dec. 5 Wachovia announces it will build \$400 million data center in Jefferson County, creating 40 jobs.

2005

February Another

round of cuts brings SouthTrust job losses in Birmingham to 1,258.

March Wachovia informs state officials it will eliminate 254 more jobs in the city. Totals stands at 1,512.

April An additional 252 cuts are made, bringing total to 1,764.

April 25 Wachovia converts SouthTrust Securities' systems. Other systems follow.

Oct. 8 Work begins to remove SouthTrust logo from downtown office town bearing SouthTrust name.

Oct. 20 Wachovia converts SouthTrust deposits in Alabama.

Oct. 21 Wachovia begins unveiling signs at former SouthTrust locations.

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