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Working to build a nest egg

Valeria Johnson has turned around her finances thanks to the free Okaloosa Saves program

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FORT WALTON BEACH — Car trouble? Last-minute plane tickets? College tuition?

Bring it on. Valeria Johnson's budget can handle it.

"I was petrified before," said the customer service representative for Beach Community Bank in Blue Mountain Beach in Walton County. "Now I feel like I can take care of myself."

Four years ago Johnson enrolled in Okaloosa Saves, a free program offered by the county extension office to help residents start and maintain saving accounts.

"I was living paycheck to paycheck," said Johnson, who had never been a disciplined saver. "I wanted to be able to do things."

America Saves recognized Johnson recently for her success and featured her in its national newsletter. "(Okaloosa Saves) has made a difference in her life," said Elaine Courtney, a family and consumer sciences extension agent for Okaloosa County. "She's more financially stable today than she was before."

Through Okaloosa Saves, the Fort Walton Beach resident has reduced her credit card debt, built up a savings account, set aside money for Christmas and cut much of her spending.

"When my car breaks down, I have the money sitting aside," she said. "It's wonderful."

Johnson is quick to point out that even the smallest changes can have a big impact.

"I don't spend any of my coin," she adds. "I keep it for my savings account."

Johnson said she's especially passionate about encouraging parents to teach their children how to save at an early age. "That's so important," she said. "It's not easy to get started, but once you get into it, it feels really good."

Valeria's tips

Keep all coins.

Get rid of credit card debt first.

After credit card debt is paid off, keep putting that same amount into savings.

When you get a raise, put that amount into your savings account.

Make credit card purchases only when you have the cash to pay it off.

Use coupons and rebates.

Start small and set reasonable goals.

For more information on Okaloosa Saves, go to www.okaloosasaves.org.

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