TIGHT TIMES, BOLD MOVES

In this shaky economy, you may feel cash-strapped and job-poor, but as these four grads demonstrate, that's no reason to neglect your needs or pawn your dreams.

REBEKAH EWING, 22, English teacher to middle-school students in South Korea

HER GOAL I needed to pay off $5,500 in student loans and $2,000 in credit card debt.

HER OBSTACLES I wanted to try out teaching and begin paying back student loans, but I'm not certified to teach in the United States. I have a bachelor's degree in English.

HER SOLUTION Thanks to a tip from a professor at Michigan State University, I found a program run by the South Korean government that hires bachelor-degree graduates from the United States to teach English in their schools. I figured I could test out teaching and see if it was something I'd like to do without acquiring further debt. I put about half of my $1,600 monthly paycheck toward my debt. The program also reimbursed me for my $1,080 airline ticket to South Korea and pays the rent on my small one-bedroom apartment. I arrived here in August 2008, and I've paid off my credit card. I'm now focusing on my student loans. If I stay here this year and next, I hope to have everything paid off.

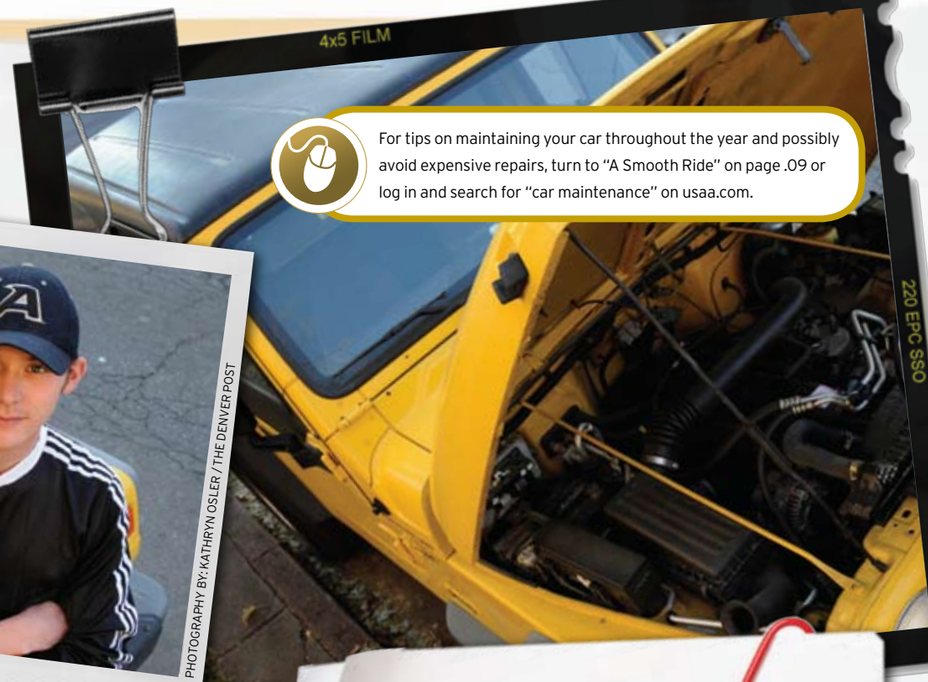
PHOTOGRAPHY BY REBEKAH EWING

SPORTS DAY AT THE SCHOOL WHERE I TEACH. THE STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN RELAY RACES.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: ISTOCK AND PROVIDED BY INDIVIDUALS

MY APARTMENT IN SOUTH KOREA

If you have questions about the best ways to pay back debt, call (800) 583-8293 to speak to a USAA financial advisor. Also, you can log on to usaa.com and search "debt."



PHOTOGRAPHY BY: KATHRYN OSLER / THE DENVER POST

For tips on maintaining your car throughout the year and possibly avoid expensive repairs, turn to "A Smooth Ride" on page .09 or log in and search for "car maintenance" on usaa.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: KATHRYN OSLER / THE DENVER POST

MATT SCHILLING, 27, assistant supermarket meat manager in Denver, Colo.

HIS GOAL I needed $5,000 to replace the wrecked engine in my 7-year-old SUV.

HIS OBSTACLE I figured I'd have little trouble landing a bank loan with a reasonable fixed interest rate because I had been with the same company for four years. I was earning about $33,000 a year and had built up a credit score in the high 700s. However, I didn't have enough money in my savings. It was a bummer when the best offer I could get from a bank was a 20 percent fixed interest rate.

HIS SOLUTION I heard about peer-to-peer lending sites that match individual borrowers with individual lenders. Since I didn't know anything about them, I had questions. I exchanged several e-mails with one site's customer service department and got my questions answered. I decided to go ahead and apply. Now, 42 strangers in 18 states have contributed to my $5,000 five-year loan. I have a 9 percent interest rate and have the $160 monthly payment automatically withdrawn from my account.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PEER-TO-PEER LENDING

Peer-to-peer lending sites, which appeared online a few years ago, match up you with one or a group of lenders who are willing to loan you money at the interest rate you're willing to pay. As the credit market tightens, you may be tempted to use a peer-to-peer site. Before you consider these online lenders, follow these suggestions from USAA certified financial planner Rich Lunsford:

- Exhaust other borrowing options, such as a credit card, savings account, money market account, credit union, and family members.
- Do your homework. Visit the Better Business Bureau at bbb.org to research the lending site. Some peer-to-peer sites have been shut down by the U.S. government until they meet federal regulations.
- Be aware that your loan will be with an online lending business, which will check your credit history before lending you money and will turn you over to a collection agency if you are unable to repay the loan on time.
- Before signing the agreement, thoroughly read it. Know exactly what you're getting into. Find out the fees charged to apply for the loan, to pay it off early, or if you miss a payment. Being late or missing a payment also could cause your interest rate to increase substantially.

PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIED BY LEANDRARAMM.COM

LEANDRA RAMM, 24, actress/singer/dancer in New York City.

HER GOAL I needed to find an affordable place to live in New York City.

HER OBSTACLE The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is around $3,000 a month. If I focus on my career and go on auditions, I can't afford this kind of rent.

HER SOLUTION I house sit in exchange for rent. I walk the dogs and take care of a four-bedroom condo in the heart of Manhattan. I have my own bedroom and bathroom. There are housesitting services that help match up renters and homeowners in most cities. But I found my living situation by talking to people I knew in the performing arts.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUE ELLEN NELSON

THAT'S ME (ON THE LEFT OF COURSE) IN A PRODUCTION OF "MAN OF LA MANCHA."

MIA WARREN, 22, operation specialist at a brokerage firm in Boston

HER GOAL I wanted to travel before settling down in a real job after college graduation.

HER OBSTACLE It wasn't in my budget to backpack across Europe. I had saved up $3,000 from working part-time in college, but I needed that money when I began searching for a job.

HER SOLUTION A friend told me about Associazione Culturale Linguistica Educational, a summer program for Italian kids. I Googled it to find out if it was legit. When I learned it is a non-profit educational organization officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of Education, I applied. There were 300 counselors, and our mission was to help the kids put on plays in English. The program allowed me to work and travel through Italy for about three months. I spent one week in training, eight weeks working, and three weeks traveling. Bed, board, and camp-to-camp travel expenses were covered, and I returned home with about $1,800. After reimbursing my savings for the $1,600 airfare, I still came out with a positive cash flow. I also picked up more Italian in three months there than I had learned in three years at college.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIA WARREN

ME FROM MY HOTEL ROOM DURING MY ORIENTATION SESSION IN SAN REMO.

SOME OF MY CAMPERS PERFORMING IN A PLAY

For tips on protecting your debit and credit card while traveling, search "credit card travel protection" on usaa.com.

A Smooth Ride

Whether your car is new or used, treating it well now can save you a ton of money in the long run. Follow this maintenance calendar to keep your vehicle out of the shop. It should also help you see that caring for your car now is much cheaper than putting it off until later.

So that you have a cash cushion in case of a car-repair emergency, focus on saving at least $1,000 emergencies. As a goal, try to save at least three to six months of expenses, including car costs, in an emergency fund, such as a