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Midlife career change: Four women who made a job switch during middle age

By EMMA JOHNSON - www.RetailMeNot.com

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Longer lives and stressed retirement funds mean that people are working well past traditional retirement age. In fact, between 1993 and 2008, the number of working women aged 65 to 69 increased from 16.1 to 26.4 percent, according to the Department of Labor. But many are also switching careers later in life in search of meaningful and sustainable work. Consider that full-time college enrollment by older women is up 31 percent in the past decade, and the number of self-employed people ages 55 to 64 grew 52 percent from 2000 to 2007, according to the Small Business Administration. Older women are not letting age stand in their way of new careers.

Here are four women who successfully reinvented themselves in middle age.

JODY JOHNSON

<http://www.RetailMeNot.com>

Hometown: Miami
Old job: Emergency room nurse
New job: Business consultant
Age when made the change: 49
Time in new career: 5 years

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I loved being a nurse, and I was successful at it. I'd been promoted to manage and was responsible for training. But by the time I was 46, I had remarried and didn't want to work nights anymore, and my son was grown. I was exploring what I wanted to do next.

Over the years, I'd taken classes in communication and management, and stemming from some of those courses, I

would coach people because I enjoyed it. I helped them with projects like getting married or opening a community center. Then one of those mentees referred me to the owner of a painting business who wanted to hire me to help him grow his business.

I wasn't sure what that entailed, so I Googled "business consultant" and then did six months of due diligence before I enrolled in a certification program. It was really scary to launch a new business in middle age. It is hard to get over the inertia of being safe and warm and dry, doing what you're good at. This venture took my savings and investments. Not to mention the naysayers who told me I was out of my mind.

But the pros of starting over professionally in middle age were only possible because I had the confidence and self-knowledge that often only comes from success in another career and life experience. When you're busy taking care of your kids, a home and car, it is hard

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to figure out what your call in life is. What I do now is so fulfilling; I can help so many more people than I did in my former career.

ELIZABETH VENTURINI

Hometown: Cathedral City, Calif.

Old job: Marketing and program manager in the high-tech industry

New job: College admissions counselor

Age when made the change: 53

Time in new career: 2 years

I never fit in during the 18 years I spent working in the technology industry, even though I was good at what I did. I pursued it because it paid well. When I was laid off in 2008, I spent months trying to find another job. I got very, very close to landing other positions but nothing clicked. I started going through the exercise of finding what situations made me feel the most comfortable, and I realized that the industry was not for me. However, I thought about the times when I interviewed at universities, and those experiences were a breeze. There was a rapport with the other people, and I never had one butterfly. But when I interviewed at tech companies, it was very stressful.

I realized that I'm never going to be an engineer, and it is time to move on. But I worried that I'd invested so much in my career I could never do anything else.

On the Internet I investigated careers that had a strong growth potential and those that required skills that matched my own. I also went to numerous conferences and meetings of professional college counselors, getting advice on thriving in this business. This led me to invest my savings in UCLA's college counseling program. I went full time and completed with a 4.0 GPA.

My business is really taking off now after two years. I love that I apply things I learned when getting my MBA and during my business career to something I really want to do. I find that the parents of the students I work with take me more seriously because I'm about their age, and I understand the pressures they're working under in the corporate world. I've been there. My age also helps in that I understand that building a career requires a lot of networking, focus and clarity - all things I talk to the students about.

BRENDA SHAPIRO

Hometown: Miami

Old job: Stay-at-home mom, then director for the State of Florida American Jewish Committee

New job: Attorney

Age when made the change: 52

Time in new career: 22 years

I had always wanted to be a lawyer, but I married an attorney, and he told me that there was only room for one lawyer in the family. After 22 years, I got divorced from my first husband and thought that it was time to do what I really wanted to do. One day I saw a sign in front of a community college that said the LSAT (law school entrance exam) was being given that day, and I pulled in and took it on the spot. A couple years later at age 49, I started law school where I spent the last three years of my alimony before graduating in 1990.

Most of my fellow students were 23 years old, and a number of them had gone to high school with my sons. On the first day of class, several young men and women asked me if I was Danny's, Jonathan's or Adam's mother. Law school was an absolutely wonderful experience, and I made friends of the faculty and students - many of whom still refer clients to me.

After a couple of years of working for large firms where I trained, I went off on my own to be a family law practitioner. I realized I would never make partner in a large firm - they couldn't pay me what my age dictated I was worth because I didn't have a book of business to justify that salary. But doing my own thing was my goal.

Being older when I began my law career had many advantages. For one, my children were adults, and I was a single woman (I remarried 15 years ago). That made a huge difference. Young lawyers today have a terrible time multitasking and setting priorities, and firms don't help them in the process. Another plus came with people's erroneous assumptions about me. I've had white hair since I was 40, and when I was starting out, the judges were very kind to me. They assumed I was much more experienced than I really was, given my appearance.

On the negative side, some men coming to me for divorce counsel are reluctant to tell me all the facts. They feel like they're confessing to their grandma that they're screwing the neighbor.

I didn't envision becoming as successful as I have. I've argued before the Supreme Court. I

have no plans to retire and honestly believe that your career has no age limit.

JERRI CONRADO

Hometown: Austin, Texas

Old job: Owned a boutique marketing agency

New job: Sales manager at an extended-stay hotel

Age when made the change: 50

Time in new career: 1 year

I had owned a successful business for 20 years. My clients ranged from Citigroup to hair salons and everything in between. Then my children became teenagers, and I went through a divorce and saw changes in my industry that suggested that there would be less room for growth. And frankly, I was burnt out and wanted a change.

I decided that a career in the hotel industry would play on my love of entertaining and travel as well as my connections and my sales success. But no one would even talk to me since I didn't have any experience. No one was open to coaching me despite my strong background in sales and marketing. Finally, a friend's recommendation landed me an entry-level sales position at an area hotel.

I swallowed my pride for the long-term benefit. The salary didn't even pay my bills. Reporting to people who were younger than me but (only) had 20 years of experience was tough after being president of my own company and consulting with high-level executives for so many years. Sometimes, I would tell my boss, "I could do this better than you." That was not always received well.

But in that position, I exceeded everyone's expectations - including my own - and I quickly switched companies to be sales director at Staybridge Suites, an extended-stay property. Being older in a new career has given me the confidence to go out and get new business. I pulled on the network I'd built over the years and had a lot of resources to count on that would have not been possible 30 years ago.

Emma Johnson lives in New York City, where she writes about the intersect of money and life for <http://www.RetailMeNot.com> - the No. 1 online coupon site in the world.

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