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Late bloomers: 5 women who found success later in life

Mary Fineday • Jan 17, 2012



Though her best-selling *Joy of Cooking* sits on millions of kitchen counters today, Julia Child was late to the dinner party. In a field where young minds are often celebrated, Julia didn't begin collaborating on her first cookbook until she was in her 40s.



Elizabeth Venturini, a college career strategist, insists that late blooming careers like Julia Child's are often the norm among women in business. "Personally, I think all women are 'late blooming' as it takes a woman a couple of decades to develop professionally, personally and spiritually," she says.

Five late-blooming women who changed it all

It's never too late to change your life -- and the women on this list prove it. Learn more about some notable late bloomers and discover how you can follow in their footsteps.

Late bloomer: Laura Ingalls Wilder

Claim to fame: Pioneer woman turned "Little House on the Prairie" author, Laura published her first book at age 65.

Early years: Her life on the prairie -- growing up in a dugout house, a small town and Dakota Territory -- formed the material that would become her spellbinding books.

Why she bloomed: Though she intended her story of life on the prairie to be a personal history, many claim her daughter Rose helped her edit and shape the books into the bestsellers they would become.

Rose helped her mother find her voice; in the same way, mentors help any late bloomer find her way in the professional world. "Go to professional meetings, organizations, seminars or conferences and observe the number of attending women," Venturini advises. "Investigate how many women are in key leadership positions or are considered industry experts." From there, you can make professional contacts and perhaps even find a mentor to help guide your future.

Late bloomer: Grandma Moses

Claim to fame: American folk painter known for her vibrant rural landscape scenes.

Early years: Though she worked for most of her life in embroidery, Grandma Moses wouldn't create the paintings that would make her famous until she was 76 years old.

Why she bloomed: She turned to painting six or seven hours a day when arthritis put her embroidery career on hold. Her painting philosophy was very simple: "First the sky, then the mountains, then the hills, then the trees, then the houses, then the cattle and then the people," she said.

The inspiration for a change can come from many places, but the end goal is often the same. In her career counseling firm, Venturini focuses on the end result of a college education -- a job after graduation -- and late bloomers hold particular interest. "The career requirements women valued so much in their 20s and 30s change when they turn 40 years old," she says.

Late bloomer: Irene Pennington

Claim to fame: Oil baron widow turned multi-million-dollar investment genius.

Early years: Oversaw her brood of children and grandchildren, staying out of the family oil business until she took over Pennington Oil at 97 years old.

Why she bloomed: Upon discovering that her husband had most of their \$600 million assets in local checking accounts, Irene got to work, starting with firing half of the company's financial department. She turned her nose up at champagne on her 100th birthday, preferring milk.

While late bloomers like Irene Pennington had greatness thrust upon them, the rest of us have the opportunity to consider such a big change. "Carefully evaluate whether your current lifestyle can financially sustain a career change," Elizabeth says. "It might mean a less prestigious job title or a lower salary until you establish yourself as a proven professional."

Late bloomer: Melchora Aquino

Claim to fame: Known as the "Mother of the Philippine Revolution"

Early years: The daughter of a peasant couple, Melchora raised six children and sang in her local church before the Philippine Revolution of 1896.

Why she bloomed: When revolution broke out, 84-year-old Melchora threw her weight against the cause. Jailed, deported and exiled, she still said, "If I had nine lives, I would have gladly given them all up for my country."

Whether you're starting a revolution or revolutionizing your career future, it pays to make informed choices. Venturini notes that non-traditional students often don't think about the time it takes to learn the details behind any new job. "Build a network of contacts that can help [you] learn the ropes or land a new position," she advises.

Late bloomer: Marjory Stoneman Douglas

Claim to fame: A prolific writer throughout her life, Marjory found her fame as an environmentalist and activist.

Early years: Marjory earned an associate degree, wrote for a newspaper and wrote short stories, all staying close to home in Miami.

Why she bloomed: At 78, Marjory founded Friends of the Everglades as a way to protect the delicate Florida wetlands. "All we need, really, is a change from a near frigid to a tropical attitude of mind," she said.

Whether you're out to change your career or change the world, let the women who have come before you serve as your inspiration and guides. Perhaps the largest lesson to learn from the stories above is the fact that life -- arthritis and all -- is a work in progress, and you never know how you'll change over the course of it.

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