



Calling off careers in favor of `callings'

Women from 40 on bid farewell to `work' work

By T. Shawn Taylor
Tribune staff reporter

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A growing number of midcareer women--typically 40 to 55 years old--are chucking successful careers, including possible advancement, to pursue their passions.

They're starting new careers and businesses, becoming activists in their communities and returning to school to earn advanced degrees.

Some were waiting for their kids to be grown. Others were fed up with office politics or bumping up against the glass ceiling and decided to put their skills to work in more meaningful ways. "There's a tendency for women to take on a calling, rather than `work' work," says Amy Lynch, founder of Ourselves, an online newsletter for women in midlife.

While the women come from disparate income groups, they are dropping out of corporate America at the top of their game. The trend may make it even more difficult for women coming up, says Liz Ryan, president of WorldWIT, an online organization of professional women in technology and business. She said employers may begin to question the determination of women workers. "The status quo will remain the status quo as long as women are not there to change the paradigm," she said.

However, some women prolong stays in jobs they no longer want for fear of ruining it for other women following in their footsteps.

Joan Borysenko, 58, a psychologist, medical scientist, clinician and author, says she stayed in her job at Harvard Medical School because she felt "guilty" about the possible repercussions for other women if she left.

A near-fatal head-on collision changed all that. In her early 40s at the time, Borysenko decided to leave as director and co-founder of the mind-body clinical program with the medical school.

"That is when I turned in my resignation, lying in my hospital bed," said Borysenko, who later wrote "A Woman's Book of Life: The Biology, Psychology, and Spirituality of the Feminine Life Cycle," which includes a chapter called "If we all defect, then what?"

"I loved my job and was passionate about it, but I didn't like the hospital politics and the constraints. I said, 'I'm a free agent, and I'm going to take the risks and do what my heart calls me to do.'"

Borysenko divorced a couple years later after 25 years of marriage. She says that many of the women she talks to are making midlife career changes as their personal lives change.

"I think it has to do with the preparation the body is making for menopause. Women are much more comfortable in their own skin and saying what's true for them. They are much less in the people-pleasing mode," Borysenko said.

A hiking enthusiast, Borysenko bought a house on a mountaintop 20 miles outside Boulder, Colo., and keeps her summers free of work. "That was part of the plan. Creating a life by choice." For the last 15 years, Borysenko has conducted workshops around the country on wellness and women's spiritual issues.

"At about 42, women are looking back and looking forward, saying, 'Where have I been? Where am I going?' and make a choice for passion and meaning. Oftentimes, this is when women defect from corporations and academia," she said.

In a recent survey by the National Association for the Self-Employed, 85 percent of new women business owners surveyed between the ages of 45 and 54 said they left corporate jobs. Only 3 percent said they would go back if they had the chance.

And 44 percent of the women in the survey said they expected to make less than \$25,000 their first year in business; 28 percent estimated they would make between \$25,000 and \$50,000.

"They also anticipate staying in business ... with the potential to make it big," said Maureen Petron, public affairs manager for the association in Washington.

Some women opting out of corporate America do so because they have achieved financial stability.

"The trend is happening among people who can afford it," said Sherry Saunders, spokeswoman for Business and Professional Women USA, an advocacy group. "It shows they've already become incredibly successful so that they can walk away from something and say, 'I'm going to do X.' If you have a lot of bills, you can't do that."

Using a decade of experience

Sharon Jones and Jane Pigott are among those who could, and did.

The women, who share a commitment to diversity in corporations, met when Jones was an in-house lawyer for Abbott Laboratories and Pigott was a partner at Winston & Strawn, one of Chicago's largest law firms.

"Sharon was my client and had been for a decade," Pigott, 46, said. "She is one of the most strategic people I ever worked with. In litigation, when you have a strategic inside counsel, you can just rock."

Jones, 48, a former assistant U.S. attorney, said she frequently was the first black, first woman, or first black woman on the job. Pigott, too, had many firsts, including first female equity partner and first female department head at Winston & Strawn.

"I had to face those issues my whole life," said Jones, who graduated from Harvard College in 1977 and went to work for Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati, where she got involved in the consumer products company's first diversity program. She went back for her law degree at Harvard, graduating in 1982.

"Jane and I were both active and involved in [diversity] everywhere we worked in varying degrees, depending on the job. Mentoring people, trying to set up programs. So we shared that passion all along," Jones said.

Jones, who also has worked at law firms in Chicago and Los Angeles, filed an amicus brief in favor of the University of Michigan's admissions policies on behalf of the Black Women Lawyers of Chicago.

Pigott started Winston & Strawn's first diversity initiative in her spare time.

"That gave me great satisfaction," Pigott said, "but it wasn't very important [to the firm] when it came to compensation. It's very heavy to be a change agent. Heavy in that it's not part of your job description. It's not part of how people are valuing you professionally."

After Jones left Abbott in March 2001 to become in-house counsel at SBC in Illinois, she and Pigott remained friends. About two years ago, both began to think about how to spend the second half of their careers. At that point Jones said it was clear she wouldn't advance any further, and not because she didn't want to.

"There were barriers to my accomplishing other things, namely the glass ceiling issue," Jones said, adding she got tired of seeing men with less experience move past her. "I was senior counsel, which was pretty high in the corporation, but I wasn't general counsel. That is the highest."

"Although I had been really good at practicing law and litigating, I did not embrace the thought of spending another 20 years doing it. I felt it would be more of the same," Jones said.

More time after kids grew up

For Pigott, when the youngest of her seven children left for college in 2002, she felt she, too, could move. In March, the two women formed Fuse3 Group, a consulting firm that helps corporations increase retention and promotion of women and minorities in leadership roles.

"I'm having so much fun," said Pigott, adding that after her children left, she felt she got back hours in the day she forgot existed--hours that now go into the business.

Some women are embracing larger roles in their workplaces as they get older. The paths to such roles can take some interesting twists.

Take Carolyn Oehler, 62, president of the Scarritt-Bennett Center, part of the United Methodist Church. She was hired to be director but quickly ascended to president and runs the center's diversity, anti-racism and women's empowerment programs, oversees the center's conference business, books seminars and retreats, and is involved in fundraising.

Only 10 years earlier she was dropping out. She left her position as ministries director for the United Methodist Church's Northern Illinois

Conference in Chicago to pursue a doctorate in theological studies. "I left with no clear idea of where I was going next," Oehler said.

Oehler said it wasn't so much the job that made her leave, although she acknowledges that the work setting was "very political" and stressful. "It was me. I reached a point where I wanted to do something different. I wanted to learn different things. I'd been giving out for 15 years. I was ready to take in. I just felt as though I'd given what I could."

Initially she was reluctant to go back to working for the church, but that feeling has dissolved. "I feel like one of the world's most fortunate women. When I was ready for this kind of job, it was ready for me."

If anything, women taking on second careers and working later into life is gaining momentum as men are moving in the opposite direction. The Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that labor force participation rates for women 45 to 64 will continue to rise through 2025, while rates for men are expected to shrink.

Jean Gatewood knew three decades ago that she wanted to become a minister. But the Church of God in Christ, which she joined with her former husband, didn't allow women ministers.

"I knew what God said to me, but I couldn't speak it. They said I would be blaspheming," said Gatewood, 65, of St. Louis.

So the daughter of a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church rejoined the AME church in 1986 after it became more open to women becoming ministers.

Gatewood was ordained a local minister in 1996, two years after she retired as an assembler at General Motors.

Now an associate pastor at St. Paul AME Church in St. Louis, she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in theology.

"When I finish, I'll probably be 69 years old," said Gatewood, who hopes to be ministering to people well into her 70s and 80s. Her husband, Oscar, recently retired from General Motors.

It isn't about the money; the church can't afford to pay her.

"It's a career, baby," Gatewood explained. "I'm doing the work of the Lord, and it's work."

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