

Switching Careers / Switching Gears



It sounds so easy. Do what you want. The money will follow. Stop doing what you hate. Start, now, this second, to change your life. And voila, it will be done.

Real life is more complex. Real life stories show this is a process. Women do change their lives. They change their careers; they move to different parts of the country. They make their lives more their own. And those I spoke with agree it is of enormous personal value and satisfaction.

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I had a career in New York City. I was a vice-president of two very large advertising agencies (once in media and once in account work). I now write and take photographs. I live more hand-to-mouth financially than I did in New York, and there are times I don't know how I'm going to make it.

I tried to change in New York. I tried to re-define my role in advertising. I tried to go to work for more creative companies. When I submitted my resignation, my boss looked at me in horror and said "You're quitting? Without another job?"

No one, and I mean no one, heard what I wanted, what I was saying. "This isn't enough. I am not being fed."

I could not change my life without quitting, without leaving New York. I ended up in Santa Fe, not knowing a soul.

For Joanne Hoover, a Corrales woman in the middle of yet another change, these transitions are part of an on-going process. "One thing leads to another."

She has found that every move builds on what has gone before. She traveled the world with her Navy captain husband, raised two children, and worked as she could.

Music is an integral part of her life. She taught while overseas and wrote criticism, but didn't have a "career." When they got back to Washington, DC she took her future into her own hands. She said to her husband: "I'm putting you on notice, this is my time coming up. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm not going to teach."

She called strangers and had to marshal her energy to keep making the calls. She started by managing a musical group in Arlington, VA, which led to covering the arts scene in Maryland for the Washington Post, which led to becoming a music critic for them, which led to radio and TV writing. "I made this happen. It was very difficult."

After a couple of years, this wasn't enough. She was restless. By outside measures she had it all—she knew she didn't. She found out about a music school, in a church basement, that was looking to grow. They had 200 students, a budget of \$100,000 and she would be the only full time paid employee. She took the job.

"Everyone thought I was crazy. A school in a basement. There was nothing aesthetic ... but the energy ..."

After six years, the school had 2,000 students and a budget of \$2 million and was housed in a 20,000 square foot, four story building. "It was a big change. In every possible way ... It was a real turn around. Because I'd been moving around and always changing, it was immensely satisfying to do something and see it through, over time. It pulled together all the pieces of my life."

She finds herself in New Mexico now, and facing change, again. "Whatever I do, it will be different ... maybe play ragtime in a bar, be a docent at the Maxwell. ... I'm getting restless, again."

Renie Garcia y Griego, staff development specialist at the Commission on the Status of Women in Albuquerque, moved from "just jobs" to a full-blown, nationally recognized career. Her path was neither straight nor easy.

She was raised by her grandmother, who "had limited literacy, a third grade education, who walked to the elementary school and worked as a dishwasher. All of us cleaned houses for rich people on Saturday."

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She remembers her grandmother saying "Don't ever depend on anyone to take care of you. Get yourself an education so you don't have to do this all your life."

When she followed this advice, as a single parent in her thirties, friends and family then said she "was too old and too stupid."

After her first semester at school, she was raped and beaten, and left for dead. It was a turning point. "I lost my job because of the attack, I went on AFDC, the public assistance program for women ... food stamps. I wanted to become an advocate for other women."

Some "friends" told her she was asking for it ... That it was punishment. If you had been married ...

She could have just quit then. "Some people still say I use the rape as a crutch. I see it as taking something so negative and making it positive. I see myself as strong, dedicated, and sincere ... it lead to being stronger, more determined. ... I'm real focused now ... I became a success on my own terms."

During this terrible time, her caseworker as well as people she had met at college rallied to her side and encouraged her to not give up and to continue her education. Later, her sister became supportive, too. She believes she was given a second chance.



Griego believes we all have choices. "Sometimes, they are limited, hard, difficult. But we have choices."

Griego has really accomplished a lot. She has received the Martin Luther King "Keep the Dream Alive" award and has recently been elected as regional liaison for a national displaced homemakers network, Women Work! the National Network for Women's Employment.

Griego says, "I wouldn't change a thing. Because I like where I am, who I am."

This lack of support stuff is difficult. My friends called me crazy. My colleagues didn't support me. It's hard to do this alone. My father continues to be unsupportive, even when asked directly. I had my first book published and I asked him, at least four times, to call me and tell me how great that was. I told him he didn't have to read the book, like it, or even look at it. I just wanted him to call me up and leave me a message that he was, somehow, proud of me. It's been six months. He hasn't made that call.

This is an ongoing life process, these changes.

Merrillee Dolan, technical writer, said she, also, got little support from friends and family and her experience with her first "career" was difficult. She worked for an agency that dealt with equal opportunity and tried to change things within her agency. It was a "real negative environment. I couldn't turn it around. I quit. Not knowing what to do next."

For Dolan, believing in visualization and techniques like those of Jose Silva have been a significant help. She believes she has drawn things to her when deeply needed. "I went to find out about food stamps. Saw all these women, and said to myself 'If I had the money, I'd set up a center to help these women.' And the next day I saw an ad in the paper for a job like that. I got it and ended up with a nine month contract."

After a time, Dolan went back to EEO work. But, it didn't last. She'd already moved past that, she had to keep moving forward. She left, went to school for journalism and writing and now writes environmental and safety manuals.

I, also, believe you reach a point where you can't go back. I call it, for me, being "unsuitable." I don't believe I could re-enter a corporate world where I had to wear suits all day every day on an endless treadmill.

So, listening to your body, as Hoover does when she gets restless—or listening to your dreams, the way Dolan did—or listening to your own small voice, as I try to do, becomes essential.

This is an on-going, life process, these changes. It's not a straight nor easy path. It is, however, extremely fulfilling. No two paths are the same.

And a final thought from Merrillee Dolan. "Sometimes there's magic."

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