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From Corporate America to Public Service

How three people reinvented their careers to match their interests and the changing economy

By Janet Reese

“You know it’s time to think about changing careers when life starts feeling like a pair of shoes that is getting too small,” says career counselor Lynette Reiling.

“At first, there is just some discomfort,” she says. “Over time, the shoes feel tighter and tighter. Some folks can live with the squeeze for life. Others will no longer tolerate it -- the squeeze makes them unhappy. If unhappy days outnumber the happy ones, it’s time to look at where you are in relationship to where you dream about being.”

Today, perhaps more than ever before, people are feeling the career squeeze. Layoffs, job dissatisfaction, or a passion to do something more meaningful have motivated many midlife workers to shift careers.

Many career changers are pleased with their new choices, but others may discover the new career is not a good fit. Most important, whatever the outcome, career changers take action to improve their lives and gain valuable new insights about themselves.

Here are the stories of three career changers: Steve Leddick, Dennis King, and Mary Jo Dreher. Steve and Mary Jo are satisfied with their new career choices. But Dennis’s career change didn’t work out as he expected.

Steve Leddick – finance to nursing

Steve Leddick, 44, left his manager job voluntarily to answer a calling that had been growing for more than a decade. May 2004, Steve ended his 20-year finance career with a major beverage company and started nursing school at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center. He yearned for a job where he could serve and comfort people daily and satisfy his life-long interest in health, fitness, and medicine. He decided that nursing would be a practical way to fulfill his calling.

Before making the decision, Steve volunteered at Denver Health to test the medical field. “It felt right,” he says. “The work gave me a chance to see and immerse myself around people in medical need.” To qualify for nursing school, Steve spent a year taking prerequisite classes at the Community College of Denver night school.

Steve felt he was able to make this change because his financial and time commitments to his family had decreased. His older sons Aaron, 22, and Justin, 24, are both out of college; his youngest son Ben, 18, just graduated from high school. Steve, his wife Sharon, and Ben moved from the suburbs to central Denver to live closer to University Hospital and inner-city outreach programs that the couple wanted to serve.

“So far, I sense that I made the right decision,” says Steve. “My family support has been beyond compare. The biggest challenge is dealing with human suffering. While moments in training seem difficult, the whole package is a joy.

“Being around other students much younger than myself, I’m a little self-conscious about my age. But most of the time, they make me feel more like 30.”

When he graduates with a bachelor’s degree in nursing in May 2006, Steve says he would like to work in a specialty area, either emergency medicine or head and spinal cord injuries.

Dennis King – sales to law enforcement

Following a layoff over a year ago with a national home and personal products company, Dennis King, 52, decided to become a police officer for the town of Parker. His daughter Chaney who was an Air Force Academy cadet, inspired him to public service.

“Chaney was willing to serve the country,” Dennis says. “If she could do that, I could serve the public as a police officer. And I was a campus patrol in college years ago, so I was somewhat familiar with law enforcement.”

Dennis, the oldest Police Corps candidate nationwide, completed a 23-week training program at the Colorado State Patrol Academy at Camp George West Colorado in Golden. He then went to the Parker Police Department for another 16-week training program. During that time, Dennis decided he didn’t want to continue with Parker and resigned.

“My career change came with sacrifices that were too great,” he says. “A 40 percent cut in my previous sales salary, a 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift that was physically demanding, and interacting with criminals contributed to my resignation.”

Now Dennis plans to pursue a job in corporate sales or another aspect of law enforcement and serve as a volunteer reserve patrol officer. “I can still give back to the community as a reserve and better support my family,” he says.

Mary Jo Dreher – management to ministry

Mary Jo Dreher, 47, is turning her interest in peace and justice and spiritual studies into a new vocation as either a New Thought minister or a teacher/trainer/consultant in maximizing human potential.

She worked for 12 years as manager of affiliate relations for the Western region of a large communications company. When the company was sold and the regional office closed, she had the opportunity to interview for jobs in Los Angeles, but she chose not to apply.

“I sold my house, received my severance papers and got engaged to be married all within 10 days in June 2000,” says Mary Jo. “It was easy for me to make the transition because I was beginning a whole new life for myself and it seemed very right by the way things were unfolding.”

Mary Jo decided to enter a four-year, full-time master’s program in consciousness studies at the Holmes Institute based at Mile Hi Church of Religious Science in Lakewood where she previously completed training in spiritual counseling. She will graduate in May 2006.

“I knew that my passion was to teach or train in the human potential or peace and justice arena. It showed up in my previous career, just not formally,” she says. “This career change represents a more pure offering of my strengths, assets, skills, abilities, and passions than my previous career. This new career is a byproduct of the questions I asked myself when given the opportunity to reinvent myself: What really matters to you? What can you do to leave this world better off than when you found it?”

“My husband and family are in full support of my career change. I’m not sure I ever thought I would not work for a while. It’s been almost five years now. The biggest challenge is coming to terms with not yet having a role or job attached to myself, and not earning a paycheck.”

Finding the Right Fit -- Tips for Changing Careers

Lynette Reiling, career counselor: If you know a change is necessary, but don’t have any clue what that should be, think back to your childhood. There are often major clues there about our passions and our life’s purpose – games you loved, the kind of books you read, the thing you could do better than anyone else, your favorite way to spend time. Then transform those clues into an adult form.

Give yourself time to explore and do lots of research, first about yourself, then about industries and jobs that may interest you. Take time to identify your values, skills, talents and interests. What are you angry or excited about? Both have tremendous motivating energy. Think of the kinds of people you like being around, and the environment that best suits and supports you.

I work with people to create a vision and mission statement first. When you have a clear picture about those things, you can find an existing organization that matches you, or create your own customized business.

Steve Leddick: Don't ever believe that you are too old to follow a dream job. We live in a wonderful time that recognizes the benefits of people pursuing things of passion. Search your heart for ways to serve and care for the under-served. I believe that this leads to joys of life that are not of costly material goods. To me this last thought could help to keep you from being tied to debt that could add difficulties in making a career decision. Simplify.

Dennis King: Be prepared for sacrifice. Career changes are tough. If your career field has disappeared or has shrunk, be prepared to start over again in a new one. Do not have any debt; get your financial house in order while you still have a job. The average job lasts two to three years now according to Right Management Consultants, an outplacement agency. Always be looking for your next job.

Mary Jo Dreher: You have likely been using your talents, skills, abilities and gifts already in your life. And to change a career doesn't mean you have to give up anything you've done before. I don't think life is going to guide you to be an actor if you love to work with numbers. It's a natural process to identify what you love to do. It's important to envision or daydream about your perfect work life. You can have what you really want.

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