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Late shift

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Career reinvention just might be the new retirement.

“The number of older Americans seeking new careers is soaring,” says Bruce Frankel, a veteran journalist with a new book on the subject.

If recession-hit 401Ks are one reason, another is a growing view of our later years as an opportunity to do something meaningful rather than hit the golf course.

“People’s view of retirement has changed radically,” he says. “It’s gone from being free of work to being freed to work with passion.”

This week we look at three New Yorkers who prove it’s never too late to land your dream job.

After varied ventures, the sweet life

The path to Rhonda Kave’s new career started on a particularly sweet note — namely, with a buttercrunch the then-homemaker began making as a holiday gift over 20 years ago. Friends flipped over the treats, and soon she was expanding her repertoire to truffles and getting requests to launch her goodies professionally.

“It just was never the right time,” explains the lifelong foodie, now 57.

While she continued churning out chocolates each winter, Kave spent the next couple decades in disparate professions. First, she ran a Long Island beauty supply store for eight years. Then, after moving to Manhattan, she worked for a group fighting domestic violence while studying sociology to advance her nonprofit career.

But even as she neared a degree, Kave felt increasingly tempted to finally make her chocolate dreams into a reality. Toward the end of her studies, the “stars started to align.” Her grown children moved out and she separated from her husband, freeing up her time. And while researching greenmarkets for a school project, she happened on the perfect venue: the city-run Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side, which provides spaces for startups.

“It was just perfect,” she says. “I said, if I don’t do this now, when will I do it?”

Kave threw herself into developing a business plan, testing new recipes and honing her skills. In October 2007, she opened Roni-Sue’s Chocolates, quickly drawing notice for her unique confections (which include “Pig Candy,” a chocolate-covered bacon treat).

Today, having taken on an assistant and moved into a bigger space at the market, Kave sells some 30 signature chocolates in Dean & DeLuca stores and on a number of Web sites. And she says she’s only getting started.

“I’ve never been happier,” she says. Which is not to say she regrets her earlier careers, which she sees less as missteps than stepping stones.

“I couldn’t have gotten to where I am now without all of my past experiences,” she says.

And while there have been road bumps along the way — sleepless nights spent filling orders in her Upper East Side apartment, slow days at the market and “billions of moments of self-doubt” — her age was never one of them.

“If anything,” she laughs, “it gave me credibility.”

Actor’s new role: cancer counselor

From the way Kathy Gurland bounces around her DUMBO office, greeting patients with warm hugs, it’s clear the 57-year-old loves working as a “cancer navigation consultant.”

Not so obvious? The fact that a series of family tragedies led her to what she calls her “dream job.”

So did a series of careers. Gurland, who moved to Manhattan after high school to pursue a stage career, spent 15 years performing and teaching musical theater before her father’s untimely death served as a wake-up call.

“I realized I wanted to do something profound and meaningful with my life,” she says. “And I knew I needed a college degree to do that.”

Thus, at age 33, Gurland began attending NYU part-time while volunteering with various social-service organizations. When she graduated seven years later, she launched her second career in earnest, working for alternative-to-incarceration and vocational rehab programs.

While the work confirmed her desire to help others, she wasn’t entirely fulfilled, and she began contemplating her next move. Then her older sister Judy died from cancer.

“Her death provoked me to go, ‘OK, let’s take this to the next level,’” says the energetic Brooklynite. “I thought, ‘Do you really want to make a difference on this planet?’”

So at 46, she returned to school for a master’s in social work, studying end-of-life care and clinical therapy. That led to concurrent jobs running a private therapy practice and serving as a social worker in a Manhattan hospice.

Then Gurland’s world was turned upside down again, this time by her younger sister Peggy’s diagnosis with stage-four lung cancer.

This time around, Gurland found herself uniquely equipped to help. With an insider’s knowledge of the health-care system and training in end-of-life care, she was able to serve as her sister’s advocate, acting as a liaison between Peggy and her doctors, helping coordinate a plan of treatment and translating medical jargon. And though Gurland ultimately lost her sister after an 18-month struggle, she had an epiphany: “What I did for my little sister is greatly needed.”

From that realization, a new career was born, running PEG'S Group (Personalized Education, Guidance and Support), a private practice serving people affected by cancer.

Since she started two years ago, Gurland has served dozens of individuals and families, offering assistance that ranges from educating them about their rights and researching treatment options to assisting with details like transportation to simply providing therapy at each stage of the journey. Gurland sees the group not only as a tribute to her sisters, but also “a culmination of all my life experience and skills.”

The challenges are many, especially when it comes to marketing a business that's a pioneer in its services, and inherently depressing in its subject matter. But two years in, Gurland wouldn't trade her new job for anything — not even more time at the Puerto Rican home she owns with her retired husband.

“Each time I finish up work with a client, it's like I've been on vacation for a week,” she says, smiling broadly. “Being able to help others is like no other feeling in the world.”

From professor to publisher

As a literary-minded young man growing up in Minnesota, Eric Larsen envisioned he'd spend his later years “like William Butler Yeats — going around with people waiting to hear my readings.”

Instead, the 68-year-old has devoted himself to a different kind of literary pursuit: running Oliver Arts & Open Press, an upstart publisher of alternative fiction, nonfiction and poetry.

The undertaking comes on the heels of a 35-year career at John Jay College, where Larsen taught English. During that time he periodically toyed with the idea of publishing — at one point, he and a colleague even contemplated buying a poetry journal. But busy with his teaching job, raising his two daughters with wife Anne and his own writing career — his five books include the award-winning novel “An American Memory” — Larsen's plate was full.

When he retired in 2006, Larsen planned to devote himself to writing full-time. But when he tried to find a publisher for a follow-up to his 2006 book “A Nation Gone Blind,” which examines the decline of American culture and politics, he found they shied away from the controversial subject matter. So he took matters into his own hands.

“Publishing today is not doing the job or telling the truth,” he says. “Books aren't being produced about the crucially important political topics that face the nation.”

So in 2008, Larsen set about laying the groundwork for his press, playfully named after Oliver, a decorative pig sculpture in his Upper West Side home office. With the goal of publishing writers whose views the mainstream media didn't embrace, he researched print-on-demand sources, hired an acquaintance to do design work and invited like-minded authors, many of whom he met online, to submit manuscripts.

The long days started to pay off last fall, with Oliver's first official publications: “Topiary,” a dystopian novel by A. Stephen Engel, then two nonfiction books by political activist

Tim Gatto. The books represent a true collaboration between author and publisher, says Larsen, who asks authors to cover upfront production costs, then assists with editing, layout, design and distribution.

As Oliver's sole employee, Larsen single-handedly reads and edits every manuscript and helps develop the work into a final product, all while attempting to spread the word through e-mail blasts and other grassroots marketing efforts.

Returns are technically split 50/50 with the author, though Larsen acknowledges that sales, which so far are exclusively Web-based, have yet to amount to more than "a tiny trickle." Moving forward, he hopes to get his books into local bookshops, and remains hopeful that if he keeps "putting out really good books, someone will notice eventually."

In the meantime, he's occupied not only with Oliver's upcoming releases, which include a pair of poetry books, but also with writing his own series of books demystifying the classics. Based on lectures he delivered at John Jay — whose students, he notes, weren't disposed toward reading Homer — the series began last fall with "Homer for Real: A Reading of The Iliad."

Though Larsen acknowledges that he's never been busier, even as he approaches 70, he seems unfazed by his hefty workload. According to him, he doesn't necessarily have a choice.

"As a literary person in the US today, the most important thing I can do is publish the best books no matter what," he says matter-of-factly. "Now that I know how to do it, I don't know if I could justify not doing it."