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What retirement? Baby Boomers follow their passions to entrepreneurship

—Kenya McCullum

In September 2004, Baby Boomer Debra Christoffers had just ended her job as the vice president of worldwide sales at a human resources software company. She was in the process of looking for a new direction for her career to take, but as John Lennon once sang, “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

And while Christoffers was busy job hunting, it was her body that had made other plans. On December 24 of that year, Christoffers was diagnosed with breast cancer. And as if that wasn’t traumatic enough, she learned that her mother also had cancer that very same day. But what many may have seen as a cruel Christmas gift from fate, Christoffers used the experience to develop a new lease on life — and a new relationship to her work.

When chemotherapy was all said and done, she decided it was time for a fresh start and a fresh business venture to go with it. “I decided, ‘Okay, I’m good, I’m well, let’s go into my own business,’” says Christoffers.

The choice to start her own business is not surprising. For nearly three decades, she worked for start up companies in the high-tech industry and was accustomed to helping businesses build a strong client base and identity. She spent her career on the cutting edge of technology — and even worked for a company that sold the very first fax machines — so she knew exactly what it takes to get a business off the ground.

After much research and consideration, in May of this year Christoffers opened a franchise of Outdoor Lighting Perspective, which provides high-end architectural lighting for front and back yards, pools and decks. With this company, Christoffers has found work that she truly loves, and suggests any Baby Boomer considering opening a business to do the same.

“Find something that you can be passionate about. I looked at many different things, and even though there were several that looked like perhaps there was a better return on investment, I couldn’t see myself there. I could see myself being very proud to light up your backyard. It’s something that you have to think about and say, ‘I can see myself there,’” says the 66 year old. “I think it’s all about lifestyle. I can’t imagine sitting around and playing shuffleboard, I have way too much energy for that. I think that doing things that you can be passionate about is what keeps you young.”

Christoffers isn't the only Baby Boomer redefining retirement and finding work to be a fountain of youth. According to Intuit Inc.'s "Future of Small Business Report," Americans ages 55 to 64 begin small businesses 28 percent more than the average adult — a statistic that is changing what both work and retirement mean.

"Baby Boomers don't really think of themselves as getting old. They think of this as a second coming — or a third coming — depending on their history and their background," says Kira Wampler, marketing leader of Intuit's Web site for entrepreneurs, JumpUp.com. "They went through one big generational shift in the sixties where they were free and liberated. Then they got into the eighties where they were making a ton of money and it was a little bit more about accumulation of wealth, and when they move into the third coming, what we see a lot of are people pursuing either personal passion or pursuing things to help the social good — so activities or work where they're really about giving back to their communities. There's the behavioral aspect of, 'I'm not getting old, I'm not retiring, I'm just doing the next thing.'"

Sometimes doing the next thing comes in the form of taking a hobby that you love and making it into a steady stream of income to supplement retirement benefits. This is what Bay Area artist Lori Roby decided to do after retiring as a litigation specialist for an insurance company.

For six years prior to retirement, after a long, hard day of work, Roby would take art classes twice a week in order to relax and nurture her creative side. When she retired, it became a natural transition for her to dedicate more time to her craft — while sharing her work with the community and making some money for her efforts.

Although the sixty-year-old artist works about as much now as she did during her career — she enjoys several hobbies and volunteer activities in addition to her artwork — she says you're really never too old to stay active and, as Joseph Campbell suggested, to follow your bliss.

"You're never too old and that is what's wonderful about it, because I don't see reaching an age where I can't do it anymore," says Roby. "It's something that evolves as you grow older and you do bring your experiences of your life to it — whether it's music, art, a craft of any kind, or writing. I think that's exactly the time that you should be tapping into your life experiences and your maturity."

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