

EMPLOYMENT

TRADING PLACES

As an increasing number of people remain in the workforce beyond the traditional retirement age, many are also embarking on a late-life career change

WORDS SARAH HENDER



Bill Botten, 60, was a lawyer for most of his adult life but, six years ago, gave away law to concentrate on becoming a full time artist.

Jacqui Lim spent 30 years enjoying a successful career in the corporate world. But now, aged 53, she's ditched her former life and is entrenched in the food and music industries.

And one-time Olympic basketballer Pat Mickan, also a former teacher and journalist, was 60 when she decided to start her own health food shop.

The trio are part of a growing cohort of older Australians deciding to forgo job security in favour of greater job satisfaction and embarking on a career change towards the end of their working lives.

Mark McCrindle, founder and principal of social research firm McCrindle Research, says that as people age, job tenure becomes less important in terms of saving

for a deposit or supporting a family. And living longer and healthier lives means more people are choosing to stay in the workforce once they have reached retirement age, but are looking for vocations that suit their age and interests.

According to a 2017 report produced by global research company Indeed Hiring Lab, the percentage of people aged 55-64 who remain in the workforce has risen from 47 per cent to 67 per cent. The upward trend is more stark for those at the retirement age of 65, where the number of people working has doubled.

Today's gig economy, McCrindle says, driven by short-term and freelance work rather than permanent jobs, has enabled the trend, with more companies offering casual, adaptable roles suiting the older worker such as Uber, Airtasker and Airbnb.

"Older workers are looking to move out of the more demanding roles in terms of

the responsibility they require to roles where they can make a contribution on their own terms so they can pick up other important aspects of their lives," he says.

Other popular career choices for the older worker include starting a business or becoming a 'hobbypreneur', turning a creative pursuit into an income-producer while gaining more job satisfaction.

But the move to change careers is not without risk. Samantha Young, psychologist and managing director of Human Psychology in Kent Town, works with people in resetting their career goals.

"Chasing our dream job can result in a boost to wellbeing and give us a sense of meaning and purpose," says Young. "But it can also have a disastrous impact if not well considered, planned and executed.

"If the new career choice fails to meet expectations of enjoyment or income, it can make people feel like they are failing or even to label themselves as a failure."

Young says it can take time and persistence to realise a new career goal and the motivation needs to come from a sense of vocation. The common thread for successful change is adequate resourcing, family support and realistic expectations.

Taking a leap of faith into a new career later in life is brave. Not everyone can do it. A degree of financial independence will offer a safety net. But, McCrindle says, people who want to do it need to be resilient, adaptable and have a keen desire to step out of their comfort zone.

Lim, of Vale Park, is 53 but she says she feels like she's 35. During her corporate years, she clawed back time from her day job to pursue her passions of food and music. She is a talented cook and has also been singing professionally since she was 25, performing gigs after work.

When she graduated in her 20s with a degree in commerce, majoring in account-



Lawyer turned artist Bill Botten at his Adelaide studio and, above, Jacqui Lim at Soi 38. Pictures: Tom Huntley, Mark Brake

ing, she soon realised she hated working with numbers although her first job was in finance. She gravitated to more creative roles in marketing and customer service but eventually took leave to pursue her interest in food, studying for a Master of Arts in gastronomy, in Adelaide, temporarily leaving behind her job and husband back in Hobart. It was a turning point.

“It showed me that when you study something you love, it’s a whole different thing,” says Lim. “I was that mature-age student with her hand up all the time, pick me, pick me.”

She returned to Hobart and was later offered a redundancy from her job around the same time she and her husband parted ways. Lim moved to Adelaide where she planned to start a new career in food.

But with no industry experience, she didn’t land a job working in the food industry and returned to corporate life, this time with the Australian Rail Track Cor-

poration. As her new role involved Australia-wide travel, Lim simultaneously embarked on a quest that no-one else had yet undertaken – to dine at every one of the top 100 restaurants across the country. It took her 10 years but would form the basis of her blog, Jacqui’s Food Fetish, and as a result Lim gained a long list of Instagram followers and a whole heap of credibility in the food industry.

In the meantime, she was performing after work as both a solo artist and the other half of the musical duo, the Sonic Divas, with singing partner, Katrina Caton.

She eventually took the plunge and left work in December 2019. Her new life is still a work in progress but Lim hasn’t looked back. She created and performed her first live cabaret show, Women with Big Hits, for the Adelaide Fringe in March.

The time away from work has also allowed Lim to be more involved in the restaurant Soi 38 she and her partner co-own,



“

I was that mature-age student with her hand up all the time ... pick me, pick me

helping to set up its new premises in Adelaide’s CBD. Earlier this year she was nominated as a judge for a national food awards event, Eat Easy – an acknowledgment of the credibility she has established within the food industry. In May, she organised a Tasting Australia event Taste of the Vale which involved three McLaren Vale chefs producing a six-course degustation menu for 100 guests.

When her mother sometimes asks Lim if she regrets giving up her day job, she reminds her that she is living her dream. But there are challenges.

“Work used to be a big part of my identity. Initially, when someone would ask me what I do I would always start by referring to my past corporate life,” says Lim.

Forming a new identity without reference to the past was difficult. She knew her work was done when, in filling out a form declaring her current occupation, she wrote, ‘musician’. Lim looked at it and thought to herself, “Oh wow, that’s cool.”

Adelaide artist and former lawyer, Bill Botten, 60, knows how it feels to struggle with reinventing yourself. A successful litigator for 26 years, he had been a part-time contemporary abstract painter for 14 of those years.

In 2015, with a number of successful exhibitions under his belt, Botten, then 54, decided to give up the law and embrace the life of an artist full-time. The transition proved to be way harder than he had ever contemplated.

“It wasn’t like I had a romantic vision of what my life would be like as an artist. I had done some thinking about it. I had thought to myself ‘you’ve got curiosity, plenty of friends and plenty of things to do, this is all going to be great’,” says Botten. But it wasn’t great.

He hadn’t realised how much of his identity was wrapped up in his idea of what makes a successful person. Despite achieving recognition as an artist it wasn’t enough for Botten to overcome his internal battle.

“The voices in my head would be saying that’s not a real job,” says Botten. “They were nasty voices. I never knew I had this going on until I changed my life.”

The lack of structure in his day was less of a liberation for Botten than a reason for him to just place extra pressure on himself. While working in the law, his painting had been done after work, in the evenings or on holidays but now the day was stretched out before him, Botten found he couldn’t paint for that many hours.

“I’d fiddle around and then whip myself in the morning because I wasn’t painting. I felt like I was wasting days. And then it became isolating.”

Botten began drinking too much and his internal turmoil culminated with severe depression which required medical treatment, but lasted four years. Botten didn’t want to return to law but he wrestled with how to structure his new life so that it worked for him.

With family and professional support, the past couple of years have seen him come out the other side. He has also created the structure in his day which he so badly needed when he first left his profession. He volunteers for several charities that help refugees and abused children, regularly practises yoga, works out in the park with his dog, catches up with friends and family and paints when he wants to paint. Writing a daily list is helpful to tick off tasks but he makes sure it’s short enough to achieve. He knows what helps now. And his love of painting is back.

And he is not as hard on himself as he >

EMPLOYMENT



Pat Mickan, former Olympic basketballer, PE teacher, journalist, first female AFL coach and health food business owner at her Gulfview Heights home. Picture: Tom Huntley

once was. “Those voices have subsided. Every now and then they can drift back in but I seem to be able to diffuse them now,” he says. “When I am painting, I love it. Not every moment, of course ... there are frustrations but it is so nice being in the moment and not thinking about anything else. “And then you have these moments where it’s not even a conscious thing, it’s beautiful. You can just watch the brush doing its thing. That is the absolute peak.”

On the other hand, the frustration can be overwhelming.

“They used to laugh at me at the art shop when I would come in to buy yet another easel. I’d just thrown one more off the balcony,” says Botten. “They were the darker moments. Fortunately, I don’t do that anymore.”

Pat Mickan, 64 of Gulfview Heights, is a former Olympic basketballer, whose career path has taken her from high school PE teacher to journalist, to coaching an elite netball team to being the first female coach in the AFL system.

But one of Mickan’s biggest learning curves was when she decided at age 60 to start her own business running a health food shop in her old hometown of Renmark. She had a strong interest in natural health as a sportswoman, so the opportunity had a nice synergy. It meant sacrifices such as a move to the Riverland and spending more time away from her husband who was based in Adelaide but they agreed to try to make it work.

“The learning curve wasn’t a curve at all, it was more like a straight up perpendicular line,” Mickan says.

Jumping through the legal and financial hurdles to establish the business was more challenging than she had expected but the biggest trial was the seven-days-a-week nature of the job. Mickan ran the business until the lease renewal was up three years later and in 2019, she sold and came home, exhausted.

It took her almost a year later to venture back into work again. She has now taken on a role as a presenter with Invigor Well-

“**The learning curve wasn’t a curve at all, it was more like a straight up perpendicular line**”

being, an organisation that leads programs on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

As an ex-Olympian, Mickan is in demand as a public speaker, always touching on the importance of good mental health, something that failed her for a time following her retirement from her second and last Olympics. In her new role, Mickan is pleased that mental health is finally being treated as a priority in the workforce.

“I’m not a lone voice anymore. It’s such an enjoyable situation to be working with similar-minded people,” she says.

Mickan has also been asked by Basketball Australia to develop a video documenting the history of the Australian women’s basketball team, the Opals. She will interview basketballers, former and current, from around Australia about their sport. She says she feels privileged to be able to share in their pursuit of excellence.

At a time when most of her friends are retiring, Mickan says she is driven to giving back in a positive way to those parts of her life that have held so much meaning.

But her plans don’t end there. Her ultimate goal is to one day be a teacher of transcendental meditation, a technique that helped Mickan recover from her own mental health struggle. Right now though?

“What a beautiful thing it is to be able to talk to people about something that can hopefully help them,” says Mickan. “There is not a single person on this earth who is not struggling with something.”

OPINION



Tree’s company, so let’s work to keep it that way

Ian Henschke

I opened The Advertiser recently and realised the editors must have had their irony meter switched to 11. Page 3 was about the fires ravaging Greece, under a report on the Premier’s Climate Change Council advice that we need to plant more trees, while the opposite page had a story about a forestry company wanting to torch five million tonnes of plantation timber on Kangaroo Island. This all coincided with the latest warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The burning question is how did this cluster of calamities come about?

To answer that, we need to go back to the time when John Howard was the nation’s new prime minister. At the 1997 UN climate conference in Kyoto, Australia argued it was a special case. It fought for a 2020 target which was not a decrease, but an 8 per cent increase in emissions. We also won a clause where we could offset our atmospheric pollution by planting trees. Carbon credits became the new big thing.

Around this time, I went to WA with Landline to film the hundreds of thousands of trees being planted by BP as part of their Beyond Petroleum (BP) vision. It was using carbon credits to offset emissions. All this post-Kyoto climate accounting activity was built on the fact that trees soak up and store carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas produced by burning coal, oil and gas.

Billions of dollars were invested, propped up by billions in tax concessions. Soon plantations popped up all over the country, even on KI. The big attraction was the “tax effective” side of the investment. The trouble is a boom industry based on a tax minimisation, rather than real profits, is bound to go bust.

When I filmed the vast expanse of newly planted blue gums on KI I wondered, like the locals did, how they were going to be shipped to the mainland without a deep sea port. They were also puzzled why planners allowed a eucalypt plantation industry on a bushfire prone island. Skip forward to the fatal fires of January last year and we soon had the “I told you so” moment.

I know some of you reading this will already be writing letters saying I’m barking up the wrong tree and the climate is always changing. That’s probably why the fossil fuel lobby decided decades ago to start using that term rather than global warming. But look at the facts. Burning carbon based fuels supplies almost 85 per cent of the world’s energy.

In 1920 we pumped 3.5 billion tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere. A century later we pump out 10 times that amount every year. It sits above the Earth like an invisible blanket trapping the sun’s warmth. So is it surprising the average global temperature has increased by almost one degree over the past century? Or Italy just had a record day of 48.8C? Or there have been horrendous fires in Europe and the USA after the ones here last year?

In 1999 I made an ABC/BBC TV documentary called Emission Impossible which predicted the impacts of global warming. Google it and have a look. It’s another “told you so” moment. I interviewed Margaret Thatcher’s chief adviser Sir Crispin Tickell. He said he had no trouble urging her to take action “because she understood the science”. She had a chemistry degree from Oxford University and was the first world leader to warn about climate change and push for a strategy to deal with it, saying we needed “to make changes and sacrifices, so we don’t live at the expense of future generations.”

Although Margaret Thatcher is no longer with us, Sir Crispin Tickell, now 90, is still fighting for a better future. But he did add: “I’m glad I’m in life’s departure lounge not the arrival lounge because I think the next generation’s in for a very bumpy ride!”

Meanwhile a National Seniors survey found 85 per cent of older Australians believe in climate change. And three out of four who believe want action, even if it increases living costs. Whoever wins the state and federal elections next year should take note. Perhaps create Better Future Bonds so the billions of dollars seniors have in term deposits getting little or no interest could be invested in large scale renewable energy projects and tree planting.

And let’s protect the trees we’ve got left, if only to keep us cool in summer. Also fight back against the new planning laws that almost encourage developers to cut them down. They certainly rarely get punished. And remember the old proverb: “The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago.” As long as it’s not one that’s part of a tax minimisation scheme on Kangaroo Island!