



# this way OUT

Sure you could keep plugging away at your job for the next 20 years, but haven't you ever dreamed of trying something completely new?

Here's how six successful people who felt the same made the change...



By Lori Bamber

**Frances Lew** wasn't the kind of person you'd think of as being stuck in a rut. As a CBC radio reporter she was a well-regarded professional, and yet she often found herself dreaming of being a volunteer ESL teacher. One day, she says, it was time.

Time to do more than dream, to make the sacrifices, take the risks and let go of so-called security.

Now 40, she's enjoying her first assignments as a substitute teacher in Vancouver after going back to university for her teaching certificate. Lew is one of a growing new cohort: people who leave their jobs and careers – even great jobs and careers – to follow a more fulfilling path.

"We tend to fall into our first careers, so there is a natural disconnect between our work and the inclinations of our soul; over time, that begins to rub," notes John Izzo, corporate advisor for IBM and AT&T, and author of *Second Innocence: A Guide to Renewal in Relationships, Work and Daily Life*. "The longing and dissatisfaction we suffer is there to keep us from a deeper regret that may come later."

And that dissatisfaction is widespread. A December 2003 study by Careerbuilder.com found that 60 per cent of employees surveyed "planned to leave their job for other pursuits" within the next two years, and a 2001 Ipsos-Reid survey found that only 29 per cent of white collar workers were "stable and satisfied" with their careers.

Yet the majority opt for security. There is a tendency to 'when' our career dreams: when our children are grown, when we've saved enough money. The price of change seems too high – the loss of regular income, benefits, and a pension plan. Trapped in our gilded, unlocked cage, some of us rationalize the failure to act until eventually forces conspire to push us out.

Others are more proactive. Rather than wait for the inevitable, they grab the wheel and take control. No retreat, no surrender. But how do you change your life, your career?

At day's end, you take a risk in expectation of a great reward. And despite the challenges, all of the 'life shifters' interviewed by *BCB* – those who actually made the leap – said they'd do it again, as one put it, "In a heartbeat."

Here are their stories and their advice on how to make it happen for you.

### Jody Paterson – Street Beat Manifesto

As a respected columnist for the *Victoria Times Colonist*, Jody Paterson was recognized wherever she went (and "in whatever I was wearing," she adds) and admired for her work. She was the winner of a B.C. Newspaper Award for best editorial, won the B.C. Newspaper Award for top columnist, and received a special commendation from the RCMP – and yet it wasn't enough.

"I thought my work in the media would allow me to make a change," says Paterson. "I could help change things for one person, but I couldn't change public policy. I was tilting at windmills, yelling into the wind."





“Find something you’re passionate about. Be prepared to learn a lot. I just wanted to make furniture and I spent all my time figuring out how to run a business” – David Anderson

When *Times Colonist* staff went on strike in 2002, Paterson learned a life lesson that – coupled with an aversion to any form of debt, including a mortgage – provided her with a great deal of financial freedom: she could live on half her income.

“The first month we were on strike [living on strike pay], I thought I’d put a hold on my RRSP contribution, but it came out of my account,” says Paterson, 47. “I got to the end of the month and there was still money there. When the same thing happened at the end of the second month, I thought, ‘Well, that’s very strange.’ It isn’t like I went, ‘Ah, I want a job that pays half of what I’m earning now.’ It was more like, ‘Oh, I can do this.’”

After the strike was over she felt a growing restlessness. One Saturday morning her partner came across a job ad: a non-profit society she’d done some very satisfying volunteer work with in 1998 was looking for a new executive director. For Paterson, everything seemed to come into focus. “I thought to myself, ‘That’s the job I want.’”

As for the fear that keeps us locked into our pension plan, Paterson says she has none. She and her partner plan to move to Mexico in their old yet reliable 1982 RV. “It gives me a great deal of comfort to know that even if things went really wrong, I could be happy living cheaply in that RV in Mexico.”

Paterson’s column still appears on the op-ed page of the *Times Colonist* each Friday – but if you want to find her you’d have to drive to a concrete industrial complex in Esquimalt. Here you’ll find the Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society, a non-profit organization that, says Paterson, works to help sex trade workers in Victoria exit the trade “at whatever stage.”

“We’re not naive enough to believe that we’ll save everyone,” says Paterson. “These are complex problems. We can’t even save one person, but we can be a part of them saving themselves. Not too long after I started here a woman showed up at our door. She was shattered, trembling like a wild animal. Something had happened to her. We got her into treatment.”

“Six or eight weeks later, this bright-eyed girl with shiny hair and dimples approached me and said, ‘Do you remember me, Jody?’ It’s incredible to see that kind of change in people, to be part of it.”

Her reward these days, she says, is “seeing people get better.” She offers simple advice for those considering her path: “Just start looking around. Opening a few doors. If you aren’t volunteering, find a non-profit [organization] that calls to your heart. Experiment a bit. You might find that volunteering is enough. Take the first step. You’ll never know for sure when you’re ready. But something will happen; something that will probably make you unhappy. The strike pushed me. It was awful, but it was what I needed.” □



## David Anderson – Varnishing Act

In early 2003 David Anderson was in Montreal, 90 minutes away from signing off on his severance package with Air Canada, when he got the call: a position he’d applied for six months earlier within the company had just opened up. Air Canada was willing to pay for his move back to Vancouver. He had six hours to make up his mind.

Seems like a no-brainer. But Anderson, 41, had done a lot of soul searching in the three weeks since he’d been notified of the layoffs and concluded it was time to return to his first love: woodwork and design.

“It took me 90 minutes to decide,” he says. “And as soon as I turned the job down, I knew with absolute certainty I’d done the right thing. There was just no question.”

In terms of financially preparing for self-employment,



Anderson's story is a cautionary tale. His severance package lasted for almost a year – a year in which he spent a fair bit of time skiing. He had no savings to speak of and was already in debt. "I used to buy a pair of jeans because I didn't have any in that colour. Now I buy nothing."

When he launched Coolwood Custom Woodwork and Home Improvement in early 2004 from his home in North Van, Anderson had no business training, no capital, no investors and no access to traditional business loans. To those eying his path, Anderson advises: "Find something you're passionate about. But take the time to learn about running a small business. Be prepared to learn a lot. I just wanted to make furniture and I spent all my time in the first months figuring out how to run a business."

In other words, if you have a choice, participate in an

intensive small business operation course such as BCIT's Venture program before kissing goodbye to your final paycheque.

Anderson has proved that money isn't the most important factor. In the eight months since flinging himself into Coolwood without a marketing budget (other than the \$150 spent on business cards), word-of-mouth advertising and a network of supporters have become his lifelines to new customers.

The moneyless approach seems to have worked. Combining his customer service skills with his artistry as a craftsman and designer, Anderson's company has taken off. He is now booked months in advance. And his cabinetry appears in shows such as *Design Inc.* and in the pages of *Canadian House and Home*. □



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## Donna Wadsworth – Destined to Dish

After almost two decades as a chef and caterer in such far-flung spots as Darjeeling, India, and Iqaluit, Nunavut, Donna Wadsworth found herself in a great job: event coordinator for Out to Lunch, one of Vancouver’s high-end caterers.

But she had a dream that had been simmering for more than 10 years, which began with a conversation she’d had with another chef about European take-home meals. Wadsworth believed Vancouverites wanted and deserved the same healthy and seasonal food, prepared and delivered to their homes.

“People are so busy,” she says. “They don’t want to go out or line up at Urban Fare. They don’t have time to cook. But they want good food. They want to put on their jammies, shut out the world, and sit down to braised lamb shanks.”

One day a co-worker brought her an ad, cut out of a community paper, for available kitchen space. The dream began to breathe. “It

was the desire to do my own thing,” says Wadsworth, 46. “That urge was so strong.”

Out of that desire came Savoury City, a company that provides catering services and prepared dinners to the Lower Mainland; meals like *Boeuf en Daube* (butter-tender morsels of beef in a fresh herb infused marinade), Thai chicken with ginger and coconut, and Fisherman’s Pie.

Asked if she tapped her RRSP in order to launch Savoury City Wadsworth smiles wryly. “My RRSP, [partner] Blaine’s RRSP, our lines of credit, our credit cards. Blaine’s family. My family. What do they call it? ‘Love money’? We’ve exhausted Blaine’s resources. Exhausted my own.

“You spend your whole life creating that little nest egg and then you gamble it. My dad has been so supportive of this business, but I don’t think he’s yet allowed himself to realize that nest egg isn’t there anymore. He’d be horrified.”

It’s about making hard choices, says Wadsworth. “Starting a business with everything you have naturally means other aspects of your life have to be scaled back. We rationalized that the dream house could wait a few years, but the business could not.”

Despite the support she’s received and her devotion, Vancouverites have been slow to discover Savoury City. There have been times, says Wadsworth, when she wondered if they might not make it.

“I would do it all over again in a heartbeat,” she says, brightening. “It’s challenged me more than I’ve ever been challenged before and that gives you such confidence. It takes blood, sweat and tears – huge amounts of passion – but I’m so lucky to be able to do this. To wake up and do exactly what I want to do.” □

## Christina Symons – Solo Ink

Less than a year ago Christina Symons, 37, was a senior marketing exec for a large architectural firm. She had a place on the Sunshine Coast, a city apartment, traveled on glamorous assignments with powerful people, wore great suits and directed a large staff.

Today she lives in her Sunshine Coast home and is a freelance writer and photographer for *Canadian House and Home* and *GardenWise* magazines, a copywriter and a *TV Week* columnist. Her work is balanced between writing and photography and firmly focused on design.

Symons' transition might be the definitive financial planning model. She lives within her means, saved an amount equal to a year of living expenses and lined up eight months of freelance work before she resigned. However, she still had to sacrifice the other job of her dreams.

In 1999, Symons joined Vancouver-based Architectura (a division of Stantec) as a marketing and communications coordinator. In less than a year she rose through the ranks to become a senior associate, directing a talented marketing team. Today she describes her four years there as “the time of her life.” However, as her role became more executive in nature it provided less opportunity for creativity, so she accepted freelance assignments to “fulfill those creative aspirations.”

It wasn't too long before the success and fulfillment of

that freelance work presented Symons with what she calls her hardest career decision. “I'd been asked to facilitate a workshop on marketing yourself for Stantec's administrative staff. I talked about being able to present yourself, being clear on your story. They loved it and found [the workshop] motivating, but afterwards I realized I wasn't following my own advice.”

She began with a list of everything she loved about working at Stantec and all of the reasons she felt she had to leave.

On the ‘don't leave’ side were things such as the generous paycheque, great benefits and extended medical package, and working with a group of people whom she's still very close to and who have been very supportive of her new career. But the ‘do leave’ side outweighed them.

For Symons, having her finances in order was vitally important; so was being clear on what she offered. “When I wonder if I've done the right thing, I can go back to those lists.

“Get your story straight,” she advises. “It's that ‘first impression’ thing. You may have only one opportunity, so be prepared to present yourself in a clear way. And surround yourself with good people. There are so many wonderful people who have faith in me and I think of that faith as an investment. They're my investors and I plan to provide a return on that investment.” □



## Myrna Khan and Andrew Gregory – The Backpackers' Epiphany

Myrna Khan, 35, is the vice president and general manager of Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR), an organization that mentors and celebrates leadership.

Andrew Gregory, 37, is partner and co-founder of Exponentia, a high-tech firm that develops sophisticated web-based software and products for organizations such as TSN, professional sports teams and the B.C. government.

But to do that, Khan and Gregory have literally paid a price. They're taking home about one third of what they were making a decade ago – yet there is an upside. This husband and wife team is changing the world of

business. From a relatively small organization launched just three years ago, CBSR has grown to include 150 member companies including Alcan, HP and Microsoft as well as small local businesses. It also recently won a contract to promote the United Nations Global Compact in Canada.

Khan and Gregory met in the MBA program at McGill, where they were both expected to do great things, and did. Khan was recruited by the Canadian National Railway (CN) after meeting and impressing then-CEO Paul Tellier. ("I told him I'd be a good shit-disturber for him," she says). In addition to doing that, she helped Tellier

orchestrate the largest IPO in Canadian history. Gregory was so successful as national account manager for 3M that Gillette eventually poached him.

But five years into their relationship they resigned from their senior management corporate jobs, sold their belongings and asked that all wedding gifts be in cash. Then they took a year-long honeymoon through India, Nepal, Malaysia and the Philippines.

"We're on the same wavelength that way," says Gregory. "We were most interested in what we were going to learn. And we were both confident enough in our own potential that we saw it less as a risk than an opportunity."



“One thing I learned in Asia is that everyone is an entrepreneur. We’re very locked into traditional ideas in North America about what it means to be working” – *Andrew Gregory*

He describes arriving in an Indian city at dawn and seeing a woman cooking for her multitude of children beside the road. “They had nothing and yet you couldn’t help notice their laughter, how happy they seem with so little.”

“Andrew and I both appreciate how lucky we are here,” adds Khan. “To see what people are experiencing in other parts of the world brings a great deal of perspective about what’s important and what’s not. And you can’t see that without knowing that we all have a moral responsibility to do what we can to ensure that two or three billion people don’t have to continue living that way. Given that perspective we’ve made choices that have allowed us both to be much happier.”

On their return to Canada the two took corporate jobs to replenish their savings, but felt they were destined for braver things. “Another thing I learned in Asia,” says Gregory, “is that everyone is an entrepreneur. We’re very locked into rigid traditional ideas in North America about what it means to be working, but there someone will open a corner store.” He pauses and Khan interjects, “right on the corner.”

His entrepreneurial spirit chafing, Gregory trained for a half-marathon with a fellow runner from Seattle, Jim Fawcett. As they ran, they talked about their vision for the internet, how it should serve to connect people as well as a simple information source.

“It just meshed,” says Gregory. “We wrote up a business plan aligned around connecting people with their passions and started shopping it around.” The result was Exponentia Communications, based in Vancouver with Fawcett as co-founder. Plan in hand, the pair went looking for clients.

“Our first client was Citizens Bank,” says Gregory. “At first we ran the business from our living room and basement, but it got to the point that the train was leaving the station. I quit my job in March 2000.” A month before the Nasdaq’s crash wiped out the dot-com economy.

“We actually had those experiences people talk about,” says Gregory. “Sitting in a board room hearing that we didn’t need the \$250K we’d asked for, we needed a million, and they’d raise it for us in four weeks, and have another million for the next phase a year later. A few weeks later, everyone is in shock. There’s no money. It’s all over.”

While many people might have given up, Gregory, Fawcett and the Exponentia team have proven up to the challenge. Despite struggles, they persevered and attracted complementary talent to their team.

Corporate revenues tripled over the last year, staff has doubled and there are now two projects in the works: a mobile and web-based program for ‘Get Your Vote On’ (a B.C. government-sponsored program to get youth more involved in democracy) and a phone-based project that allows Telus cell phone users to play along with sports games on TSN.

Says Khan of their shared journey: “A big reason why we were able to make these shifts is because we support each other and encourage each other to pursue our dreams. If we didn’t have each other I’m not sure we would have had enough guts to pursue our paths.”

While some couples are fighting over the remote, Khan and Gregory are enriching their relationship, leveraging the power of partnership, living deeply and making the world a better place. ◻▶



## Could you do it?

There is no single or right path to a successful second career, but the most sensible one is a proactive, measured approach. Barbara Richards, formerly a vocational counsellor and now a life and business coach with VisionWorks.com in Vancouver, advises her clients to begin planning (interviewing, volunteering and conducting market analysis) while still in the "safe zone" – before you quit your job or get laid off.

"You don't need ideal circumstances," says Richards. "Think of it as a progression, not an either/or." Work on improving the quality of your current life. It shifts the energy.

Richards challenges her clients to think in terms of 90-day projects that move them closer to their new calling before abandoning their current career. Be warned: your project probably won't make money and may even require a small investment. However, the stress level and risk factor is much lower than leaping in unprepared.

But then comes the time to either move on with it or get off the dream. What then?

"Often it's lifestyle that makes it impossible to make a life shift," says author John Izzo. "We need to think about the concept of simplifying. The basic question we have to ask of ourselves: How much is enough?"

The loss of lifestyle and status can be a deal breaker, but those who have made significant sacrifices rarely express regret. Richards quotes former lawyer Tama Kieves, from her book *This Time I Dance!*: "The wrong career creates the need for money. The right life is entrancing and sufficient unto itself."

Once you're willing to sacrifice, those who have done it say managing the shift becomes surprisingly easy.

Reporter-turned-teacher Frances Lew used the federal government Lifelong Learning Program which allows students in secondary education programs to tap into their RRSP. She also opened up a line of credit.

"You may have to dip into your savings," Lew advises. "Dip into your RRSPs. Think about housing costs, whether you can take on housemates. I packed my lunch almost every day. You don't travel. But it's worth it in the long run." ■