

Second Acts

By Sheryl Kraft, May 16, 2008

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Once upon a time, Michael Lord practiced law, Susie Horgan's life was a soap opera, and Dan Southern was one big showman.

And then they left it all behind. Switching careers happens...for a multitude of reasons.

"Usually what precipitates a career change is some sort of dissatisfaction with your current job or career," says Julie Jansen, a Stamford, Connecticut-based career coach and author of *I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This* (Penguin Books). A pervasive unhappiness, a change in your industry, or a feeling of boredom and lack of meaning can be a call to action. Some may look for a change rather early in their working lives (Jansen says that many of her clients are in their 30s), while others may have their eye on retirement (the other common age group Jansen sees are in their 50s) and want something different for whatever work years remain.

Attempting to check the numbers on career changes throughout a person's life, I came up empty-handed. This is due to the fact that the folks at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) have a hard time defining just what constitutes a "career change." A person may be laid off and temporarily wait tables. Another may have a new job description or promotion, but stay within the same company. Yet someone else may take on a second job at night to make ends meet. One statistic I found says the average person can expect to change careers three to five times in his or her lifetime.

Wilton resident Kathy Caprino, M.A., a life and empowerment coach and a former co-founder of Living in Harmony—The Center for Emotional Health located in Westport, Connecticut—is the author of the upcoming book, *Breakdown, Breakthrough: The Professional Woman's Guide to Claiming a Life of Passion, Power, and Purpose* (Berrett-Koehler, Fall 2008). Caprino experienced a career change herself, leaving the corporate world behind after 18 years, to become a life coach and career transition consultant. She says that especially around midlife, individuals can suddenly realize all they've worked for and achieved looks very different when viewed from the eyes of a 45-year-old. "Longings for meaning, purpose, fulfillment, contribution, balance, joy, health, and inner peace become stronger in midlife, urging us to take a different course than would have been compelling in our 30s," she explains.

My own personal career change began in 1998, when my two children began preparing for their change: college. I had given up my career in advertising for full-time parenting after my first son was born in 1986. And I knew that once my home no longer rang with the racket of two boys, I would need something more to satisfy me. I anticipated long, lonely days and searched deep inside myself to come up with a way to maintain a connection to the outside world; a way to combine working at something meaningful with something I loved. So, I made a decision to return to school for a graduate degree. Three years later, degree behind me, I began to trudge down the necessary circuitous roads to launch my new career as a freelance writer.

No matter how you define "career change," one thing is clear: these Wilton residents have managed to take courageous steps, sometimes operating on passion alone, to move their lives in new and often unknown directions. Though the leap can be daunting at first, a combination of faith and trust that something better lies on the other side makes it rewarding in the end.

Their stories are varied and interesting, proving that if you just have "one life to live" you've got to be happy in your career!

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Michael Lord

"Down the road, I knew I wanted to be on my own."

Some might say that Michael Lord navigated a traditional route: after graduating from Emory University, he headed north, attending Syracuse University Law School. But after working in Manhattan as a bankruptcy litigator for seven years, this 40-year-old began to feel disenchanting. The long hours combined with the commute to Manhattan started to take its toll, leaving Lord wondering if this was the way he wanted to live his life. Then, a phone call helped to direct his feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

"I got an invitation to interview for a legal recruiting position, and decided to find out more about it," he says. While it never occurred to him that he might like recruiting, Lord was intrigued enough to listen and then seek out advice from others in the field, including his own father. "My father, who was in the apparel industry for years, switched careers to become a recruiter. But he didn't do it until he was 59," explains Lord. "The only regret he had was not doing it sooner." The message sunk in. Don't wait, grab the opportunity, take the plunge. After happily leaving his job as a lawyer behind, Lord then set out to learn what it took to succeed in the world of recruiting. Two years of working for a New York-based company was enough for him to reach the conclusion that he could be more proficient running his own company. In 2002, he set up shop in an office located in town, behind Hastings Real Estate, where he remains to this day.



Mike Lord today running his own legal recruiting firm, Micheal & Lord Company based in Wilton.
Photos By: Carolyn Rundle Field

While not every career change may have a storybook ending like his, Lord has no regrets about his move. In fact, he couldn't be happier. "I took both feet and planted them firmly in the recruiting world," he says. And now, this legal recruiter who is frequently quoted in the elite publication Crain's New York Business is pleased to have a short 10-minute commute to work and don a casual sweater, rather than a formal shirt and tie.

His advice to others who might be contemplating a switch? "Do it sooner rather than later. If you think you're in the wrong place, chances are you are." In his opinion, it also doesn't hurt to sock away some extra money to cushion what may be a temporary change of earnings. And it's a good idea to seek out other people who might have gone through the same change. "The best advice I ever got was from another attorney who went into his own business," Lord remembers. "He said, 'You have an innate instinct to survive when you are on your own.' I took this to heart."

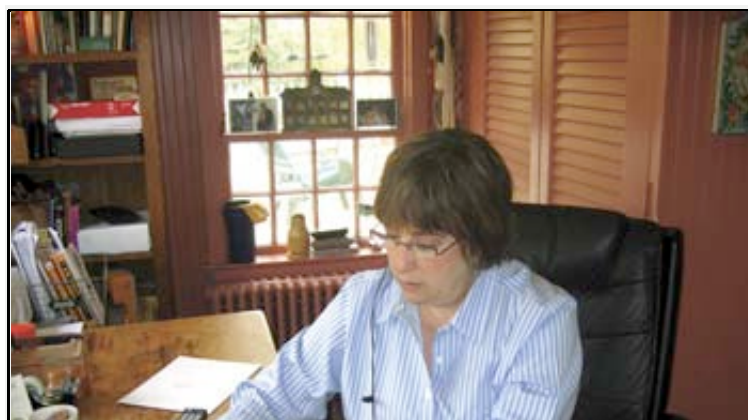
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Susie Horgan

"I wanted more control over my life."

As a classically trained actress who appeared on Broadway in 1975, Susie Horgan navigated her way through the ranks of show business. In addition to being on stage, Susie worked with a team of writers, weaving complicated tales and unexpected twists for the soap opera *One Life to Live*. In a few years' time, Horgan was awarded an Emmy for her role as executive producer of the long-running daytime program.

It was her desire to spend more time



with her son, who was four at the time (he's now a high school senior) and eliminate the long commute to Manhattan that sent Horgan packing. Besides, show business had begun to feel less than satisfying. "Although I still adore it, it's difficult. People in the position of power are run by the numbers," she explains, "and they really don't know the best way to develop creative talent." Burn-out? Maybe. Reaching your absolute limit? Perhaps. But sometimes that's what it takes to make a change and pursue an alternate course.



Today Susie Horgan works out of her home office as a life coach, often counseling her clients by phone - a far cry from her career as an Emmy-winning executive producer for *One Life to Live*.
Photos By: Carolyn Rundle Field

Horgan was certain she wanted out—but wasn't sure where to go. At the time, there was no such thing as a "life coach;" perhaps if there was, she could have sidestepped the route she took to get where she is today. "I tried writing on my own, but it was too isolating; I tried real estate, but it wasn't for me," she admits. She considered returning to school for a master's degree in counseling, but nixed that idea. Searching for what to do next, Horgan's serendipitous conversation with a therapist friend led her to the career she takes such pleasure in today. "She asked me if I had heard about life coaching. I hadn't—but immediately loved the name," she says. After a quick google search, Horgan was able to locate a training company and wasted no time in signing up.

Enter her new career as a personal life coach. She named her company "Get a Life!"—which is precisely what she did, and helps others to do.

It takes just a "hello!" and a quick inviting smile from Horgan to understand the fit. She connects and communicates effortlessly—qualities vital to her line of work. "I'm a people person and probably would have become a therapist," she says. Certainly she is drawing upon her skills to help her clients and guide them through life's sometimes-difficult journeys, providing I've-been-there-myself advice for people as they wade through their feelings of being stuck, wanting more out of life, finding their passion, and ultimately, living more authentic lives.

"I realized I had a valuable service to offer. If I had known that, I would have done it sooner," says Horgan. This time around, working from home does not feel isolating: she spends most of her days counseling her 21 loyal clients from her comfortable easy chair, connecting with their lives over the phone wires.

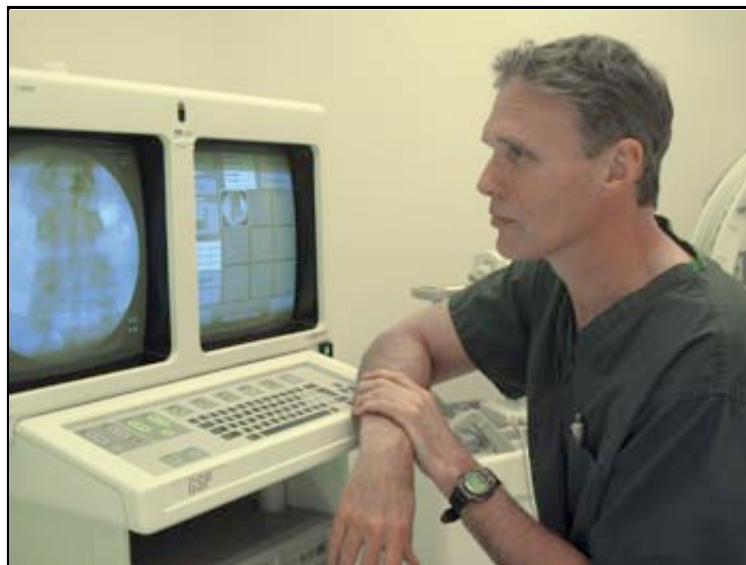
"I love being my own boss. Life is great!"

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Dan Southern

"I hated my life; I was not offering anything to anyone."

Born in southern California, he began acting lessons at 11, catching the bug to perform early on. He graduated with a B.A. with Honors in Dramatic Arts at the University of California at Berkeley, and continued his studies as a scholarship student with the American Conservatory Theater. Jobs awaited. He danced on stage, acted in off-Broadway shows, regional theater, television dramas, and movies. His early work put him alongside Tom Hanks, only at the time, he didn't know what Hanks would go on to accomplish. He started the Riverside Shakespeare Company where he acted his dream roles and even directed. Seems glamorous, doesn't it?



Today Dr. Dan Southern (here in his office at the Wilton Surgery Center, 195 Danbury Road) spends his screen time reviewing patients' medical films.
Photos By: Carolyn Rundle Field

But Dan Southern was miserable. Alas, the life of an actor was not

rewarding. At least, not for him.

After a while, the right script finally came along. The role was as a doctor—not a Marcus Welby- or Dr. Kildare-type doctor on TV—but one in real life. “I thought about a lot of different careers,” Southern says. And then, he had an aha! moment. All it took was a question from his future wife, Heather: “What would you really like to be?”

So, at the age of 38, after being out of school for almost 20 years with no science or math background to fall back on (“hey, that was during the 70s and the ‘relaxed’ curriculum period,” Southern laughs), he pulled every last cent out of his savings account to embark on two years of pre-med studies. He was challenged and driven enough to complete the coursework in 18 months time. By the time he enrolled at Downstate Medical School in Brooklyn, New York, this professional actor had also married and started a family.

Through medical school, Southern relied on acting jobs to help him pay his bills. “We were broke,” he remembers, “when I got a call to be in the movie *The 13th Warrior*, co-starring with Antonio Banderas.” Southern took a leave from medical school to film the movie—and came away with enough money to pay off his loans.

Three years ago, after much hard work, Southern was ready to move into his most rewarding role to date, that of medical doctor. And what of the life he left behind? “Well, I miss some parts of it. Like the camaraderie. Nobody parties,” Southern muses, “like theater people!”

Today, Southern’s role as a sports medicine doctor (physiatrist) suits him perfectly. Years of dancing and high school athletics made him personally familiar with neck and back problems.

But is this his final act?

“Maybe.” Southern pauses. “I’m not exactly sure what it would be,” he admits. “A change of career does require a lot of energy, but I know one thing: it can be done.”

Bravo!