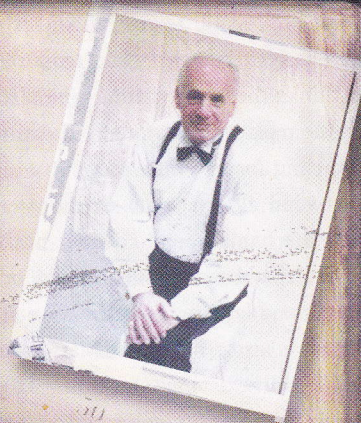
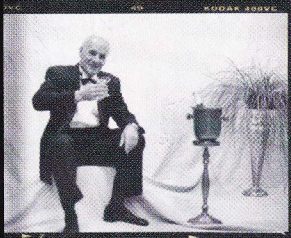


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FOUR NEW JERSEYANS WHO'VE MADE SUCCESSFUL CAREER CHANGES

BY JOEL SAMBERG

"From couture to coir." That's how Michael Becker describes his midlife career change—and he's not trying to be funny. In fact, he's being quite literal. A few years ago Becker, of West Orange, left a lucrative position in high-end women's fashion to run his own floor covering business. Today, Fabulous Mats & More has a retail store at the Wayne Towne Centre next to Willowbrook Mall, and an associated e-commerce site on the web. Combined, it's as serious a venture as any small business can be—but that's not to say that there isn't a laugh or two waiting in the wings whenever Becker tells the story of his vocational evolution. After all, the major incident that triggered it was when his chief designer and his head pattern maker began a torrid love affair that significantly slowed down the number of custom orders he was able to produce.

It's good to look back and laugh—particularly when the roads that lead to major transformations are fraught with nasty potholes. Inge Oleksy of Millington, for instance, left an intriguing career at an oil refinery when she tired of facing the prejudices of men who didn't feel she belonged in the business. Lauren Seise, a graphic artist from Hasbrouck Heights, felt worn down after several years of a daily three-hour commute to Manhattan. Andy Pritikin of New Egypt thought he was happy as a young music teacher until he began picturing himself as an old music teacher.

"Clearly half of the people who switch careers midstream are those who start to question their values in life," notes Beverly Baskin of Baskin Business and Career Services in Marlboro. "They had been good soldiers for many years in their jobs and at their companies, but suddenly realize they're not interested anymore."

Many counselors acknowledge that making more money is rarely the sole motivation for a career switch. It's more often a desire to do something altruistic, to catch up on long-held dreams or simply to lessen the daily stress.

Michael Becker of
Fabulous Mats & More. }

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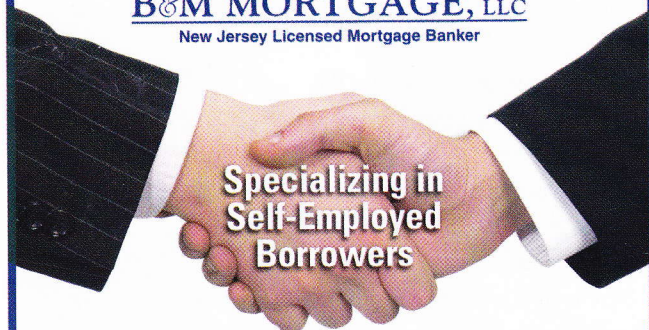
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CAREERS CONTINUED

"Sometimes it's the result of a passion that's been smoldering inside, and then something happens to cause that passion to catch fire," says Andrew O'Connor of A.J. O'Connor Associates, a Parsippany counseling firm. "People want to be happy with what they're doing professionally. Happiness is certainly a great measure of personal success. But if you can be happy and still pay the bills, that's even better."

FROM FASHION TO FLOORING

"I enjoyed traveling to Spain and Italy for leathers and fabrics," Michael Becker says. "I enjoyed interacting with the people in the factories and the buyers in Manhattan. But I didn't like the fact that you're only as good as your last line."

And he didn't like the fact that the behavior of company personnel could threaten the fiscal growth of an entire firm. In short, he wasn't happy, and quickly came to realize that it was time for a change.

"One day my significant other and I were looking for a rug and visited some manufacturer's outlets. We noticed what a poor selection there was overall, and such horrible customer service. I decided right then and there to build a floor accent store with an overwhelming collection, a website that could be regarded as the best e-commerce site around, and a customer service policy that is second to none."

Fabulous Mats & More was founded in 2002, and Becker says that doing all the planning and development on his own has been challenging and energizing at the same time. Success and failure is his alone—which is what gives him the impetus to succeed.

"I was initially undercapitalized and found myself working around the clock just to stay afloat," he recalls. "I was a social disaster. I wasn't happy about that. I even lost my significant other because of it. Plus, everyone who knew me thought I had completely lost my mind and begged me to see a shrink. 'A doormat and accent rug store?' they'd say. 'Are you kidding?' They tried to talk me out of it, but I was as stubborn as a mule."

With his engaging personality and his belief that superb customer service is as important as a good selection, Fabulous Mats took off. (His website accounts for more than 60 percent of the business now, although his spacious store is also very popular.)

"Because of my past career I have an excellent insight into what is fashionable. One key ingredient is that less is more. Never over-embellish, whether it's an evening gown or a doormat. That's my philosophy, and it works."

He says the old Michael Becker was a little cocky, but he's gone through some reality checks in recent years which have changed his outlook on life. "I still work hard, because I'm driven to make this business succeed like none other. But I'm mellow now, more giving, more understanding." And a lot happier.

A PASSION FOR HELPING

"I began volunteering as a Red Cross candy striper when I was 14. My parents always instilled values in my brother, my sister and me that we should give back to society for all that we were given," Inge Oleksy recalls. "As a result, volunteer work has always been my passion." Helping people and encouraging positive change were part of her personal doctrine.

But volunteering is one thing; earning a living is something else. Her parents had expected her to go into the medical field, which could be rewarding in both a philanthropic and financial way—but she didn't have the calling. She wanted to find her own path, live her own life. So she tested the waters of several professions, eventually landing a position with an oil company in Linden. The demanding nature of the job was enticing, the financial rewards were not insignificant and, because she dealt with matters relating to safety and the environment, there was a humanitarian aspect to it as well.

"But there was a downside," she says. "There was a pervasive mentality of some of the others on the job who resented working with a woman. It became a dangerous situation. Some people would sabotage safety functions. Others would put up degrading pictures in the control room. There was some verbal intimidation."

Although she was offered a management position with the company

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starting over

There is no shortage of middle-aged Americans either looking for work or starting new jobs. That's long been a reality of modern society. What may be a little more unusual is the percentage of people within that group who have made major career changes based strictly on their own preferences. Starting anew is not easy for those have to do it—and it is no less stressful for those who simply want to.

Those who have done it, and those who counsel others, recommend a series of approaches to make it as easy a transition as possible, including learning as much about a profession as you can before taking the leap, making sure you have a financial cushion prior to the change in case it doesn't work out, and seeking the advice of others. It should be noted, however, that care should be exercised in just who you ask. "So many people who want to leave their professions were originally guided by well-meaning people—parents, relatives, friends—and that didn't necessarily work out for them in the first place," notes Beverly Baskin of Baskin Business and Career Services in Marlboro.

It's the old "plastics" routine: no one knows what Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* ended up doing—but it's a pretty safe bet that he wouldn't have been happy had he gone into plastics.

Those looking at a midlife career change sometimes find a professional counselor valuable because counselors have certain tests and tools that can help clients determine whether or not they have what it takes, on many levels, to go ahead with their plans. Most counselors help clients put together a business plan both to enable them to hit the ground running and also to identify needs and strengths as they go forward.

A major change is often accompanied by major stress—which doesn't always have to be a downright negative. "Expect the stress," says Andy Pritikin who went from being a musician and teacher to managing a day camp. "Embrace it. Consider it a challenge instead of a hardship. Most of all, believe in yourself."

That's the common denominator among virtually all midlife career changers: self-confidence. "Be ready to smile. Be calm. Be patient," says Lauren Siese, a former graphic artist who now works for a placement agency. "Know that sometimes you have to take a leap, along with the mistakes that go with it. Sometimes that's the only way to get to new places, professionally speaking—other than the places you've already been."

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CAREERS CONTINUED

that bought out the original firm, Olesky soured on the entire profession, deeming it unfriendly to women, and tried to determine what it was she truly wanted out of a career.

"The one thing that kept popping up was my interest in community involvement, in helping people in need. A career counselor was able to focus my search, interestingly enough, back to the medical field. I enrolled in school and got a degree in radiography from Union County College and a certificate from Muhlenberg Hospital." Compensation pales by comparison to what she had been earning in the refinery business, but that didn't matter. What mattered was improving awareness of breast exams and women's health. She was recruited by the Summit Medical Group and has been there ever since.

"I love my career now. If I'm able to make a mammogram or breast biopsy easier for a patient, or to convince someone to come in for an annual exam, I feel tremendous satisfaction.

DESIGNING A NEW CAREER

"I was the artsy one in the family," Lauren Seise says. "I loved to paint, I loved photography, I loved to draw." So she applied—and was accepted at—one of the top art schools in the country, the Rhode Island School of Design. But she wasn't quite ready to face the fact that she quickly had to choose a specific discipline. Architecture? Furniture fabrication? Graphic design? So she selected all three, one right after the other.

Seise graduated as a graphic artist, and her first job after college was for a design agency in New York City that specialized in brand strategy for financial institutions. "I was taking the PATH train from New Jersey every day. There were conflicts with management. I was taking on more and more responsibility, but not earning any more money. I was burning out."

Then she met a man and fell in love and her suspicions were confirmed: because of her job, she wasn't able to spend nearly as much time with him as she wanted, and when she was by his side her mind was still downtown, thinking of ways to deal with all the internal politics. "I suddenly realized that I would have to make a change in order to work toward enjoying life, instead of making work my life."

So she left the agency. It was around this time that Seise began planning her wedding and concentrating on that alone—to the exclusion of any thought of reestablishing herself in art later on. "People said to me, 'But you're so good at what you do? Why give it up?' But not loving what you do simply makes every day a bad day."

Still, she decided to hook up with a company called Update Graphics that trains and places artists, designers, editors, and proofreaders with companies in need of tempo-

rary help—just in case something came along—and she ended up working for them in sales.

The transition was hard at first. But she had found her niche. "I love meeting people," she says now. "I love the camaraderie in the office. I love talking to clients about their options in the field." Basically, she loves helping others instead of feeling that she's the one who needs help.

A DAY JOB THAT'S DAY CAMP

Andy Pritikin's life has been music. In many ways he was a pied piper of young suburban rocker wannabes because of the way he was always so busy forming bands, taking lessons and networking with people in the business. It was nonstop. He was on the radio. He played concerts all over the tri-state area. One of his combos, Absolut Drama, won in the band category on TV's *Star Search*.

As a keyboardist, horn player and guitarist, Pritikin was doing whatever he needed to do to feed his passion for music—although he was also wise enough to have that proverbial 'thing-to-fall-back-on,' which in his case was as an educator. Although he continued to pursue music in virtually every spare moment, he also built a very respectable resume as a public school music teacher. His first job was in Wall Township.

"I was there for two years, then in the South Orange/Maplewood school district for three. I loved my job. The kids loved me, the parents loved me. At one point we had 95 percent of the fourth graders playing instruments, and I taught every one of them."

But he was also looking ahead—particularly if a full-time music career didn't pan out. "Suddenly, I just couldn't picture myself in the teacher's lounge 30 years down the road. I saw how negative some teachers became about students and parents over the years."

One day Pritikin, who had worked in the summers at day camps, was approached by some people who suggested he go into camp management full time. They saw in him some leadership qualities that were important to the field—not to mention his rapport with youngsters. And he saw it as his chance to be an entrepreneur, to continue to work with kids, to make a positive, more concentrated impact on young lives. "It was a chance to live a life that's not decided by boards of education and union negotiators."

Today, Pritikin runs Liberty Lake Day Camp in Columbus—a camp he founded on his own in 2001. In its first year Liberty Lake had 200 campers; five years later it had 200 on staff. It is one of the only camps of its kind in Burlington County. "We introduced the concept of camp to this entire region," he explains. "Sometimes I feel like the local Pied Piper of Camps." And as everyone already knew, being a pied piper is entirely appropriate for him.