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RETIREMENT

# Transitioning to and navigating a post-work life

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Kim Carlin left her job as a health system administrator at 55 — a “pre-retirement pause,” she says — after realizing the pandemic crush would be a long haul. Jodi Raffa, 76, has been searching for a roommate for over a year to offset the sharp reduction in household income after her husband died. Urologist Alfredo Aparicio decided at 60 to shift from full-time to part-time practice. Debbi Campbell, 70, took in a housemate at her Manhattan apartment and was surprised at how well it worked out. Marc Gudema, 73, had a plan in place to have his daughter take over the family business but had trouble actually retiring. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones is still figuring out life beyond the academy, two years after retiring from the University of Texas at 64.



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## New Golden Girls: Baby boomers share homes to save money

BY SOO YOUN

Jodi Raffa has been searching for a roommate for over a year. Her husband passed away five years ago, and compounding her loss was a 75 percent reduction in her household income.

The 76-year-old lives in a sunny three-bedroom, two-bathroom home overlooking a lake in a 55-and-over community in Groveland, Fla. The sunsets from her back porch are “stunning.” However, the homeowners association fees just went up again and inflation has left her “flabbergasted.”

“I live on a very strict budget and am not able to indulge in any extras at all,” said Raffa, who worked in administrative jobs before she and her late husband retired in 2010. Raffa now views that move as a “hasty decision” in light of her financial circumstances. “I am a worrier and a planner, so logic suggested getting a roommate.”

When she takes out ads specifying women over 55, she gets responses mostly from men in their 60s or adults in their 20s, 30s or 40s. Raffa hopes for an easier way to find and vet potential sharers of her home. “I’m very frustrated,” she said.

SEE CO-LIVING ON G3

## Can I afford it? Will it stick? What’s next? Here are seven early retirees’ tales.

BY SUE HERTZ

Call it a pause. Call it a timeout. Call it anything but retirement.

Despite the millions of older workers who have fled the labor force in the past two years, few have signaled a permanent exit. Whether they were ejected from their jobs or left voluntarily, most have yet to tap their Social Security benefits, explaining in surveys that they may yet reenter the workforce. Some wait for covid to fade. Others wait for better jobs with better pay, or jobs with more flexibility, jobs that allow more control of their time.

The share of Americans over age 55 who were working fell sharply when the pandemic began, plummeting 6 percentage points to 33.3 percent in March and April of 2020, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. And although those numbers have started to recover, it remains unclear how many of those older workers will pursue new employment or eventually declare, “Retired!”

“We don’t know which way it will break,” said Alicia Munnell, director of the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.

For all the fantasies about days free of deadlines and meetings, supervisor demands and cranky colleagues, a successful workplace departure depends on myriad

factors — with or without a pandemic.

For those with hefty 401(k)s and valuable real estate, retirement comfort will depend less on savings and more on social connections and purpose, replacing a career with something fulfilling. For those with thinner wallets, leaving a job early means not only lost income, but also lost savings and lost medical coverage. How far back can a lifestyle be pared to pay the mortgage, the car insurance? How necessary is landing a job?

To better understand the reasons behind and the impact of relinquishing one’s salary and career early, The Washington Post spoke with seven men and women who left the marketplace before their full retirement age, which is 67 for anyone born after 1960.

They represent a variety of vocations, backgrounds and geography. The earliest job departure was at age 55 and the latest at 64. Covid played a role in some decisions, but not all. Their experiences indicate that early retirement for many has a new narrative. “It may no longer mean put out to pasture,” says Robert Laura, a social worker-turned-financial planner who runs a retirement training program. “It may mean taking a break.”

SEE RETIREMENT ON G4

## For some, leaving job and legacy behind can feel impossible

BY SINDYA N. BHANOO

For months after Rick Lehrer sold his share of his insurance company to a business partner, he kept showing up at the office three, sometimes four days a week wearing a designer suit, along with a great tie and a starched shirt.

A baby boomer who was accustomed to long hours at the office, Lehrer, now 76, didn’t — and still doesn’t — like the word retired. “I was in denial,” he said about his halfhearted attempt to retire in January 2019. “I was officially retired but I really did not announce it in a way that I should have.”

Lehrer’s reluctance to leave made for some confusing office dynamics with his designated successor, Art Grutt, who had come on board in 2006 with the understanding that he would take over 15 years later, when Lehrer turned 75.

“There was this uncertainty because Rick would still come into the office and be present, but what [was] his role . . . as founder and as figurehead without still being the owner?” Grutt said.

Office staff would often go to Lehrer with questions when in fact it was Grutt who was in charge.

SEE SUCCESSION ON G2

WORK ADVICE: A colleague took offense at an email I wrote. I still can’t figure out why. G2 • THE COLOR OF MONEY: A new sign-up platform makes it far easier to get an IRS account. G3

THE WEEK  
 As of Friday at 5 p.m.

↓ DOW 34,058.75  
 253.28, 0.7%

↓ NASDAQ 13,694.62  
 22.09, 0.2%

↑ S&P 500 4,384.65  
 4.39, 0.1%

↓ GOLD \$1,887.60  
 \$14.40, 0.8%

↓ CRUDE OIL \$91.59  
 \$0.17, 0.2%

↑ 10-YEAR TREASURY YIELD 1.97%  
 2.1% change

CURRENCIES  
 \$1=115.54 YEN, 0.89 EUROS

## RETIREMENT FROM G1

## Covid-infected workplace

Before he started driving a forklift at a Volvo warehouse outside Columbus, Ohio, in 2000, Tony Byers had worked as a policeman, a salesman and a warehouse worker delivering pizza on the side to make ends meet. At Volvo his hourly wage almost doubled, and he liked the work. He found he was skilled with machinery. He liked his co-workers and liked playing basketball on the company court at lunch. When Volvo moved its distribution center to Byhalia, Miss., in 2015, Byers followed.

In Byhalia, he learned new software and adjusted to early hours — rising before dawn for the 5 a.m.-to-1:30 p.m. shift. He drove a cherry picker but spent many hours on his feet lifting bulky boxes. In his 50s, he began to strain his back and wondered how long his body could take the work. He was still paying child support for a son from his second marriage, and he needed to save for retirement. His current wife, a native of Nicaragua, wasn't eligible for Social Security, and in her sixties hadn't found work to replace her restaurant job in Ohio.

Then covid swept through the warehouse. The younger guys on the second shift fell first to the virus, and anyone exposed had to quarantine. The first-shift crew, including Byers, toiled extra hours to compensate for the second shift's lost productivity — but then they also got infected. At one point, almost 20 percent of Byers's shift mates were sick or quarantined. He tried to avoid close contact, but how can you do that with 600 co-workers, even when 80 are out? He feared illness. He feared death. He needed a way out.

Byers and his wife had made some savvy real estate deals in Mississippi, and he figured that between the house profits and cashing out a pension and his 401(k), he could leave Volvo and live well — out of the country. "I couldn't retire in America," he says in a phone call from his home in Jinotepe, Nicaragua. "But in Nicaragua, you're a king."

At age 56, Byers received his last Volvo paycheck on June 11 of last year. By early July he slipped coffee in the home with a pool that he built on a lot next to his stepdaughter's property — mortgage-free thanks to low construction costs. Food costs, he estimates, are 75 percent less than in the United States. They can dine out as far as \$6 a meal. He misses his children and grandchildren from his previous marriages who remain stateside, but Byers delights in the daily romps with his stepdaughter's children.

Without a mortgage or car payment, their primary costs are utilities — Byers says his water bill is \$4 a month with his wife's senior citizen discount — food, and health care. They don't have insurance but can afford the care they have needed. Dental visits are \$30. Repairing Byers's broken ankle from an ATV accident was \$100. He knows, though, that they will need insurance eventually and has started looking into local programs. To receive Medicare, he would need to return to the United States. At age 62, he'll apply for Social Security.

## A pre-retirement pause

Kim Carlin loved the stimulation of her work as an executive administrator for Essentia Health, an integrated health system with 14,000 employees. She loved the problem-solving, the sense of accomplishment, the teamwork. When on task, she was all-in, driven, when she recognized didn't leave her room to travel from her home in Duluth, Minn., to visit her first grandchild in Denver, or to venture regularly nearby to help her octogenarian parents. In February 2020, she decided to take a pause.

Yet, in contrast to health-care workers fleeing the field because of covid, Carlin delayed her retirement. "Health care couldn't deliver



Omi Osun Joni L. Jones retired to L.A. at 64 from her tenured teaching post at the University of Texas at Austin.

er health care," she says of those first few pandemic months at hospitals and staff struggled to care for the sick and avoid transmission. They worked 70-, 80-hour weeks, thinking the pandemic would be over in a few months. In July, she recognized that the virus was in for the long haul. In September 2020, at age 55, she retired, celebrating with her colleagues over Zoom.

She had plotted her exit with her financial adviser Tanya Nichols, who had grown accustomed to female clients seeking flexibility. There was a risk; Nichols calculated that if Carlin and others retired in their mid-50s, their nonwork life years could exceed their working life years. With financial planning, and earning some income for part-time work, it is doable. Yet many women like Carlin still struggle to find an identity outside work.

Carlin's strategy was multi-pronged. First, family. She had time to keep company her recently widowed mother and visit her granddaughter. She poured her energy into long-distance running, competing in half-marathons around the country. And she launched a part-time consulting business that provides her days with structure and professional contacts.

"I call this my pre-retirement pause," she says. "Never did I think that I will never work again."

A year after her retirement party, she reflects on the impact of her choice. She and her husband lived modestly, driving older cars and living in a 1977 ranch. They took the occasional family Disney vacation, ate at restaurants, but always saved. In hindsight, she would ask her work self, "That could grow to be one month of health insurance."

Health insurance is an enormous expense — \$1,300 a month with a high deductible. Her consulting work covers most of it, but not much else. Still, she is grateful for the freedom her new schedule allows. Her husband continues to work full-time for a company that services gas pumps but is talking of retiring, too.

## The grind of 24/7 expectations

On a warm January day, Alfredo Aparicio can sit by the pool of his home in a canyon near the Hollywood Hills and read. He can play with his new camera. He can

visit with friends or stream a Netflix movie with his husband, Jason Gonzalez. He can mull what's next.

When Aparicio decided to retire from his urology practice, it was tired of patients, or exhausting surgeries, or even the fog of death that hovered over the sickest. He adored his patients, most of whom were Latino. Born in Peru and transplanted as a teen to Southern California, he learned firsthand how intimidating the medical matrix is for non-English speakers in his grandmother. He knew as a physician that his warmth calmed his patients and his Spanish explained what they needed to know.

Likewise, he was energized by surgeries, by the challenge, the skill demanded, and the promise they held for recovery.

But with elective surgeries canceled, Aparicio found breathing space. He and Gonzalez had time to talk. Gonzalez had recovered four years earlier from melanoma, and they recognized time was short. For hours during lockdown, they discussed what they wanted for the next stage while they were healthy and energetic. Should Gonzalez continue his interior design work, which he relished but often demanded seven-day workweeks? Could Aparicio sustain more grueling 24/7 week-on-call shifts?

No. No. No.

Gonzalez completed his last house project in November. At 60, Aparicio left full-time practice on June 30 of last year to work eight to 12 hours a week, seeing patients and performing minor surgeries such as vasectomies and kidney stone removal. Because he still has a foot in the hospital door, he has not had the chance to miss his colleagues or patients. Their medical care is covered by Kaiser until Medicare. They have money to travel to Chicago to visit the Gonzalez family, to New England to visit Aparicio's friends from his undergrad years. He's not sure if the next step involves medicine, or photography, or just enjoying life. "I don't know," he says. "I'm excited about the next chapter."

## Time to move on

For a decade, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones had mulled leaving her tenured teaching position at the University of Texas at Austin. A full professor, she was proud of being one of the few — 4.4 percent, according to the National Science



Alfredo Aparicio left full-time practice as a urologist at 60 and now works eight to 12 hours a week, with no regrets.

Foundation — African American women with a PhD. Her work was teaching undergraduate and graduate students performing arts and communication and helping to create the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies. She was proud of the books and articles she published, of her stage performances and conference presentations, of her 20-page CV.

But she was depleted by regular academic demands and the additional expectations for a female faculty member of color: advocating for students; recruiting diverse faculty; battling the river of microaggressions, students resistant to other perspectives, administrators resistant to acknowledging an embedded White patriarchy.

"This is a formula for exhaustion, alienation, isolation and — at its worst — despair," Jones said from her living room in the home she shares with her wife, Sharon Bridgforth. In fall 2019, at age 64, she retired from UT and moved to Los Angeles to figure out what was next.

Two years later, she is still figuring out life beyond the academy. They live simply, renting a home, meeting household expenses by combining Bridgforth's income as an artist and drawing on Jones's retirement account, and pursuing projects together to foster social change. She and her wife recently received a grant from the Solidaire Network to mentor five Black women in the early stages of their careers. Jones has yet to apply for Social Security.

Retirement, Jones says, is exciting and disorienting. She misses the structure of her academic life. She misses her colleagues, her students, and the community members she met through her art and off-campus projects. She does not miss feeling muzzled, afraid to say the wrong thing and jeopardize possible promotions for herself and others.

Her days are open, and that is daunting. She is writing a series of stories about a 9-year-old Black girl growing up in Chicago in the 1950s. She dreams. She hasn't retired from work, she says. Rather, she is learning who she is beyond Dr. Jones.

## Aging out of the workforce

Jackie Mitchell would have continued to toil cheerfully at her job for a public relations firm booking clients on podcasts. She enjoyed working remotely from her home in Pasco, a small city in

southeast Washington, and the pay was enough to meet household expenses. But then the firm changed formats, asking her to create podcasts for clients to host — and to cut back on her hours. At first, she tried. But she found the software daunting and her clients uninterested. Like many older workers facing changing technology and corporate demands, she weighed her choices: master new skills for modest pay or quit. Last January, she quit. "I was emotionally overwhelmed," she said. "It was more work than it was worth."

Fearing that her age — mid-60s — and physical limitations — diabetes and an aching hip that could not be replaced until she lost 100 pounds — left her without many employment options, she applied for Social Security. Her hope was that her husband Joe, who is five years younger, would land a job that would pull them out of debt. But he had his own struggles. Laid off from one technical support job and unhappy in the next, he had bought a smoothie franchise in 2019, plunking down \$150,000 for the truck, trailer and equipment to sell the frozen drink at outdoor festivals. The gig lasted one season before the pandemic struck and canceled all events. The smoothie truck has been parked in their yard ever since.

Since then, Joe has worked several jobs, from collecting census material to making shakes and fries at Wendy's, but he cannot land a post that uses his administrative skills — a conundrum faced by many over 55.

"Employers don't want older workers," says Siavash Radpour, associate research director for the Retirement Equity Lab at the New School's Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis. The lab has studied the impact of the pandemic on older workers and found that options are few for those over 55. As the economy reopened after layoffs in the early days of covid, many older workers found the jobs available to them offered lower salaries and status than their pre-pandemic careers.

For the short term, the Mitchells live on Jackie's Social Security, Joe's Veterans Affairs benefits from his Marine Corps service and whatever income Joe brings in from odd jobs. Jackie's health care is covered by Medicare and Joe's through VA. For the long term, Jackie hopes salvation rests in Joe's plan to return to school to learn medical billing.

In the meantime, they are

deeply in debt for the smoothie equipment and struggle to stay afloat. Still, she says, "we're old enough to know that things change. What we are together is our focus. We'll get through it."

## Exhaustion for her, other interests for him

Neither Sarah Woo nor her husband, Greg, intended to quit their jobs. Sarah, a middle school librarian, relished sharing literature with an age group that caused most educators to shudder but she found entertaining. Greg, an electrical engineer by training, performed so well in his second career as chief of aviation systems engineering for the U.S. Department of Transportation that he was asked to apply for a prestigious promotion. Financially, it made sense to wait. For Greg, the longer he pulled down a healthy salary, the more they could save. For Sarah, the longer she stayed with the Damers, Mass., public school system, the more she could maximize her pension.

But by February 2021, as she neared the first anniversary of the pandemic, her thinking changed. Covid had rocked her world. Remote instruction meant no more Harry Potter nights. No more poetry anthology projects. No more in-person book talks or setting up students on a "blind date with a book." Classroom read-alouds were video-recorded. Without student contact, what was the point? Sarah pondered retiring during the summer of 2020. But she had promised her aide she would stick around until the aide completed her master's degree, which meant at least another year.

And that next year was equally tough. Even with the hybrid schedule her school had adopted — half of the 900 sixth-through-eighth-graders attended in person Mondays and Tuesdays and the other half on Thursdays and Fridays — the students weren't allowed in the library. Zoom classes weren't the same as sitting in front of a cluster of 12-year-olds, watching their faces, exchanging comments. And since students weren't allowed in the library, she couldn't steer them to books she thought they'd like.

By February 2021, she had made her decision to leave on Oct. 1, her 64th birthday. "The pandemic precipitated another way of thinking," she said from the living room of her antique home six weeks after her retirement party. "There are other things I'm interested in doing. Is it worth it to work another few years?" She knew she'd miss daily chats with her aide and the teachers but that they'd stay in touch.

The downside? Teaching pensions are based on age plus years of service, which meant that because she joined the public school system late, at age 39, she retired with only 58 percent of her salary. Fortunately, Greg's medical insurance covers Sarah in retirement until she's eligible for Medicare.

Flattered by the invitation to apply for a promotion, Greg shifted his thinking when Sarah decided to retire. If he pursued the new post, he would commit to working well into his 70s. That would leave him with little time for Sarah, their grandchildren in Connecticut or training pilots on Cirrus aircraft — "the Tesla of personal aviation," he says — at nearby Beverly Flight Center. Shortly after his 64th birthday last August, he, too, left his job. Between Greg's earnings teaching flying and Sarah's pension, they knew they would live comfortably.

Greg is energized by his side career and stimulated by learning new technology. Sarah's goal — launching a vigorous exercise program — was, however, delayed when she twisted her ankle on the last day of the retirement retreat in the Berkshires her children had arranged in October. She couldn't walk for six weeks. As her ankle heals, she has focused on overseeing renovations to their kitchen and mulling the next phase.



OSALDO PINO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Tony Byers cleans the pool at his home in Jinotepe, Nicaragua, where he moved after retiring in Mississippi at 56 to take advantage of the cost of living. "I couldn't retire in America," he says.



DEREK MONTEGOMERY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Kim Carlin worked as an executive administrator for Essentia Health, a multibillion-dollar corporation with 14,000 employees. In September 2020, at age 55, she retired — but not entirely.