

Better late than never

Starting a business at an age when most folks are thinking retirement.

December 18, 2009

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BERRY GOOD MOVE: Joy Berry took control of her children's book licenses so she could build her own brand.

Joy Berry was a grandmother when she decided to make the leap. She had spent 30 years as a children's book author, writing 250 books that had sold 85 million copies. Life was good at her 6,000-square-foot house on a nature preserve in Scottsdale, Ariz. But it bugged her that her books weren't available under a single brand, because she had sold them through a variety of publishers.

"Parents who purchased a [book] series from a publisher would not know about the other series and would miss out," she said.

So Ms. Berry began letting the publishers' licenses on her books run out. This allowed her to eventually regain control of her work, but forced her to forgo much of the income she'd lived on for most of her career.

"It was hard and it was scary," said Ms. Berry, now 65.

She sold her house and moved to a one-bedroom apartment in New York City in 2004, to be closer to the publishing industry. During that first year, she said, she often cried at night. But her gamble paid off. She teamed up with a media company that helped her connect with investor Kay Koplovitz, who joined Ms. Berry in creating Joy Berry Enterprises. The company launched a Web site in April to sell her books and is now venturing into online programming, animated TV shows and merchandise. As Ms. Koplovitz says of the now-established Joy Berry brand: "There's no person, author or authority who has the richness of the books, [and] the songs, the readings and the curriculum that go with them."

Ms. Berry is hardly alone in venturing into the entrepreneurial world at a time when retirement is on many people's minds. Census figures show that the self-employment rate is close to 18% for people ages 55 to 64—and nearly 27% for those over 65, according to Ed Rogoff, chairman of the management department of Baruch College and author of *The Second Chance Revolution*, a new book on older entrepreneurs.

"The older you are," Mr. Rogoff said, "the more likely you are to be an entrepreneur."

Some late-blooming entrepreneurs turn to self-employment because it is harder to get a job after age 50. Others, like Ms. Berry, realize their years of experience can pay off in an independent business. "It's for reasons of necessity and opportunity that there's a lot of this going on," Mr. Rogoff said.

To be sure, starting a business in midlife and beyond is different than doing so right out of college. There's the endurance factor, for starters.

"Entrepreneurs in their 20s can work 20 hours a day and have all sorts of energy," said Bruce Bachenheimer, clinical professor of management and director of the entrepreneurship program at Pace University.

But the financial responsibilities of a startup can still mean that late bloomers must live in a state of sleep deprivation—at an age when that's tougher.

Lawrence Owusu, 48, an immigrant from Ghana, got plenty of training in business management from Accion, a microlender that loaned him money for his discount clothing shop, L&L Store, in Brooklyn. But more than a year after his grand opening, he still works nights as a supervisor for security guards to make sure he can support his three children even if the economy affects the store.

"I plan to do that for a while," Mr. Owusu said matter-of-factly.

While many older entrepreneurs come to business ownership with a bigger cushion of savings than their younger peers, they're not usually well positioned to replace their stash if a business goes south. "When you're 26 years old, you can bet the ranch," Mr. Rogoff said. "If it doesn't work out, you're 28 and starting over. So what? If you're 68, you have to be careful to minimize risk in the venture you're starting."

But there's at least one big advantage that midlife entrepreneurs bring to the table: "Connections," Mr. Bachenheimer said.

That was the case for Lucy Siegel, 59. She quit her agency PR job to start her own firm, Bridge Global Strategies, in 2004, after watching her former employer downsize many of her colleagues—and worrying that age discrimination might make it hard to find a new job if she too was downsized.

Ms. Siegel was delighted that several of her accounts followed her. Her Manhattan business is now thriving, with three full-time employees and several part-timers, and she plans to stick with entrepreneurship for the long term. "Experience is really worth something," she said.

Ruta Fox turned to entrepreneurship at age 50, after pain from arthritis made it impossible for to pursue her longtime career as a freelance advertising and magazine writer, which required long hours of sitting at her computer. "I was on the couch," she said. "I'd say, 'God, you have to send me a message. What am I supposed to do?'"

She found her message in a diamond pinkie ring that she bought in the garment district. Many of her friends wanted one too, so she started buying them wholesale and selling them to single acquaintances at a slight markup. She soon came up with her own original pinkie ring design and began manufacturing it under the name of The Ah Ring (short for "available and happy").

When she discovered her then-\$295 product would be appearing in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Ms. Fox scrambled to learn the ropes of entrepreneurship in six weeks—from order fulfillments to getting financing—before the issue of the magazine hit newsstands. Her career experience also helped. "I had been a fashion executive and an ad executive," Ms. Fox said. "I had all the pieces in place—PR, marketing and graphics."

DivineDiamonds.com brought in \$1 million in sales the first year. Nearly nine years later, Ms. Fox still runs the enterprise from home, an 800-square-foot apartment on the Upper East Side, selling the rings alongside other jewelry. "The knowledge and expertise I had was able to propel me forward," she said.

Comments like these don't surprise Mr. Rogoff. Armed with a lifetime of self-knowledge, late-blooming entrepreneurs often show a knack for picking the right business, he said.

"They're better able to find something that's a good personal fit," he explained. "The vast majority of people I talked to were exceedingly happy with their choice."

That's more than many of their corporate counterparts can say these days.