

Career changers: How to reinvent yourself? 3 local professionals tell their stories, give you tips

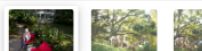
ELIZABETH TAYLOR | TUESDAY, MAY 17, 2016

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Photo by Julie Branaman

Landscape architect Laurie Potier-Brown designed the backyard of her Seminole Heights home.



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Ever yearn for the chance to try an entirely new career? While changing jobs is more common than ever in today's world of work, those making radical transitions from one career to an entirely new profession are still a special breed.

Talk to anyone who's changed careers, and they'll tell you it takes careful planning, time, hard work and plenty of guts to transition from an established profession to an entirely new line of work. But they'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. Here's how three Tampa Bay career changers made their moves and never looked back.

From marketing pro to landscape architect: Seeds for career change planted early

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Laurie Potier-Brown's first career in corporate marketing began by accident. Over a decade later, she started her new profession in landscape architecture after years of research, saving, education and sacrifice. Was it worth it? You bet.

Potier-Brown had a highly successful career in corporate marketing, a field she "happened into" when she landed

her first job in Busch Gardens' marketing department after graduating from the University of South Florida. Though she'd majored in psychology, a volunteer experience at a mental health clinic during her senior year convinced her to take a different path. "I realized I wasn't cut out to work in that field," she says.

Her Type A personality helped her excel in the marketing world, getting fast-tracked into a New York-based job with Anheuser-Busch and traveling the country. Next, she moved back to Tampa and worked in marketing for GTE Data Services, a technology offshoot of the area's phone company at the time. She wrote brochures, marketing materials and ran the company's national advertising.

Job frustration leads to inspiration

But after 12 years in marketing, Potier-Brown was restless and frustrated. "Every two years they'd change management and we went through a reorganization. Our department felt at risk, so we'd just hold our breath each time," she says. Tired of the lack of security, she started to rethink her career. "I thought, 'words aren't my thing, and here I am writing, doing ads.' "

That's when she started thinking about what she might really want to do and what she truly enjoyed doing. That led her back to her roots, literally. Her father was from a family of farmers and her grandmother and mother were avid gardeners.

"I think I had dirt under my nails when I came out of the womb," she says. "I was always out there weeding or growing my own stuff."

Growing up in Delray Beach, she was exposed to the landscape design profession through a close friend's father, a "famous landscape architect" in the area. "He'd take me and his daughter along as he drove around checking homes of his clients and I saw all these fabulous designs and lush gardens."

No easy path

As a first step, she took some non-credit landscaping courses at USF. After confirming she had the aptitude, she started saving money and researching master's degree programs. But the fact that no school in the Tampa Bay area offered a landscaping program posed a significant problem because she'd just gotten married. If she wanted a degree, she'd have to spend at least three years away on campus in Gainesville.

"We'd been married one year. My mother told me my marriage would never survive," she says, laughing. "But fortunately, I'm married to a psychologist who happens to be the nicest guy in the world."

It still wasn't easy. She was required to take extra math and science courses prior to starting the program to augment her bachelor's degree in liberal arts.

"It was very rigorous. But I had a blast because all the professors were my age," says Potier-Brown. In her late 30s at the time, "older" students like her were called "retreads."

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The workload was so challenging that she had no time to drive home to Tampa for the weekends. Her husband just rolled with it. "He'd pack our lab (retriever) in the car and come up and spend the weekends with me," she says.

After graduating summa cum laude with honors, she took a two-month artistic apprenticeship with Roberto Burle Marx, a world-famous landscape architect in Rio de Janeiro.

"What a concept. I'm broke, but what's another adventure?" Potier-Brown says in describing her perspective. "We stayed along Ipanema Beach, like the song."

Ever flexible, her husband Richard, a retired Naval reserve officer, arranged for duty in Rio so he could join her there. The experience was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"Roberto was a game-changer for me. People came from all over the world to see him. He taught me that simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve," says Potier-Brown. "He was 82 and died six months after I left."

Back in Tampa, she faced a barren job market when she started looking for work. It was 1993, and the country was in deep recession.

"There were no jobs. I was freaked out. But every firm interviewed me because there were so few landscape architects with master's degrees back then that they all wanted to talk to me," she says. Prospective employers also saw her strong marketing background as a major asset. As a result, a large architectural firm created a position for her, ending her job search after just two months.

Still, she had to accept that she wouldn't come close to matching her previous salary in marketing. "You have to start at the bottom when you're starting in a new field. Financially, it was stunning," she says.

Despite the lower salary, Potier-Brown couldn't have been more thrilled to land her first job in her new profession at age 41.

"I was so darn excited. I went and sat down under the trees and just lay in the grass and thanked the heavens. I was so happy," she says.

Making her mark on her hometown

From that first job, she became an associate with a leading global architectural and engineering firm, working in their civil division on major government projects for several years. From there, she was recruited to work for the [City of Tampa's Parks and Recreation](#) department, where she's worked for over nine years. There, she's designed many iconic projects, from Bayshore Boulevard to Bern's Park, a hidden jewel in south Tampa. She especially enjoys working with residents to gather their ideas and make sure a park meets their vision for their neighborhood.

Now 63, Potier-Brown says her early steps in her career journey have proven valuable in her second career. Her original degree in psychology taught her how to work effectively with all types of people, from construction workers to residents and bureaucrats. Her marketing background helps her present and sell her ideas for landscape designs.

After 23 years and many successful projects, Potier-Brown's enthusiasm for her work as a landscape architect hasn't dampened a bit.

"I feel I went back to school so I can improve Tampa, my hometown," she said. "I love getting up every day and going to work. It's a passion, not a job. I'm so thankful."



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Potter-Brown's advice for potential career changers?

- Research, research, research.
- Prepare yourself financially.
- Make the decision and go for it.

Former sales exec navigates new career as social entrepreneur



When Christine Acosta tried to get back to work after taking a few years off to care for her ailing father, she figured she'd just pick up where she left off with her high-flying corporate sales career.

"The economy was fabulous when I left, so I just had these visions of walking back into the workplace and saying, 'I'm back.' Well that didn't happen," says Acosta, who like so many others got blindsided by the recent recession.

That setback started a process that ultimately led her to launch [Pedal Power Promoters](#), a social entrepreneurship focused on spearheading bicycle-friendly business certifications in the Tampa Bay area. Like a mountain bike path, the journey to launch her own nonprofit in late 2014 was a long, winding and often uphill climb.

"It was really hard, you do feel lost. I felt like a floating puzzle piece, wondering where am I going to fit?" says Acosta, 53. First, she returned to school, starting at the beginning by earning her associate degree from Hillsborough Community College and then her bachelor's in communication at the University of Tampa.

Connecting with other career changers

As she was finishing her degree she began applying for internships and other work opportunities, but found she wasn't gaining any traction.

"I was applying for various internships, but I sensed there was an age issue. I think people felt uncomfortable hiring someone so much older than themselves. They were looking for a traditional intern," says Acosta. "I felt so discouraged."

At that point, Encore Tampa Bay, a nonprofit that helps people launch new careers, proved instrumental in helping Acosta find her way. Founded by Bevan Gray-Rogel, the organization

specializes in helping people over 50 explore and find their next career opportunity through workshops, community and other resources.

"It was super reassuring to find that I was not a freak. There's an entire wave of mature adults who are faced with these crossroads like me. That was so comforting," says Acosta, who calls herself a "boomette" because she's on the tail end of the baby boomer generation.

The support and resources she got from Encore Tampa Bay were a lifeline as she navigated her new career journey.

Reaching inside and out

"You have to figure out what makes you tick and that's not easy to do. You need a framework, support, exercises," Acosta says. "It was super hard, a good 12 to 18 months of 'Where am I going?' and 'What am I going to do? Am I going to have income? Am I needed?' You have to push yourself really hard, stay focused on your values, on what makes you well."

For Acosta, after watching her father die of Type 2 diabetes, that meant focusing on wellness. During his illness she turned to biking as a way to exercise control through a chaotic time.

"When dad was really sick and I didn't have control I decided to focus on three things -- body, budget and planet -- and looked for any decision that would positively affect one or more of those things. I found that riding my bike was a trifecta."

The idea for combining her passions for wellness and biking in a social enterprise came while conducting "informational interviews," a key networking and career exploration tool recommended by Encore Tampa Bay. Job hunters are encouraged to conduct informal conversations with people in fields of interest to learn about trends and ask advice.

"I think I conducted almost 40 informational interviews. If you put yourself in listen mode and remember you're not there to sell, people are so gracious and nice. Just ask them what they predict will happen in the next five years in their industry or field," says Acosta. "People love to talk about what they do."

During such an interview, Karen Kress, director of transportation and planning for the Tampa Downtown Partnership, told Acosta about a need for an advocate who could get local businesses on board to become more bicycle-friendly. With Acosta's background in corporate business development and community involvement, Kress could see she had the skills to make that happen.

"Karen was very supportive. She could see I had a skill set that would help the partnership achieve some of its goals. She gave me a chance, the opportunity to get started," says Acosta, who has a contract with the Downtown Partnership and City of Tampa to educate, recruit and certify bike-friendly businesses.

As her venture gains momentum, she says Pedal Power Promoters is on track to "put me at a comfortable pace income-wise." But like most social entrepreneurs, money is only one of the rewards of her second career.

"I've never worked harder or had more fun in my professional life," says Acosta. "It's absolutely fantastic to see our region changing for the better and to feel like I'm some small part of it."

Acosta's advice for potential career changers?

- Find a career support group such as [Encore Tampa Bay](#) or other organization.
- Commit to creating your own infrastructure. "When you don't have anywhere to get up and go each day you have to make your own structure," Acosta said. "You've got to set goals

and deadlines. Nothing happens unless you put it on the calendar.”

- Do informational interviews. “Remember to be in listen mode. Period. It takes practice,” she says. “People are giving you that time for you to ask questions and listen, not to listen to your pitch.”

Exploding career myths: Mom shifts from classroom to patrol car



Think you're too old, too young or too afraid to pursue a new career? You should talk to Mary Angelo.

Angelo was in her 40s, had two young daughters and a master's degree in fine arts (MFA) when she made the switch from teaching writing to patrolling the streets as a deputy for the [Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office](#).

Now 51 and loving her work as a sheriff's deputy and training officer, Angelo says she had several misconceptions that had to be dispelled before she realized her longtime interest in the profession wasn't just a pipe dream.

With an older brother who was recruited from high school to be a police officer, she developed an early interest in law enforcement. But she wanted to go to college, and assumed that wasn't the right path for becoming a police officer.

“When I was in college, I still thought about going into law enforcement and picked up a couple of books. This one book scared me to death,” she says. “I considered it, but thought it wasn't a good fit because I was afraid I didn't have the courage to do this job.”

Instead, Angelo pursued her interest in writing, first earning her bachelor's degree at the University of Tampa and then her MFA at University of Florida. She taught to earn a living, as many aspiring writers do. After 10 years of teaching, she took some time off when she had her second child. When it was time to go back to work, she wasn't excited about returning to the classroom.

Knocking down perceived career barriers

“I knew I needed to go back to work, but I knew I didn't want to go back to teaching,” she says. “I didn't dislike it, but I was never passionate about it. I thought I'd like to go back to work at something I'm passionate about, but I had no clue what that was.”

Then a newspaper article about a nontraditional police officer got her attention.

“A bomb exploded in my head when I read this. I thought there were height requirements for law enforcement. I really did. But he was 4 feet 11 inches. And I saw he was 45,” says Angelo, who stands at 5 feet 6 inches. “At the time I was 40 and it never occurred to me that anyone in law enforcement would hire someone that age.”

Realizing that her long ago dream was still a possibility, she did more research.

“I'd go to the library and bring home a stack of books about law enforcement and read them. I remember strategically placing them around the house so that (my husband) John could see them,” she says.

He picked up on the clues.

“He said, ‘So you want to be a detective.’ I told him, ‘maybe some day, but I'd have to start out on patrol,’ ” Angelo recalls.

Despite concerns about her safety, her husband was very supportive.

"He's just amazing," says Angelo. "He's been my greatest support."

From research to ride-along

With her husband on board, she took her research to the next stage. A Temple Terrace resident, she took the Citizens Police Academy course offered by the city's Police Department.

"After that I arranged to do a ride-along with a Temple Terrace officer. At the time he was 21 and I was 41. I asked him about the career and he told me it's the greatest career in the world," says Angelo.

Then she asked him: "What about me?"

"Yeah, you'd love it," he told her.

That summer Angelo applied to the Sheriff's Office. They told her it usually takes three to four months to hear anything. "They called me the next day," she says, laughing.

Once hired, she attended the Sheriff's Office six-month academy, then eight to 10 weeks of hands-on training in shooting, driving, defensive tactics and other skills. After her training, "I went out on the street with various training officers to learn on the job. You gradually take over doing more of the job."

She received pay and full benefits while attending the academy and training, a practice the Sheriff's Office continues.

After the official training period, Angelo started patrolling on her own, explaining that new officers "can call anyone you want with questions. It's an extremely complex job. I would call colleagues three to four times a day ... for the first couple of years you're getting advice all the time. And just because you're alone in the car doesn't mean you go into dangerous situations alone."

As a mother, she says a key to making it work involved getting help caring for her daughters, ages 4 and 9 when she started.

"I'm lucky. I had tremendous support from my husband and his mother," she says.

As a new officer she was assigned the night shift for over five years, but the timing worked for her. "That way I could sleep, and then get up and pick up the kids at school," she says.

Now that her daughters are teenagers, Angelo says she likes the opportunity to work different types of shifts. For example, one week she might work five 12-hour days, but then have plenty of time off the next week, giving her more time to be with her daughters than a traditional schedule.

"I like the schedule and I love going to work every day," says Angelo. As a training officer now, she sees many new recruits with bachelor's degrees, although that's not a requirement. "There's a lot of opportunity. I think it's an excellent agency, a great agency to work for. I'm impressed with their hiring process and I think they have some of the best training in the country. The recruits I train, I'm kind of amazed sometimes how good they are."

What about the risks?

"There's no arguing that it's a very dangerous job. The amount of guns on the street in the last three to four years has probably quadrupled," Angelo says. "But we have excellent training, which is what I try to convey and enforce with my recruits. There are things you can do to keep yourself safer ... it's frankly harder on the spouse than the officer."

How do her daughters feel about having a mother patrolling the streets?

"They've grown up with me in it. I tell them a lot of stories from work, so it's not unknown," she says, adding that there are some things she doesn't talk about.

While she's not "totally sure" why she enjoys law enforcement so much more than teaching, she points to specific qualities. "I know being inside a building all day wasn't for me. I like people, and I have constant interaction with people. I like the physical movement. I like that every day I'm doing something different."

Angelo's advice for potential career changers?

- Be prepared for the requirements of the job: "Know realistically what they are. I worked nights for over five years," she says.
- Don't romanticize the job: For example, law enforcement isn't all action. "Of a 12-hour shift I spend three to four hours writing reports. A lot of people don't realize how much documenting what we do is a huge part of the job." She advises that people do internships or go to work with someone to learn about a profession. "What you think they do isn't necessarily the reality."
- Understand that your career interests change over time: "We change as we get older and have a better idea of what we like career-wise," says Angelo.

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