

Third Act

How female boomers are redefining themselves

By Eileen Spatz



I guess it makes perfect sense. A generation ago, when women were rarely employed outside the home, most women just gradually slipped into their later years without any earth shattering developments. For women in my mother's generation—and my mom being the only mom among my group of friends who had a career—the transition from being mothers and caretakers of the family to enjoying their golden years was a seamless trek, passing smoothly from one life phase to the next.

Well, we boomer gals are known for being trailblazers and go-getters, so even in our late fifties we march to a different beat. Not content to just let the years roll by uneventfully, women are hitting new strides in mid-life. I count myself among this new breed, having started two fledgling businesses this year at age 58. But it seems that more and more of my friends are themselves redefining their lives; by starting businesses, consultancies, returning to college to get an advanced degree, or seeking promotions in their fields.

To be sure, there is much fear that goes hand-in-hand with all this trail blazing. Doubts and insecurities can squelch our best-laid plans right in their tracks. Can I pass that class

in the masters program? Will anyone actually pay for my services or buy my tchotchkes? This crazy evolution can at times seem, well, crazy, and definitely isn't for the feint of heart.

So what are the driving forces that are inspiring such latent productivity among our female boomers? In pondering this question, consider the following probable scenarios:

The empty nest

Women who experience the phenomenon of their children vacating the premises most definitely go through a form of mid-life crisis. In an instant, it seems, all that purpose we had as mothers goes up in a puff of smoke as our last child drives their stuffed-to-the-brim vehicle away from the family home. Although we experience the glee of returning home in the evenings to find the house looking just as tidy as when we left in the morning, there is a lump in our throats when it sinks in that we no longer have a purpose in life. Sure, we revel in the fact that we don't have to cook and clean so much now, and that our weekends are not defined by ball games and tournaments. As involved moms, we have done our time and paid those dues many times over. But when you find yourself feeling a little lost in all that undefined spare time, the idea to forge a new purpose emerges.

Divorce and widowhood

No doubt that the earth shattering events that lead to singlehood in one's 50s are big motivators to find new and creative ways to increase our net pay. Whether we were employed or not during marriage, once single the vast majority of us will be forced to earn a chunk of change to make ends meet. Instead of settling for a low paying job in the local mall, women without a mate are more likely to take classes or get certified in a specific field or skill to better themselves. If feasible, single women at this stage of life often start a business—and the sky's the limit. Because of the parallel workspace of both brick and mortar and digital, there are now two avenues to plumb to find our new niche in the work world. And nothing motivates people like financial necessity, so while in a relationship you had a financial backstop, as a single woman pushing 60 you have got to scramble.

Retirement

Holy moly, suddenly the reality that our golden years are only a decade away sends shivers down our collective spines. Realizing that the cost of parenthood meant less money available to stash away, the big financial setbacks of 2000 and 2008 taking tolls on our 401Ks, the high cost and financial fallout of divorce, and the probability that we may live a long, long time brings retirement planning sharply into focus. Once the numbers are crunched, and crunched to bits it seems, we realize we had better get on it

during this next decade. Spouses are convening to come up with a strategy together, where they consider ways to supplement income with side businesses or advanced degrees. Singles are creating multiple revenue streams by working smarter; working from home to save commute time and expense, or asking for that long delayed raise, or looking for promotions either at their company or elsewhere. There is no rest for the weary in our fifties these days. Chop chop!

Life enrichment

Sometimes there is no cataclysmic event that launches a new career path in later life. Sometimes it is simply a choice to deepen our interests and challenge ourselves. Maybe after a couple of decades of the status quo, be it as a stay-at-home mom or at a comfy job, we find we have become complacent and squishy, figuratively speaking—or literally. Fifty somethings are becoming more active and fit these days, as the burgeoning growth in the fields of health and fitness attest. With more free time, women are not only growing their own new businesses but also getting out to hike, paddle board, and join a Pilates or yoga class, among many other healthy activities. At this stage of life, and determined to have no regrets in life, a long ago desire to work in a certain field may be revisited. Many women are also finding their passions in volunteer activities, fitting the hours into their schedules sometimes on a weekly basis, and making new friends along with this new purpose.

Whatever the motivation or reason for redefining our lives as we approach the final third (we can only hope for a good 90 year run, right?), one thing is clear. There are many energetic, smart, fit, interesting, intelligent, and beautiful women discovering that there is plenty of life left to live, so why not max it out?