

Just Say No to Retirement

By Kim Painter

For most of human history, there was no such thing as retirement. Life was short, and most workers kept on working until they could not work any longer. Then came the 20th century. Social Security, pension plans, and a growing leisure industry helped invent retirement to move aging workers out of the way of their younger and, presumably, more productive colleagues. In many workplaces, mandatory retirement rules made it official. If you were 65, it was time to trade your desk chair in for a recliner.

Today, mandatory retirement rules are illegal, except in a few jobs, such as air traffic control. And growing numbers of people well past 65 are just saying no to that recliner.

For some, working is a financial necessity, especially after the recession and market downturn of a decade back. But 80 percent of older workers say they work because they want to, not because they have to, according to a survey from Bank of America and Age Wave. Those workers put money fifth on a list of top benefitsâ??below mental stimulation, physical activity, social connection, and self-worth.

More people are realizing that working longer â??is not just good for oneâ??s wealth, itâ??s good for oneâ??s health,â?• says Paul Irving, chairman of the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging.

Despite this willing wave of older workers, obstacles remain.

â??The principal barrier is ageism,â?• Irving says. â??Thereâ??s still this unfair view that we have this frail, cognitively challenged group of older people who are expensive and in the doctorâ??s office every day. Thatâ??s nonsense.â?•

Helen Dennis, co-author of the book, *Project Renewment: The First Retirement Model for Career Women*, says the perception that older workers are a burden is slowly giving way to a new reality. â??We not only have increased life expectancy, we have more people experiencing the upside of aging in their later years, into their 80s or 90s.â?•

Dennis, who is 77 herself, says she hopes that will be her story. â??I am passionate about my work, and for me personally, as long as I have the physical and mental capability to continue, I am going to do it,â?• she says.

Thatâ??s a common attitude among older workers. Some apply their energies to new careers, part-time jobs, or civic pursuits. Others, like Dennis, continue their lifeâ??s work, full steam ahead. Here are four of their stories.

The Medical Researcher

Hematologist Robert Kyle first came to Mayo Clinic as a fellow in 1953. He left a couple of timesâ??for military service and another fellowshipâ??then joined the faculty in 1961, a record that he believes makes him the longest-serving physician there. But even at age 90, he notes, heâ??s not quite the oldest. Thereâ??s a Mayo neurologist who is six months older.

Kyle also points out that, technically, heâ??s retired. His title is â??supplemental consultant,â?• and the position is unpaid. He stopped seeing patients nearly two decades ago.

But, make no mistake, Kyle still is hard at work, researching a group of conditions known as plasma cell proliferative disorders. The best known of these conditions is multiple myeloma, a cancer that affects white blood cells. He did seminal work that classified the disorders and changed their treatment. Kyleâ??s most recent scientific paperâ??one of his roughly 1,100 peer-reviewed papers and book chaptersâ??was a 40-year follow-up of certain patients published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*.

â??If you had asked me when I was in my 50s if I would retire at 65, I would have said â??yesâ??,â?• Kyle says. â??But when I reached that level, I found that I was still very interested in what I was doing.â?• His research was reaching an exciting phase, Kyle says. It was no time to step aside.

Kyle continues to work a full day; heâ??s in the office shortly after 7 a.m. and stays until 4:30 p.m. or so.

How does a nonagenarian keep that up? Good health habits help. Kyle walks to and from work, about 10 minutes each way, helping him to rack up between 8,000 and 10,000 steps on his fitness tracker each day. He also gets to the gym a couple times a week and eats a healthful diet.

â??My health is very good. I take no medications,â?• Kyle says. Part of that, he says, is sheer genetic luck. â??Iâ??ve really been blessed.â?•

Kyle also is blessed with a large and supportive family, including his wife, Charlene, and their four children and five grandchildren. Kyle still travels extensively for work but usually takes along a family member and combines business with pleasureâ??seeing historic sites, museums, and other points of interest.

He knows contemporaries who are happy with a life of card games, lectures, and other leisure activities. But that life is not for him, at least not yet, he says. He does have one consuming hobby: stamp collecting. But heâ??s been combining that with his work for the past several decades.

His position with Mayo is up for review in 2019, and, right now, he says, â??I would like to continue.â?•

The Arts Booster

Ann Oppenhimer, 82, also insists she is technically retired. She left her job as an art history instructor at the University of Richmond back in 1992. But she now works full time at her unpaid job as executive director of the Folk Art Society of America.

Oppenhimer and her 86-year-old husband, Boo (William), a retired obstetrician and gynecologist, helped found the society in 1987. The two first developed a passion for folk art with trips through the Deep South in the early 1980s. They became major collectors and have filled their home in Richmond, Virginia, with the works of the self-taught artists they continue to meet in their travels in the U.S. and elsewhere.

â??We enjoy meeting the artists more than any other part of it,â?• Ann Oppenhimer says.

Her day-to-day work mostly revolves around editing the societyâ??s thrice-yearly magazine, *The Folk Art Messenger*. She and her husband, the societyâ??s chief financial officer, also spearhead planning for a yearly conference that typically attracts about 100 people to locations around the country. This year, they are planning a first: a meeting outside the U.S., in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Ann Oppenhimer stays in shape by practicing ballet, something she has done for 30 years. The two also make regular trips to a fitness center, eat healthfully, and drink moderately. The couple, both previously married, each have three children and are the proud grandparents of 11 young people.

They enjoy their full lives and have no immediate plans to retire from their non-retirement jobs. â??We are definitely going to quit at 100,â?• Boo Oppenhimer jokes.

â??We are in good health, and we are enjoying what we are doing, so we will continue as long as we can,â?• Ann Oppenhimer says. â??I canâ??t imagine stopping work at 65. I think it would be so boring.â?•

She believes that work helps keep people vital. She says she sees that in folk artists, many of whom begin making art after a lifetime of other work, in everything from welding to farming.

â??We do find that the folk artists we have gotten to know tend to live a long time,â?• she says. â??They take up art to pass the time, and it gives them something to live for.â?•

The Attorney

Stephen Swindle ran into a friend one day at his Salt Lake City country club. â??He said, â??Itâ??s good to see you. When are you going to slow down and smell the roses?â??â?•

As he drove away that day, Swindle had an epiphany. While the friend may have been talking about retiring or cutting back on work, Swindle saw things differently. â??I thought, â??I smell the roses every dayâ??â??smelling the roses is doing something purposeful in your life,â?• he says.

That was 25 years ago, when Swindle was in his early 50s. Today, heâ??s 77 and still smelling and enjoying the same roses as a full-time attorney specializing in estate and tax planning at the firm Fabian VanCott. He has no plans to retire.

â??Quite honestly, itâ??s not something that Iâ??ve struggled with â?¦ I have never connected chronological age with my desire and aspirations to do anything in life,â?• he says.

For many years, Swindle was managing partner of his firm. While he gave up that role a few years ago, after a merger, â??I have not eased up at all,â?• he says. â??I have a great client base and like working hard.â?•

Swindle also plays pretty hard. â??I work out. I go for spin classes. I do bike trips all over the world. Iâ??ve hiked mountains.â?• In the next few months, he plans a golf trip in Scotland and a bike trip in Nova Scotia.

He often travels with his wife, Sonnie, 70, who also continues to work as owner of Bloomingsales, a floral and gift shop. The two still find plenty of time to spend with their two children and six grandchildren. One family tradition is an annual trip to Mexico.

Swindle does have some friends who â??have retired and are doing a multitude of good things,â?• he says. â??There are people who do it well.â?• But, he says, â??I also have friends who I think have retired too soon, and their purpose in life is waning. That has not been good for them.â?•

The Entrepreneur

Bill Whisenant describes himself as a â??young 73.â?• To say he is not even considering retirement is an understatement.

â??Iâ??m a very intense, hyperactive person,â?• says the chief executive officer of Isochem Colors, a manufacturer of dyes, flame retardants, ultraviolet coatings, and other specialty chemicals in Clover, South Carolina. â??If I retired and went home, my wife would probably divorce me,â?• Whisenant

says.

Thatâ??s a joke, he says, but he truly believes that he would find retirement a poor fit. â??My brain is just not there. As long as I am physically capable, I will always do this. This is my hobby.â?•

It helps, Whisenant says, that his business, which he started with a partner back in 1990, is truly a family affair. His son, Todd, is company president, and his son-in-law, Jeff Zavitkovsky, is vice president. The family bought out Whisenantâ??s original business partner about a decade ago.

A typical workday for Whisenant still means a full 9-to-5 stretch at his desk in Clover. But the job also means lots of travel, including visits to clients in California, Europe, India, and China. Whisenant enjoys the trips and usually takes his wife, Alcy, along.

â??It gives us an opportunity to see the world,â?• he says. â??I have the best of both worlds; I can work and play at the same time.â?•

He finds time to play closer to home as well, especially at the familyâ??s weekend home in Isle of Palms, near Charleston, South Carolina. He and his wife spend time with their children and five grandchildren. He also loves to fish and to hunt quail, rabbit, and duck, and often takes clients to a hunting lodge he owns on 50 acres near the town of Union.

Whisenant makes it a point to walk three miles a day. He says he is looking forward to getting a bum knee fixed so he can keep up that healthful hobby for many years to come.

He plans to keep moving ahead at work as well. â??I have friends who ran companies until they were in their 90s and woke up dead one day,â?• he says. Asked if that sounds like a good thing, he answers: â??Absolutely.â?•

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