

CAREER RE-DO

We all toy with the idea of switching careers, doing something completely different and new. But how many of us have the guts to quit our jobs and pursue our professional passions? Meet three women who did just that, and they'll tell you how you can do it too...

By Megan Handley | Photos by Barb Levant

FINANCIAL CONSULTANT TO FASHION DIVA

After graduating with high honors from the University of Illinois in 1997, Kathryn McKechnie, 32, embarked on a lucrative career in the finance industry, first as a credit analyst for a Chicago banking corporation and later as a consultant for a financial management group. After bouncing around to various local companies trying to find the right fit for her qualifications and professional goals, Kathryn says, "I came to the conclusion that I was tired of being a support person and started thinking about what I really wanted to do."

Fascinated by the fashion industry since she can remember, Kathryn found her ultimate inspiration doing something she loves: shopping on Michigan Avenue. "I not only have a figure that is challenging to dress, I also have wide feet that don't like to fit into medium shoes!" she laments. This all-too-familiar predicament found Kathryn in a perpetual search for comfortable but attractive shoes and pitted against designers who ignore the fact that only 4 percent of women have ideal figures. "I ended up trying on a pair of Taryn Rose shoes. The shoes fit and I had been looking for so long that the price tag seemed a little easier to swallow. They are still the most expensive shoes I have ever purchased but I was impressed by the fact that an orthopedic surgeon had started the shoe company instead of going into private practice after completing her residency," Kathryn explains.

After a particularly disappointing stint in another support finance staff position and earning only "meets expectations" on her job review, Kathryn decided, "It was time to do something about my dream. I don't do 'meets expectations,' I set very high standards for myself and 'meets expectations' was the slap in the face I needed to get going on my dream."

To jumpstart her new endeavor into the fashion industry, Kathryn enrolled in the Illinois Institute of Art for Fashion Marketing and Management. "I really liked it," Kathryn says, "but at the rate of one class a quarter, I knew I would never finish." With the support of her husband and family, Kathryn reduced her hours as a financial consultant and squeezed a full-time student schedule into a two-day time slot. Kathryn admits there were considerable challenges but she overcame them with the moral support of her husband and adhering to a fitness program.

"It was busy working three days a week and going to school two days a week. Luckily, the program wasn't nearly as rigorous as a major university, so I still had part of a life!" she says. Eventually, burned out by the constant demands on her time and energy from work and school, Kathryn quit her job in order to more fully pursue her fashion career. "I quit my job and haven't regretted it a bit. I cook more and go out to eat less and have found that cooking is another one of my passions," she says.

As Kathryn continues to pursue her dream of designing a fashion line for full-figured women, she experiences apprehensions and doubts. "Sometimes all of the things I need to accomplish seem overwhelming," she admits, "but in my heart, I know my clothing line for curvier women is going to be a success."

Although Kathryn enjoyed a higher salary as a financial consultant, she continues to forge ahead with her new career. "I finally realized that I need to be doing something I love, not something that gets that direct deposit into my bank account," she says. "Follow your passion. You are never too old to go for it! You are never locked into your career. It doesn't matter how much money you make doing it, if you don't love it, you won't want to get out of bed to do it every day."



(above) Kathryn McKechnie who says, "It doesn't matter how much money you make doing it, if you don't love it, you won't want to get out of bed to do it every day." (top right) Mary Ellen Christian. (bottom right) Connie Fairbanks.



MARKETING MAVEN TO PET CARE PROFESSIONAL

Torn between love for her dog, Billy, and the travel requirements of her marketing job at a technology consulting firm, Mary Ellen Christian constantly faced the dilemma of finding adequate lodging and care for her canine companion while she was away on business. After the serious decline of the technology sector, Mary Ellen seized the opportunity to leave her desk job and applied her business skills and love of animals to start up her own company, Chicago Dog Duty, in 2002.

Recognizing the acute need for high-quality pet sitting services designed to give owners peace of mind, Mary Ellen scoured the Internet, local libraries and attended several seminars in preparation to launch her business. "I spent all of my free time online and in libraries seeking out resources and learning everything possible about caring for animals." Most importantly, Mary Ellen enrolled in a training program to become a certified professional pet sitter.

But launching her business was not a simple walk in the park. "I knew that my love of animals alone would not lead customers to my door and that it was important to set my company apart from alternative pet care providers," Mary Ellen explains. With that in mind, Mary Ellen focused on building a clientele base founded on offering unique and passionate pet care personalized to meet the specific needs of owners and their pets. "I knew that in order to provide this type of service, I wouldn't be able to rely solely on the knowledge gained through books and seminars. Pet owners know their pets best so I meet with new clients before any service begins and focus on every detail of instruction about their pet's care," she says.

Five years later, Mary Ellen continues to enjoy the growth and success of her fledgling venture. Although she admits the first years of her business involved long hours and hard work, Mary Ellen says, "The pet care industry has provided me a way to enjoy the rewards, personally and professionally, of entrepreneurship. I never started this business thinking I was doing it to pay my mortgage bill...the fact that it does is just a bonus!"

Mary Ellen advises anyone wanting to leave the corporate world to work for themselves, "Don't let others set limits for you. You have to listen to your heart and go at your own pace," she says. "I love what I do and I feel like a lucky dog each and every day!"



STELLAR SALESWOMAN TO PUBLISHED AUTHOR

A true "jack of all trades," Connie Fairbanks is no stranger to sticking her toe into uncharted waters. Originally in sales and marketing, Connie completely switched gears in 1998 to pursue her dream of onstage stardom. "The biggest career switch was definitely going into acting, the other careers were all related and I was able to apply everything I had learned," she says.

Nevertheless, Connie courageously dove into show business and took lots of private and group lessons to shore up her chances of surviving in the brutal industry. Inspired by Kathleen Turner in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, "I took many classes, talked with a lot of people in the business and hit the pavement getting agents and going to auditions," Connie says. Hindered by the responsibilities of her job, Connie remembers juggling acting classes, rehearsals and shoots at night—all for experience and little pay.

Connie concedes that being financially secure from the savings and investments she made in her 30s and being free from the responsibilities of a family enabled her to branch out and follow her dreams. Still she admits, "I went from six figures, bonuses and stock options to low four figures, taking public transportation and shaking the last bit of shampoo out of the bottle!"

But she has no regrets. "Taking the curtain call at a play or hearing laughter from the audience makes it all worth it," Connie says. "It's better than any bonus!"

Now seven years later, the chameleon-like Connie is moving on to yet another career with the publication of her first cookbook, *Scratch That* (which can be purchased now at Oil & Vinegar, The Book Bin, The Book Stall, and Books on Vernon or through her Web site, www.ConnieFairbanks.com). Connie's glad she finally decided to fuse her culinary training and passion for food with publishing. "It's fun to have my new cookbook reviewed, to hear that I inspired someone or made a difference," she says.

Between being in the spotlight on stage and crafting her latest culinary creation, Connie always remains committed to her friends, family and community. For those hesitant about giving up the corner office to follow their dreams, Connie says, "Develop a plan and work at it every day. Make sure you have funds in the bank, and decide what you're willing to give up to make it happen. Don't look back and say 'I wish I would have done this.' Life is short! Go for it and laugh as much as you can!" ■