BRIGHT IDEA Austin artisan Todd Sanders has a singular focus: doing work he loves.

***The rungs on the* corporate ladder are broken. The economy has forced many of us to think smaller. And a decade-plus of social upheaval has us longing for something more centering and fulfilling. These changes have spurred a radically new approach to the way we live and earn our livings. The great news is it's working.**

by TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER

photography by JEFF WILSON, DAVE LAURIDSEN, KEVIN MIYAZAKI, & DAN ROOT

THE NEW AMERICAN DREAM

AS A WEB PROGRAMMER, Mike Schmiedicke wasn't just doing fine financially—he was doing great. He'd been working on information systems at research libraries, and as the Internet grew so did the scope of his opportunities. He was contracted by the federal government to program large databases and, eventually, websites. That led to a partnership in a thriving Web development business. As he entered his late 30s, he had it all: a great family and an enviable career. So why was he so miserable?

He'd been working for 15 years before the whispers of discontent became too loud to ignore. "I don't want to be a programmer in my 50s," he told his wife, Dian.

Around 2003, he began crafting furniture in the garage of their home in Front Royal, Virginia. Nothing formal. When his daughter was born and he and Dian were considering buying a rocking chair, Mike figured he'd make it himself. He did. It wasn't bad. There was woodworking in his blood. In Bavaria, his great-grandfather had been a woodworker, as had his grandfather in Michigan a generation later. But Mike's grandfather had made a conscious decision not to pass the trade on to his children. He wanted them in college, and into college they went.

Mike's moonlight noodling—the sawing and sanding and shaping of that rocking chair and a scattering of other small, personal projects—generated buzz around town. Through word of mouth, he began to take on—and charge for—commissions. Nothing big, maybe two a month. And he had never been happier.

However, this wasn't the time to make big life changes. Dian was in graduate school getting a teaching certificate, and they had, Mike remembers, "bills coming out of our ears." But with Dian's support, he put together a five-year plan. In his off-hours, he would make and sell children's furniture. The day-job/night-job routine was not, he says, "for the faint of heart."

But the furniture business blossomed, and as it did he began to off-load much of his programming work to his partners. Then the craziest thing happened—Mike's life began to look like the life he'd long ago imagined: Not one in which he was yoked to a desk and a computer, but one in which his children happily milled around him

THE COMEBACK KID At the Unique Space, Sonja nurtures the creatives of her native L.A., to which she returned after 13 years in Canada.

THE **CATALYSTS**

***For the New American Dreamer,* independence can be thrilling—and lonely. For that reason, co-working spaces and startup incubators are on the rise. And it's the infectious energy of savvy motivators and mentors like Sonja Rasula that drives their success.**

L.A.–based entrepreneur Sonja Rasula wore a number of hats before finding her true calling. In her 20s, she worked as an editor at Harlequin and was cast on interior-design makeover TV shows. But her gift for bringing creatives together blossomed in 2008, when she created Unique LA, a design marketplace featuring 350 of America's best artisans. Her goal was to put L.A. art and design on the map—and money in designers' pockets. Fast-forward five years. In 2013, Sonja founded The Unique Space, a vast co-working space in L.A.'s Arts District, and CAMP, a business-skills retreat in California's High Sierra mountains. Both ventures are aimed at helping entrepreneurs and giving them the tools to succeed. The Unique Space is particularly vital. Housed in an 18,000-square-foot building, it features 14 private studios, an open work space for 60 members, a kitchen, dining room, and rooftop terrace. "Co-working allows people who own their own business and work alone to have a home base and community," Sonja says. "It gives them stimulation, and it's great for networking." *—Melinda Mahaffey Icden*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE LAURIDSEN

in a workshop. Most importantly, he was making something real, something that could be touched, something that would outlast Mike himself. The algorithms of programming, the Web development, the surge into new cyberfrontiers lacked sufficient mystery for Mike. Instead, he remembers, "I'd look at a piece of raw wood and think, *What can this become? What can my hands do?* I had to answer those questions."

The big break came in 2009, when a restaurateur in suburban Philadelphia approached Mike about outfitting three of his eateries with custom furniture. Mike said yes. Three years later, at the age of 44, he left his desk job for good.

WORKADAY DRUDGERY has had a healthy run, hasn't it? The Industrial Revolution, which began in the mid–18th century, gave us factories, and those factories—catalyzed by teeming workforces—were managed by managers managed by managers managed by still more managers. Et voilà! The corporate life as we know it.

And we leaned into it. We took big jobs, climbed ladders, wrecked glass ceilings—and were grateful to be able to. As we returned from the World Wars and grabbed at the American Dream, we delighted in job stability and safety—something our immigrant parents had never conceived would be so prevalent. We had children and contributed to 401(k)s, bought patches of American soil and built homes on them. The formula for such sweet and enduring success was straightforward: Attend college, graduate to a job in one of the country's many bustling industries, show up on time, be productive and loyal, and retire with a gold watch after 40 years.

Although there were recessional dips along the way and gradual changes in wealth distribution had, for decades, been squeezing the average working American, nothing hammered us quite like the market collapse of 2008. Up and down Main Street, once-steady businesses were shuttered. Newspapers and magazines folded. Discouraging phrases like "income inequality," "jobless recovery," "catastrophic health insurance," and "the 47 percent" became everyday language. Even the most industrious among us were sent home with two weeks' severance and a boxful of our belongings.

"The way we think about work is changing," says Linda Barrington, executive director of the Institute for Compensation Studies at Cornell

TRUE GRIT Although a winter storm recently destroyed their greenhouse, Kiyoshi and Emma wouldn't think of packing it in.

★ THE RURALISTS

***As Americans become aware* of issues with the food supply and more eager to eat organically and live sustainably, a crop of first-generation farmers like Kiyoshi Mino and Emma Lincoln have shed careers to harvest the bounty.**

After marrying in 2007, Kiyoshi Mino and Emma Lincoln longed to spend more time together but found that their careers—he was an Army vet intending to pursue work in Third-World development; she was a preservation librarian—were pulling them apart. There were other factors contributing to their desire for change: During his time in Afghanistan, Kiyoshi had been inspired by the locals to live more simply, and Emma had found herself troubled by what she'd read about food production in the U.S. In 2010, they decided to switch gears, and after a year of studying at The Farm School in Orange, Massachusetts, they took a 40-year lease on 10 acres of land in Forest, Illinois. Today, the young couple, both 34, operates Lucky Duck Farm, where they sustainably raise sheep, steers, pigs, chickens, and ducks; and organically grow Asian vegetables, selling their products at a farmers' market in Chicago. It hasn't been easy; Illinois is in the middle of a record-breaking drought. But it's been worth it. "In the face of the millions of acres around us that are being farmed conventionally, our 10 acres are a drop in the bucket," Emma says. "But it's gratifying when you realize how many people in Chicago are eating a little bit better because of us." —*MMI*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MIYAZAKI

University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. "Coming in at the bottom and working your way up the ladder isn't [a reliable option] anymore."

ONE OF THE REASONS is elemental: There *is* no bottom in an era where bank tellers are so easily replaced by ATMs, bookkeepers with personal computing software. Even in service sectors like hospitality and retail, where the recent expansion of low-paying jobs hints at growth, there may be, Barrington says, "fewer middle rungs to build a career path from."

All of this is particularly impactful on the Millennials—those born in the 1980s when, as Barrington puts it, "the Rust Belt was rusting." Lately, the job market hasn't been especially kind to any group, but those born in 1982 or later are being hit particularly hard; as of October, their jobless rate was 15.2 percent, compared with the 7.3-percent national average.

"Millennials saw so clearly what happened to their parents through the '80s or during the recent recession. They realized that corporate America is not necessarily going to be loyal to you," says Lindsey Pollak, author of *Getting from College to Career: Your Essential Guide to Succeeding in the Real World* and a researcher who focuses on Millennials and leadership. "If law firms don't want to make you a partner, they won't. If IBM wants to lay off 10,000 people, they will. Now we're seeing it in medicine and law. Twenty years ago, if you were a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, you thought that was a job for life. That's not the case anymore, and I think Millennials are really savvy about it. They have no illusions that any job is for life or that any career is safe."

Conversely, they've witnessed extraordinary breakthroughs made by outliers—entrepreneurs who innately distrusted corporate conventions and limitations. "Millennials have had amazing role models for innovation and success," says Barrington, "the Steve Jobses and the Microsofts"—businesses born in garages with no infrastructure and certainly no secretaries. "They've grown up seeing those successes and saying, 'If I do something I believe in....'" Those somethings don't necessarily have to be creative. But if Mark Zuckerberg's story tells us anything—and having been turned into an Oscar-winning movie, it does—what rules now is knowing what you want to do and not waiting to do it.

In a recent Pew Research Center study, half the respondents rated having a job you enjoy as being "extremely important." That emotional 180 from the miserable platitude "That's why they call it *work*" reflects a number of core shifts in the culture. "You're seeing friends unemployed," Barrington says. "You're hearing on the news that you're not going to do as well as your parents did. So you might as well do what you enjoy—especially if you're not going to be paid as well as your parents were."

But it's far more visceral than that. The existential upheaval of 9/11—not to mention the subsequent wars, the seemingly endless rash of school shootings, the deepening cynicism about governmental leadership, etc.—has reconfigured our lives in measureable and still ineffable ways. Born of all this chaos is an ethos adopted by many Millennials, but one that may well define 21st-century life for the rest of us, too: YOLO (or You Only Live Once). Yes, it can be a rationalization for reckless behavior. But it has been a spur for uncharacteristically bold decision-making, too—especially when it comes to how we earn our livings. In a rapidly changing and unreliable job market, it's not much of a leap from YOLO to DIY.

Emily Matchar, author of *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity*, understands the lure of the Do-It-Yourself spirit epitomized by Mike's ditching of the digital life for a fine piece of pine. "You are in charge of your own work," she says, "whether that means you're working totally freelance or for a small company with flexibility. And [there's a greater chance] you'll be doing something you find fulfilling."

In a recent Pew Research Center study, half the respondents rated having a job you enjoy as being "extremely important."

Increasingly, that fulfillment is being found in things tactile and earthbound. "Maybe it's because we're living in a high-tech world, but there has been a real nostalgia for hands-on work and handmade things," Matchar says.

It's true. A growing number of Americans are abandoning traditional CONTINUED ON PAGE 83

THE ETSY GENERATION

***The online crafts fair that* got its start in 2005 is no longer home to just hand-knit beanies and other folksy finds. Nine years in, Etsy is a bustling e-marketplace whose sellers are being courted by the likes of West Elm and Anthropologie. Here, six homegrown makers talk about what they do and how they do it.**

WIND & WILLOW HOME

***Araya Jensen*, MINNEAPOLIS**

"After 12 years as a kitchen and bath designer, I was laid off in 2011. I grew up making things by hand, so I went back to what I knew. It started with hand-dipping wooden spoons in a rubber material I mix myself. I was getting wholesale orders a month in, and three years later I've grown this into a career." *Set of two wooden salad bowls, $64; etsy.com/shop/windandwillowhome*

HOMAKO

***Yoko Vega*, LOS ANGELES**

"Using materials like felt and fabric, I create jewelry that is both textural and lightweight. When I'm not fulfilling orders by hand, I'm experimenting with new designs." *Origami Hana Rope necklace, $60; etsy.com/shop/homako*

LOLAFALK

***Lauren Falkowski*, BROOKLYN, NY**

"I learned how to sew six and a half years ago on a whim. At first it was just basic bags with raggedy edges and no lining. Now it's how I make my living." *Men's leather billfold, $58; etsy.com/shop/lolafalkdesigns*

SILLY BUDDY

***Hande Cengiz*, CHICAGO**

"My husband and I got our dog, Buddy, after we graduated from college. I started making him collars, and soon some of my friends were asking me to make them for their dogs. Within a year of taking my first job at an architecture firm, I quit to focus on Silly Buddy full time." *Nautical stripes bowtie dog collar, $43; etsy.com/shop/sillybuddy*

HRUSKAA

***Melissa Hruskaa*, GRAND RAPIDS, MI**

"This hanging planter is inspired by the Himmeli mobile, a Finnish piece that celebrates the start of the winter solstice." *Brass Himmeli prism No. 2, $49; etsy.com/shop/hruskaa*

HERBIVORE BOTANICALS

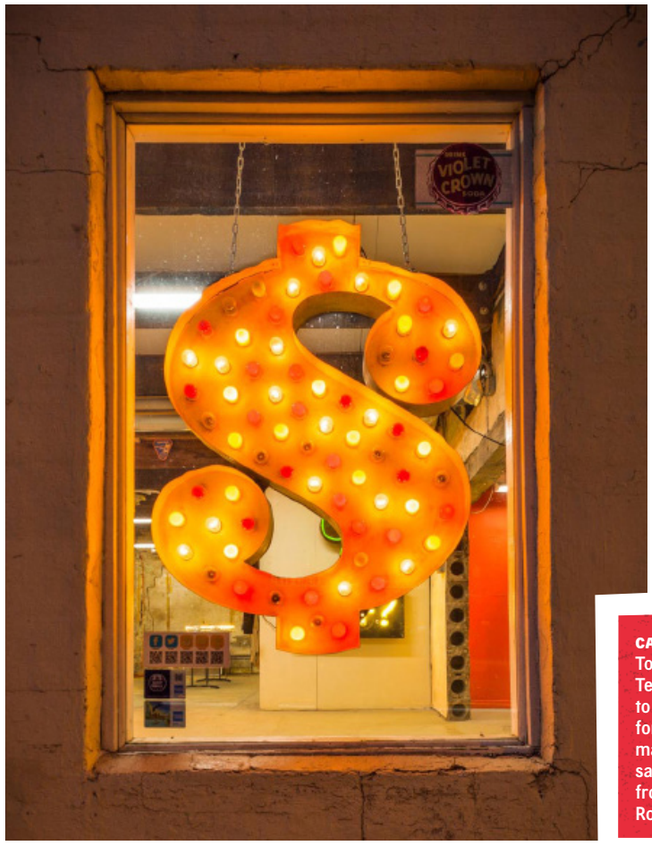
***Julia Wills and Alex Kummerow*, SEATTLE** "We started experimenting with natural skin care after our local handmade soap shop closed. Products in our line contain gemstone powders from Brazil, volcanic salts from Hawaii, and activated bamboo charcoal from Japan." *Products $9–$68; etsy.com/shop/herbivorebotanicals*

THE ARTISANS

Craftsmanship has never **really gone away, although in the aspirational decades of the late 20th century, "working with your hands" wasn't the most noble of phrases. Thrillingly, there's a renewed appreciation for things handmade and for people like Todd Sanders, who are literally wielding the tools of inspiration.**

"There's something about neon. It's this light that speaks to the core of me," Todd Sanders says. "It grabs me like a moth to a flame." Today, the 46-year-old Austin, Texas–based artist is celebrated for his vintage-style neon art pieces—he has a four-month waiting list for his work, which has been featured in *Esquire*, *Fortune*, and the films of Terrence Malick and Robert Rodriguez. But the road wasn't always so smooth.

In fact, Todd's journey began with a bumpy 1992 road trip. In his sophomore year of college in Southeast Texas, the graphic design major had already fallen in love with signage. And when he and a buddy ended up in Austin after making a wrong turn off the highway, he was entranced by what he found. "We were driving around town, and within 15 minutes—20 tops—I said, 'I am going to move here, and I am going to build neon signs.' My friend thought I was nuts, but that's exactly what I did," says Todd, who, a few months shy of school-year's



CAPITAL GAINS
Todd credits Austin, Texas, with inspiring him to be an original and go for his dreams. "Austin made me who I am," he says. Today, he works from his studio/gallery, Roadhouse Relics.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF WILSON

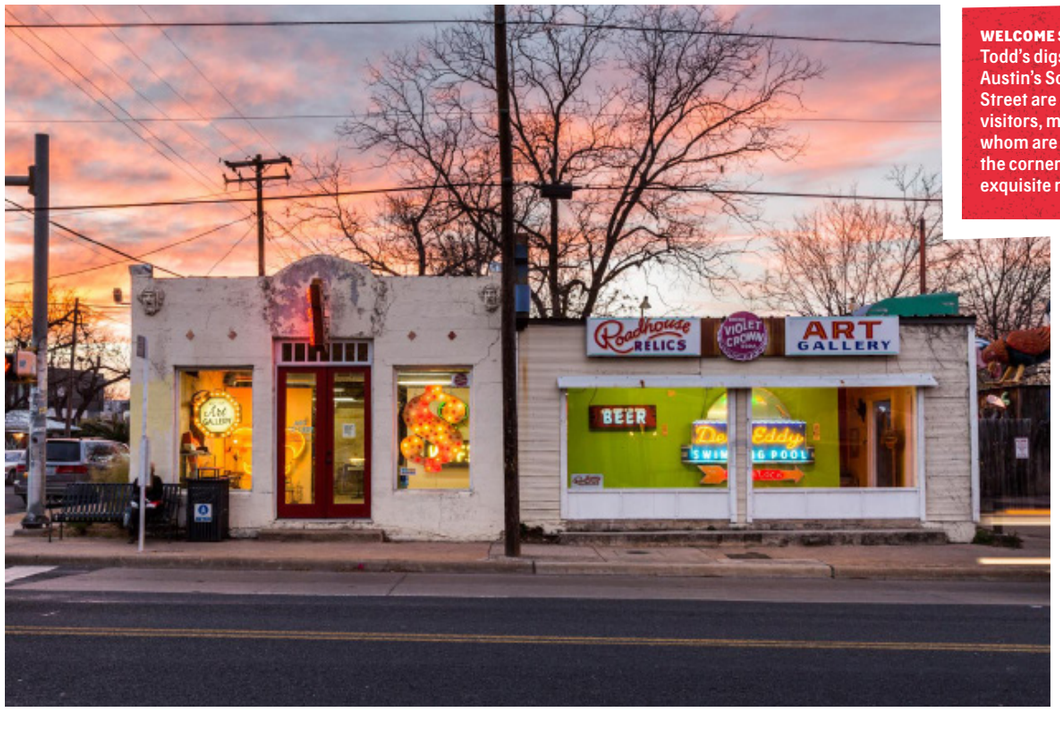
end, packed up his things and moved to the city that loves to keep itself weird.

The aspiring artist spent the next decade learning his craft, starting with a three-year apprenticeship in a local neon shop and a solo run as a neon repairman. There was little money in it—Todd made $300 a week for years—and the sacrifices were intense. "I wanted to stay in Austin, but I couldn't afford it," he remembers. "So I had to live on a ranch outside of town, in a trailer with no water or electricity. My dad would come see me, and later he told me that one time, when he was driving down there, he saw me sitting in a chair in the yard with the cows walking all around, and he just started crying. He couldn't believe I was doing all of that for my art."

By 2005, Todd had worked long and hard enough that he felt ready to take the leap from working on commercial signs to fulfilling his dream of making art inspired by vintage signage of the '30s and '40s. The hub of Todd's operation is a former grocery store whose roof was collapsed when he bought the place in the '90s.

Drawing inspiration from his 400-strong collection of old trade journals, books about neon, and graphic posters, he starts the design process with a hand drawing—no computers involved. The crafting of the glass tubing itself is something he shops out. ("There's only one way to bend neon," he says. "There's no creativity in it.") But the bulk of each piece is built and battered in his backyard. "If I do my job right, the average person will think, *Wow, he found that neat old, rusty sign somewhere.* But in fact, it's a fine work of art."

Todd has been at it for 22 years, and he's still just as passionate about his craft. "Sometimes, at night, I sit in the backyard, and when it's all lit up, and I'm experiencing the glow of the neon and the line art and even the flashing bulbs, it's an almost spiritual experience." —*MMI*



WELCOME SIGNS
Todd's digs on Austin's South First Street are open to all visitors, many of whom are pulled in by the corner shop's exquisite neon glow.

SEW CREATIVE Sarai spent more than a year preparing a business plan before cutting ties with Google.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77 jobs for work that is more hands-on and that they deem more meaningful. For some, it is out of necessity. "When there's no wind, blow," goes the adage, and many people, faced with diminishing corporate opportunities, have been forced into thinking like entrepreneurs. For many, it is a choice. Old-school artisanship—like craft brewing and shoemaking and the millinery arts—is on the rise. A nation of hobbyists and fine artists have brought energy and invention to (and made more than a few bucks on) websites like Etsy and Big Cartel. There's a sprouting up of first-generation farmers. These days, it would not be odd to see a hedge-fund manager throw it all away to become a mushroom grower. Or a Google gearhead to take up textiles.

Call it the New American Dream, where uncertainty is being spun into infinite possibilities, and a pathway to unexpected freedom and deep satisfaction feels like our birthright.

CONSIDER THE FREEMANS. Karen, 53, worked for some of the biggest banks in the world, extending lines of credit to automobile dealerships. Years before, she'd begun as a bank teller and had worked her way up, even returning to school for an accounting degree. But in 2010, the writing was on the wall. She and her team were told they had about a year before, inevitably, they'd become casualties of the financial crisis. Others might have panicked, but Karen had survived raising three boys as a single mother in Los Angeles. Nothing scared her. She simply got to it.

But this time, she didn't want just another job. She was tired of banking, and tired of working for other people. She called her oldest son, Mike, 29, who'd graduated from college with a communications degree and was, somewhat unhappily, following his mother's footsteps as a service manager at a bank in San Francisco. Karen asked Mike to move home to L.A., and home he came.

The answer to their yearnings (as it is for many of us) was cheesecake. Karen had been baking her entire life. And while wrapping up her final year at the bank, she and Mike rented a commercial kitchen for use in the evenings and on weekends. During the day, Mike scouted retail locations and studied the restaurant-business health code. At night, as they stood in their rented kitchen and fine-tuned recipes for a variety of cheesecakes, he'd brief his mother on everything he'd learned. Tastings were held for their friends: free cheesecake in exchange for honest feedback. About six months into their delectable dabbling, they began selling mini cheesecakes to local caterers and restaurants. A year after that,

★ THE REVISIONISTS

***For folks like Sarai Mitnick*, downsizing isn't a dirty word. After testing out the corporate waters, they long for a new and different way of life, making an intentional leap from big to small, and from the stress of *I need it yesterday!* to the profound satisfaction of now.**

Recruited out of grad school by Google, Sarai Mitnick spent four happy years as a user-experience researcher for the tech giant and its subsidiary YouTube. Well, four mostly happy years. "It was a fascinating place with a lot of interesting problems to work on," she says. "But at a large company like that, you're working on such a small piece of the puzzle that it's difficult to see what the impact is. I really wanted to do something where I was making a difference." In 2009, that seed of discontent led Sarai, 33, to ditch Silicon Valley and open her own shop, Colette Patterns, in Portland, Oregon. Combining her love of sewing with her background in user experience, she wanted to fill what she saw as a hole in the market—a need for modern, stylish sewing patterns that feature easy-to-understand instructions and support for novice sewers. But Sarai isn't up to her ears in thimbles and thread. "A lot of people have an idea that they'll just be doing their hobby full time once they start a business based on it, but I don't have a chance to sew. It's really all about enjoying the creative process of building the business itself." —*MMI*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN ROOT

they opened the Pacific Cheesecake Company in a small retail space in Glendale, eventually moving to another location 10 miles west in Valley Village, where they are now selling mini cheesecakes in a mind-blowing array of flavors.

Changing jobs isn't always about a personal preference or a fast exit from a shrinking industry. Sometimes, it's about values.

"When you work in a bank, your customers aren't necessarily thrilled to be there," Mike says, leaning into the doorway of the store's tiny backroom office, a space not big enough for three of us and the sampling of their treats. "When you own a cheesecake shop, your customers are happy. Making cheesecake is such a process—you have to create and rest the batter, each type of cheesecake in its own pan, take it out.... We see it come together from nothing, to gradually growing to a product, and then on to the customer. So when they're pleased, when they try it and they're happy, that's what it's all for."

In her banking days, Karen saw people pushed out of jobs without regard for their talent or dedication. It's why, she says, "I wanted to take control of my own destiny." You can taste that freedom in her sublime salted caramel cheesecake and feel it in the glowing energy of two people who can't believe they get to do this every day.

Over and over, and in many different realms, I heard echoes of Karen and Mike's words from people who wanted to make sense of how they spent their days and to see the tangible results of their hard work.

Make no mistake—what Karen and Mike did was an act of bravery, but as risk goes, she'd been given the cushion of at least six months of sever-

THE **FOOD NETWORK**

Art and craft aren't the only ways to be creative. **In their quest for fulfilling careers, many of today's upstart entrepreneurs are turning to the ultimate comfort. These five foodies found a new direction—and a quite delectable day job—in cuisine.**

BANTAM CIDER

WHO Michelle da Silva and Dana Masterpolo
WHAT Hard cider
HOW A Massachusetts realtor (da Silva) and architect (Masterpolo) used to work like crazy, but for what? "We still put in a ton of hours, but it's different when you're making something that is yours and that you believe in," Masterpolo says.
bantamcider.com

SIR KENSINGTON'S

WHO Scott Norton and Mark Ramadan
WHAT Gourmet ketchup and mayo
HOW "It's an incredible creative outlet to start from scratch with an enterprise like this," says New York–based Norton, who, with his pal, turned their college experiments with healthy recipes into a tangy business.
sirkensingtons.com

BIG PICTURE FARM

WHO Louisa Conrad and Lucas Farrell
WHAT Goat milk caramels
HOW Former teachers, the married Vermont couple started out "chasing the cheese dream," Conrad says, but fell in love with goats and decided to come up with an original business concept.
bigpicturefarm.com

BIG SPOON

WHO Mark Overbay
WHAT Nut butters
HOW While working in marketing, the North Carolinian decided to create made-to-order nut butters inspired by what he'd tasted as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zimbabwe. "Freshness is paramount," Overbay says.
bigspoonroasters.com

NOTHIN' BUT

WHO Jerri Graham
WHAT Granola bars
HOW After getting laid off from her editing job and feeling financially precarious, the Connecticut-based entrepreneur "didn't want to be in that position again," so she ramped up her side business of making high-quality granola bars.
nothinbutfoods.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIAH TYLER

ance. The threat of a layoff was all the sign she needed to start thinking about her next move. In a way, she was lucky to have been given the nudge—and she took the leap. More uncommon but still prevalent are people who, in upward-trajectory jobs, find themselves unable to tolerate another minute of the rat race.

Jeff Campbell, 31, was excelling in a stable graphic design gig at ComedyCentral.com when he began to get the itch to leave. He produced great things there—including mobile apps for *The Daily Show* and *Tosh.0*—that brought laughter and information to people. But the more he stared at his computer screen, the more he yearned for an alternative.

"I had the urge to make something with my hands," he says. He'd spent more than a year looking for a new job when he came upon an opportunity at Mast Brothers Chocolate, a small-batch, bean-to-bar operation based in Brooklyn. A home brewer and craft food-and-drink enthusiast, Jeff massaged his resumé to include food-related jobs he hadn't actually worked since the age of 19. He crossed his fingers, applied for the Mast Brothers gig—and got it.

And much of that had to do with the cheering on of the people around him. Jeff's wife, Kate, who works in fashion, was very supportive, which is something he doesn't take for granted. "I spoke to a lot of my co-workers," Jeff says, "and they were jealous that my wife agreed to this." He and Kate have committed to altering their lifestyle, which no longer includes laying out $10 for the chocolate bars that Jeff will help make. Still, he says it's worth it. "I've learned that making good money and accumulating wealth isn't what's important to me. Doing what you want to do is far more important."

A month in, Jeff's job is what he'd hoped it would be—an intuitive process with a tactile result. But he's also getting something he never anticipated: a new kind of life. He told me

***For every striver* I spoke with, there are 10 more with a great idea or something they know they could be good at—and a billion reasons why it just won't work.**

he hasn't ridden the subway since he started his job, and while he's had to alter his sleep schedule for an earlier call time, he gets three emails a day versus 300, which was what he was pulling in at his last job. He's on his feet more, which is good (if sometimes demanding), but best of all, he says, "My clothes smell like chocolate all the time."

Not all of the adjustments have been easy. Jeff misses his old coworkers, and he doesn't necessarily have more leisure time—the hours are shorter, but he comes home more exhausted. And, he says, "It is humbling to go from a manager-level position to a position where I am the employee with the least seniority."

But with the challenges come a reward: "I'm really proud of myself for doing something new."

Changing jobs or launching that new career isn't always about a personal preference or a fast exit from a shrinking industry. Sometimes it's about values, about working a job more in line with your ethics. Michael Meier, 27, was on the rise at an advertising firm named Vindico, but he became disenchanted with the excess and manipulation inherent in the industry. As an alternative, he began to investigate the burgeoning agriculture scene in New York City. He left his Vindico gig after three years, and six months later met an urban homesteader

named Megan Paska. Together they launched a community-supported agriculture business in New Jersey, with dairy goats, chickens, ducks, vegetables—the works.

Michael began learning how to live with less and decided to take his message on the road. He moved back to his native South Florida and began spreading what he calls "young farm energy" there. He saw that people in the Northeast were grabbing hold of concepts like sustainability and self-sufficiency, so he carried those ideas south. This month, he and a couple of childhood friends will begin work on an urban farm right in their hometown of Stuart, Florida, with plans to launch this fall. "We're building out a small commercial vegetable market garden, as well as planting native fruits and medicinal herbs for added-value products," he says. "And we'll be hosting events—classes, films, and workshops—to help educate and inspire our community around food and agriculture."

Occasionally, he misses the money, but he doesn't miss the *stuff*. The lessons Michael learned as a farmer were ones he brought home—particularly a mindfulness about consumer waste, the perils of worshipping the dollar, and trust in a safety net. "Honestly, everything that happened after the economic collapse of '08 was an affront to the values we were raised with," he says. "You would go to school, and you go and you go and you go. You're told you won't have to worry. Then we saw the collapse, and you learn that the system isn't as friendly as we were led to believe."

Michael finds farming, and his work as a farming educator, challenging—financially, emotionally, and physically. But he wouldn't change it. "It's the one way, with a career, that I can address all the things I feel passionate about. I can sleep at night."

OVER IN PIKE, New Hampshire, sleep wasn't exactly what Karen Charbono was going for in 2003. In fact, with a newborn, it was largely out of the question. Karen had always been artsy—for Christmas and housewarming gifts, she would turn grain sacks into gorgeous hand-painted table runners—but had never tried to make money from her passion. Now, she was attempting to do just that by selling her runners in local shops. But the Charbonos live in a small town, and those shops had very little foot traffic. On top of that, the grain sacks she depended on were becoming increasingly expensive and hard to find. Two years after the birth of her daughter, her handcraft business still wasn't going well, so she returned to secretarial work.

A couple of discoveries changed her fortune: first, burlap, which made an affordable and plentiful

alternative to grain sacks, and second, Etsy, the wildly popular e-commerce marketplace for all things homemade. Within two weeks of posting her accessories to the site—she added a line of pillows to the table runners—Karen had her first sale. Soon after, North Country Comforts (the homey name she'd given her business) took off in a way she'd never imagined. "I got so busy I couldn't keep up with orders myself," she remembers. Her husband, Dana, a plant engineer at a nearby printing company, spent his off-hours cutting fabric. Karen left her job, and eventually Dana did, too, after 16 years at the plant.

Karen doesn't claim that they're raking it in, but their numbers improve every month, and in 2013 they doubled their profits from the year before. She can't explain it, but she somehow knew this was going to go well. She's doing what she loves and is free to spend more time with her daughter. "It doesn't get better than this," she says, sounding a familiar refrain.

Every person I interviewed has a variation on the "been-there, done-that, found-a-better-way" tale. Their stories are about whimsy (and, in some cases, to-be-expected setbacks and hurdles), but mostly they're about bravery.

For every striver I spoke with, there are 10 more with a great idea or something they know they could be good at—and about a billion reasons why it just won't work. I spoke with a young-adult novelist who has several successful books under her belt but can't risk losing the security of her editing job at a parenting blog. I met an illustrator who does digital drawings for a website and wants badly to break into the illustrated T-shirt business but can't bring herself to believe that the money will possibly work out. I spoke with a singer who was terrified to end her law career, because if the singing thing didn't work out, she couldn't bear the embarrassment of having to return to the job.

To be clear, the Old American Dream works fine for many people, and the best corporations still show loyalty to their employees.

Nothing that can yield great happiness—love, career, growth—is without risk and the inevitability

of failure. In their just-published book *Fail Fast, Fail Often: How Losing Can Help You Win*, Ryan Babineaux and John Krumboltz talk about how failure—setbacks, wrong turns, dead ends—is central to creative work. It's integral to life changes, too. "You can't know what something is like, how you will feel about it, or what will result from it until you actually are doing it," they write.

The difference between those who jump ship and those who stay tied to the plank is an ability to vault over the fear of failure and other barriers to success we construct. Maybe it's a karmic reward for the stresses they shouldered and the legitimate and practical lessons they learned in corporate life, but those who are able to make the leap ignore the signs—and the nagging conscience—that say, "Turn around."

Between the success stories and those too trepidatious to even ask the questions, there is a large middle ground of dreamers, the ones wondering, W*hat if*? Etsy has a blog called "Quit Your Day Job," where successful sellers chronicle the steps they took to change the course of their work lives. But storytelling can't square the illogic at the core of risk-taking and success.

Life coach Martha Beck has written books on this phenomenon. She believes that when one finds his or her "original medicine"—their personal gift to the world, be it Key lime cheesecake or gorgeously woven bracelets—the money shows up.

"It makes no sense," she tells me. "Yet it happens every time. I am an empirical thinker; I read everything on black holes, dark energy, dark matter, quantum foam, quantum entanglement, all these different aspects of physics. I am forever trying to make sense of this, and I haven't been able to. But that doesn't mean it's not true."

You can't convince someone too afraid to act that the logic they're seeking—the rightness and comfort of it all—will be evident once they get to the other side. And let's be clear about something: The Old American Dream still works just fine for many people. Despite the reverse trend, the best corporations still show tremendous loyalty and sensitivity to their employees, and traditional careers will continue to deliver riches—financial, creative, and emotional—for generations to come.

But if you're flirting with taking flight or maybe finding yourself leaving that spreadsheet open in one window while wandering over to that Etsy "Quit Your Day Job" blog in another, be assured that the Freemans will lend a sympathetic ear as they serve you a helping of their Oreo cheesecake. Jeff Campbell, who smells like the chocolate he makes with ground beans from a remote region in Cuba, hears you loud and clear, and he will tell you to try it anyway. Mike Schmiedicke, still with the remnants of sawdust on his clothes, will offer you a seat in the rocker he's just built and tell you all he knows about the dreams business. Michael Meier will offer you one of his tenderly harvested apples and a shoulder to lean on. The Charbonos might throw a burlap pillow at you—because to doubt any of these people is to have missed the point: Later is later. This is what is working now. And they'll continue to pursue their passions for as long as it keeps working. For the New American Dreamer, there is no end in sight. And even if there were, well, You Only Live Once.

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