

On October 30, 2009 I walked out of the Rogers building in Toronto and ended a 24 year career in magazine publishing. I say ‘walked’ but the truth was I’d been booted out, thankfully with a healthy severance. The web had sent the magazine industry into a nosedive and I was simply another casualty. In a final outrageous act, I brought gallons of homemade rum punch to my send-off party and that, along with a table laden with goodies, meant the room was filled with ‘well-wishers’.

I was 55 years old, convinced that getting another job would be a piece of cake! After all, my corporate career had followed a successful trajectory of promotions and I’d left with a healthy salary.

By early 2010, months of unanswered job applications woke me to reality. I was no longer employable in my career. Marketing, especially direct marketing had gone the way of the dodo bird. Should I bite the bullet and go back to school with the savvy young 12 year olds? Was I in the least bit interested in learning how to coerce people to buy stuff online? Did I really want to keep doing something that seemed somehow immoral?

Both my heart and my head screamed NO! So now what? I was too young to retire. Was I too old to re-invent myself?

Partly to keep my mind active, but mostly to explore career opportunities I looked around for volunteer jobs. By process of elimination- children, no. animals, no. fund raising, Lord no. – I chose to work with Seniors. Opportunities were everywhere so I carefully chose a cross-section of jobs. General helping with a group of frail elderly at a day program, serving free lunch to residents of a subsidized housing building, assisting the recreation manager at a fancy retirement residence and working reception at a seniors community centre. Although all these jobs taught me a huge amount about myself, it was the community centre that led me to my next career.

The Islington Seniors Centre had been open since 1960 and existed to “*provide a warm and friendly place for seniors to share, connect and learn*” (excerpt from their Mission Statement). Working reception, with the many tasks involved, opened my eyes to a new world of career ideas.

One fateful day the Centre Administrator approached me. “*One of our Foot Clinic clients wants to know if there’s anyone here who could help him write a business letter. Can you?*” This was definitely in my wheelhouse! She gave me his address, set a date with him and soon I was knocking on Victor’s door.

Victor was 89 years old, a retired engineer with a track record of professional improvement since coming to Canada as a refugee from WW2. He had started out working on a tobacco farm and ended up as an engineer, most notably credited with re-locating the Toronto mental health

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facility from the Lakeshore to Queen Street. Victor was as sharp as a tack but an administrative job like writing a business letter was not a skill. From the first letter we moved on to me taking on a myriad of administrative tasks, from building a provenance document for an old violin he swore was valuable to putting together a comprehensive summary of his assets, liabilities and household affairs (a document that later proved crucial for his wife).

After a month of spending 2 hours a week with him, Victor handed me a \$50 bill. “*What you do for me is valuable. I am going to give you \$50 every time you work for me*”. This was a revelation to me. Could I actually get paid for this type of work??? It was worth a bit of research.

By now I had learned a great deal about the services on offer for seniors. At this time the monetary value of marketing to this growing demographic had given birth to several industries. Most notable were Retirement Residences essentially flogging permanent full service hotel rooms for a healthy monthly fee, downsizing companies to take care of folk moving to the retirement residences, funeral homes encouraging pre-paid services, and home care companies offering personal, health-related care.

Who was helping seniors to research and access assistive services? Who was helping them monitor their income and expenses? Who was helping them change their TV plans? Who was helping them to handle so many day to day questions that came up with simply living in their own home? No-one was offering overall administrative support. No wonder when a spouse inevitably died, the only choice was to move out of the family home.

With my background in business and a wealth of day to day experience by virtue of my age, this was something I could offer. In February of 2011, Victor was the first client to sign a ***Leave it to Jane*** Non-Disclosure Agreement. Since there was no precedent to follow, my job was going to evolve with the tasks needed. Basic rules like no knowledge of PIN numbers, passwords, access codes – in fact anything where I could be accused of stealing – were a given. Signing an NDA with each client was important as a promise to maintain confidentiality.

I rose to the challenge of marketing my new found career! This included joining a few networking groups. As mentioned earlier, marketing to seniors was a fairly new endeavour so the networking groups were a hodge podge of everyone looking to target the market. Meetings were hosted by members so could be found everywhere from seniors’ community centres to retirement residences.

It was at a funeral home in April of 2011 that I first met Sandra. The network group was The Integrated Partnership for Seniors (TIPS). A lofty name for a bunch of people looking to make money. As attendees entered the meeting room, they were asked to put their business card into a basket, with no explanation given as to why. Proudly pulling out my hot-off-the-press supply, ***Leave it to Jane*** was added to the mix. I made my way through the filling room and took a seat next to a well-dressed woman who looked to be about my age.

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The event was billed as a presentation of some sort. When it was over the host announced that she would now draw the winning business card. The prize? An opportunity to give a 2 minute pitch for your company. Her words filled me with terror. *Leave it to Jane* was literally 3 weeks old and I only had one client in Victor. But what were the chances she'd pick me out of the full basket. Turned out the chances were good and my fresh *Leave it to Jane* card was the first in her hand. Without thinking I shot to my feet ... knocking over my chair and sending my coat flying into the lap of my well-dressed table companion. My first words were "*Well at least you won't forget me!*". I have no idea what else I said but I guess it went over well as they gave me a round of applause when I sat down. The well-dressed woman was Sandra and she was still laughing at my performance. It turned out that we were the same age, had both been booted out of lucrative corporate careers and were both on a journey of re-invention. It was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. Sandra became my sounding board, supporter and font of knowledge. Our email exchanges gave me focus and kept me going in times of "*what the hell am I doing?*"

In December of 2011, not long after Victor's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got a call from his wife Edith. Victor had suffered a stroke and was in ICU. She kept asking him where the money was and what bills needed to be paid and he had removed the oxygen mask from his face and said "*Call Jane*". So she was calling me to ask "*Where's the money? What bills need to be paid?*" Thanks to my work with Victor I had the answers.

Victor passed away shortly after this call and Edith immediately became my client. Her role had always been to take care of the house and raise the children. She had no idea how to keep everything else going without her husband. Starting with helping to settle Victor's estate I stayed with Edith for the next 12 years. A myriad of needed tasks came up during those years, from finding out how to get a tree cut down to arranging milestone birthdays to liaising with her financial contacts. Each task added to the evolving service line up for *Leave it to Jane*. Edna will be 103 years old this year and still lives alone in her own home. I like to think that everything I put into place to help her household run smoothly has helped with her independence.

More clients came on board over the years. Some needed the same types of administrative help already offered. Others took me into new territory.

January, 2012 – Russ

My first visit with Russ was to write a few business letters. Russ was "shacked up" as he called it with Mary in a fancy Retirement Residence. An Airforce training pilot in WW2, a retiree from Bell, a graduate in his 70's from Sheridan College with a Fine Arts Diploma, Russ was a man who believed in keeping his brain active. At the end of our first meeting he said "*You can do more than write letters, can't you?*" "*Yes, what do you have in mind*" was my reply. "*Well I've been writing a book for the last 20 years and I could use some help to sort out my notes*". His 'notes' turned out to be a mixed bag of typed sheets, handwritten notes and post-it jottings. It took a while, and lots of patience on my part, but in March of 2013 at the young age of 96, Russ

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published his book. “*Deaths Averted*”, a primer on how to teach people to drive, was sent, free, to every Canadian Minister of Transportation.

February, 2012 – Dan

By far the best part of my volunteer job at Islington Seniors Centre was chatting with the members. Dan was a particular favourite. He was a font of fabulous jokes and stories and the source of my regular Thursday ‘phone call (*he called me ‘the Thursday girl’*). He lived around the corner from the Centre and often dropped in to chat in person as well. He happened to come in on Valentine’s Day once and I gave him a long stemmed red rose. This was a first for him and he told me he planned to offer it to the first pretty girl he saw and “*see what happened next*”. During one of our regular chats he asked me to help him write his memoir. Gladly I spent hours with him, recording his stories, making notes and then getting his signoff on the end result.

When Dan died suddenly in April of 2013 (heart attack while taking his daily walk) I gave my recordings of his voice to his daughter. Dan’s last joke – on this side of life:

*Whenever anyone asked who she was, the 7 year old would say “I’m Mr. Stevenson’s daughter”. Her Mother overheard this one day and said “Don’t say that. When someone asks who you are, you tell them ‘I’m Emma Stevenson’”. That Sunday after Church, the minister came up to her and said “Aren’t you Mr. Stevenson’s daughter?” “I thought so” replied Emma “but Mummy just told me I’m not”.*

April 2012 – Mary and Shirley

Working for Mary, and later her best friend Shirley, was a long term gig. Mary was a strong-minded retired teacher, spinster, devoted to good works and firmly entrenched in her local church. In her later years she had lost her sight to macular degeneration and by the time I met her she needed what she called “*another set of eyes*”. I learned a great deal from working for Mary. From her I learned the difficulties of growing old. For myself, I learned the limitations of my patience. Mary was strong, stubborn and scarred by her life.

Shirley and Mary were polar opposite personalities. Shirley had been married (though not happily) and had grown children and grandchildren. She had always been a tad flighty and so was malleable. The story was that she had met Mary through volunteering and Mary, needing a sidekick, had figuratively adopted her. By the time I met them, they were practically inseparable and Mary ran Shirley’s life. They lived in the same building, thankfully in separate apartments. Not long after I came into their lives Shirley started showing signs of dementia. It became obvious that she could no longer be trusted at the wheel of a car so her son-in-law took away her licence. That was the lucidity end for Shirley and soon I was tasked with cooking her dinner and having a chat several times a week. Shirley told the same stories every time I spent with her but they made her happy and after a short while I learned to just laugh along with her.

June 2014 – Vi

Part of spreading the word about *Leave it to Jane* was giving presentations wherever I could book a gig. Topics varied but they always ended with “*hire me to help you*”. After one of these sessions I heard from Vi. She was working on her memoir and needed me to ‘gentle edit’ it. Her first language was Vietnamese and what she needed was someone to check her use of English. Always up for a challenge I met with her and she handed over a HUGE pile of typed pages. Vi had been one of the first “boat people” to come to Canada from Vietnam and this was the story of her life. It was a fascinating tale but a daunting task. I explained that the job would take time and that I was going to charge her by the hour but she nonetheless asked me to go ahead. Weeks went by. I did my edits and delivered them to her along with a healthy invoice. Only to be given yet another pile of paper. I asked when she’d be finished writing to be told “*I can’t really finish it until everyone in it has died.*” Hearing that, I apologized and said I couldn’t just keep going. I might have made a fortune from her but it wasn’t worth my sanity.

June 2016 – the Austrian Sisters

In a testament to word of mouth I was asked to meet with 2 ladies visiting from Austria to settle their Aunt’s estate. There were no relatives in Toronto and both sisters had been appointed as executors. Neither had actually seen their aunt for years and they had no idea of how to proceed with the estate, especially since they were heading back home with no plans to return. The hospital where their aunt died had referred them to a funeral home. The funeral director had referred them to me (I bought him lunch in thanks). This was a dream job for me! They gave me the keys to their aunt’s house and said “*See what you find and report back to us in Austria*”. What I found could fill a book but most importantly: evidence of years of unpaid income tax, a Reverse Mortgage about to start charging astronomical interest, stacks of bills both paid and unpaid and hundreds of receipts needed to support tax submissions. This job in particular made me realize just how important my services were. It was immensely satisfying to complete this job! A year later my husband and I travelled to Austria and stopped in Innsbruck to visit the sisters. We were treated to a fabulous Schnitzel dinner!

For an insecure corporate pawn such as I, *Leave it to Jane* was a blind leap into the unknown. It left its mark on me both physically and emotionally. It also drove me into yet another unknown – the world of holistic medicine – again with Sandra as my guide and sounding board.

But that is a story for another time.