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Section: Local

Baby boomers in business

By Lucy Sutherland

Tired of her consulting job, Amy Newburg opened a period furniture store on Main Street in Fitchburg. "I feel like this huge weight has been lifted because I'm not part of the corporate rat race," said the 50-something Newburg, who launched Design at 639 in January.

The colorful display of restored furniture dating from the 1930s to the 1970s is just one of the many businesses recently launched by area baby boomers -- people born from 1946 to 1964 -- looking to escape the stress and low satisfaction of long-held corporate jobs.

A flood of older entrepreneurs have sought Kerrie Carnes' help with budding businesses, said the Leominster business development coordinator. Carnes said nearly one out of every four new business owners she's met with in the last two years has been from the boomer generation.

The rise of older entrepreneurs like Newburg locally mirrors a larger nationwide trend. Sixteen percent of those in the boomer generation are now self-employed, according to a recent study completed by the AARP, compared to 10 percent of the general work force. About a third of self-employed boomers also are first-time entrepreneurs who had previously worked for others, according to the same study.

Michael Holbrook, senior management counselor at the Small Business Development Center at Clark University in Worcester, said the number of boomer businesses in North Central Massachusetts has risen sharply in the last five years.

Lifelong passions

He said many businesses are started by boomers with long track records in the corporate world who crave an outlet for lifelong passions, such as antique furniture or period clothing. "They want to take their hobby or their passion and try to make a living from it, added Holbrook."

Stephanie DeAmicis recently opened Caffe La Tazza, an Italian-style coffee bistro, on Main Street in Leominster. DeAmicis, who is 40, grew up in Leominster but spent 10 years in Boston as a marketing executive for the Boston advertising giant Hill Holliday and Thomas Cook, a travel agency.

Leaving the rat race

Weary of big-city life and the constant storm of deadlines that defined her marketing work, DeAmicis moved back to Leominster two years ago. "Would I go back to corporate life after this? Absolutely not," DeAmicis said.

As a bistro operator she gets much more satisfaction from serving Italian espressos and Italian desserts. "It is a lot of hours," DeAmicis said. "It can be stressful, but it's a stress I can enjoy."

The small-town ambiance of Main Street drew her to launch La Tazza in Leominster's downtown district. "When I was growing up we used to have Old-Fashioned Bargain Days on Main Street," said DeAmicis of her Leominster childhood -- a small-town life she missed as a Boston resident.

DeAmicis said she always looked forward to these bargain days, when residents would stroll along the sidewalks next to outdoor food vendors and live music. She's hoping that her business, along with other retail stores on Main Street, will lure downtown weary mall shoppers craving more personalized service. "People are getting sick of the malls," she said.

Out on their own

Robert Gifford lived and worked for nearly 30 years in Boston as a multimedia production manager before relocating to Gardner about two years ago. Gifford, who is in his 50s, now runs Beacon Multimedia Services, a consulting firm specializing in digital media presentations for national and international businesses.

"A lot of what baby boomers have is knowledge," said Gifford, who got tired of working for larger companies and craved more independence and financial security. "I can't be downsized, I can't be laid off. I have job security," he said.

Plummeting prices for multimedia production equipment in the last 10 years also made it possible for Gifford to start his own business, he said. A decade ago, startup costs would have been too high. Today, Gifford has a steady base of about 20 clients in the U.S. and England.

He said many boomers have started businesses in recent years because mergers, consolidations and overseas competition resulted in companies firing their older staffers. Having your own business, Gifford added, "is based on having a little bit more control over your life in uncertain times."

Holbrook said boomers like Gifford can be more vulnerable to downsizings because of their age. "Who wants to hire someone in their 50s when you can hire someone who's 23 for a fraction of the price?" Holbrook said.

Holbrook and Gifford both say that despite the extra freedom that comes with starting a business, many boomers may underestimate the risk involved. "It's a lot different than showing up at your (corporate) job," said Gifford. Long hours and stress don't necessarily disappear when you have your own business, he added.

The biggest challenge that boomer entrepreneurs have is that they tend to come from a corporate environment where they had support staffs with specialized knowledge, said Holbrook. "They don't have any of that when they start their own businesses," he said. Marketing is often the one skill many boomers lack -- a skill that is crucial to getting a venture off the ground, Holbrook added.

For former marketing executive DeAmicis, marketing came naturally. She successfully tapped into the large Twin Cities Italian-American community -- one of her target markets -- by offering Italian classes and evening piano concerts as a way to grow her customer base.

The work is hard, she said, but much more rewarding than corporate life. "I wake up every morning and I can look forward to coming to work," DeAmicis said.

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