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Silver Lining: Economic woes can inspire positive life changes

Alexis Grant
Colby College

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When Glenn Connell ’79 lost his research position with a biotechnology laboratory in October 2008, the Mainer headed straight to North Carolina with his wife to lie on the beach. There, the then-59-year-old reexamined his career path and decided that one thing was certain. Next time he’d be his own boss.

After 30 years in the semiconductor and software-development industries, Connell has traded the corporate world for the home front. Now he works on his own schedule, out of a barn on his property in Sabattus, Maine, building his business, Connell Research Laboratories.

“If the economy hadn’t changed, I would probably still be droning away at that job I wasn’t thrilled about for a mediocre salary,” said Connell, who graduated from Colby at age 29. “Now I’m doing something I’m passionate about, something I probably should have been doing ten years ago.”

Economic downturns often prompt tales of woe and hardship. But amongst the wreckage of the unemployed and financially strained are survivors who say the recession has unexpectedly resulted in positive change. Whether faced with a job loss or simply a renewed sense of fiscal responsibility, some Colby alumni have turned recession-induced disappointments into opportunity.

Leaving the beleaguered newspaper industry allowed Carrie Cooper Jacobson ’78 to turn a hobby into a profession. Jacobson paints full time and sells her work through shows and her Web site.
ack on Mayflower Hill, this comes as no surprise. “A liberal arts experience gives you a sense of the possible,” said Michael Donihue ’79, associate vice president for academic affairs.

Donihue, a professor of economics, said new graduates leave Colby with a broad range of options. Their ability to adapt to new situations, and to turn them into opportunities for growth, is sustained over time, he said.

Carolyn Berry Copp ’82 had worked since 2001 as a fundraiser for the arts when she lost her job in January. Initially, after going through what she called the “seven stages of grief,” she thought she might continue that type of work as a freelancer, though not necessarily for the arts. But then she realized this was a chance to seek more meaningful employment, perhaps to help people who were harder hit by the recession than she was. “Even though I think the arts are very important, and music in particular is really important, it wasn’t focusing on putting food on someone’s table or taking care of children,” Copp said. “I really wanted to focus more on those basic needs, dealing with children and families.”

Now she works as vice president of development for the Newton Community Service Center in Massachusetts, raising money for early-education and child-care programs. Her advice for other alumni trying to turn a job loss into a new opportunity? “I think that the most important thing is to have a positive attitude, even if it hurts,” Copp said. “What are the skills that you have, and how can you repackage them?”

Repackaging has become a job-worthy skill itself as more Americans find themselves looking for work. The Federal Reserve estimates the unemployment rate will hit 10.5 percent by the end of the year.

Under normal economic conditions, people who are comfortable in their jobs often put off their dreams and ideas because there’s no reason to take a leap, said executive coach Kay Cannon, who helps clients find personal and professional success. Now, with the recession serving as a catalyst, people across the country, most often those who have lost their jobs, are moving into new positions or following through on dreams that have long taken a back seat. “You see a lot of people who are able to use this involuntary, unexpected change as a real positive springboard,” Cannon said. “When the economic situation is such that all of a sudden you find yourself without a job, you have a lot of motivation to go ahead and turn that dream into a reality.”

Take Aaron Bond ’02. During his five and a half years as an internal consultant for a large retailer, he had thought about starting his own consulting company—someday. He didn’t think he was ready to go out on his own. But when he was laid off in December 2008, with plans to enroll in a master’s degree program this fall, Bond was forced to find clients. Turned out he was good—really good—at being his own boss. Now he is in a graduate program at Boston University, and he is consulting on the side. “I never would have left my job to start my own consulting business at this point in my career,” said Bond, who lives in Newton, Mass. “It has worked out to be really positive, and now I’m strongly considering this as my more near-term career rather than long-term.”

Even if your job is safe or your bank account is in good shape,
The recession prompted Joanne Karlin Giudicelli '77 to move from full-time consulting to owning and operating frozen-yogurt shops in California.

spent 20 years in corporate consulting and recruiting, used her back-
ground in business to start a new venture she believes is recession-
proof: self-serve frozen-yogurt shops.

She and her husband had planned to retire in the near future. But
the state of the economy left them without that option, so even as she
continued her self-employed work as a consultant, she brainstormed
ways to earn additional income. She settled on the yogurt shop,
where customers help themselves to sometimes adventurous flavors
and toppings, then pay according to the weight of their creation. “I’m
a frozen-yogurt freak,” Giudicelli said. “It’s a cult food. People who are
not part of the cult think of it as an ice-cream substitute. It is so not an
ice cream substitute to those of us who are yogurt-cult people.”

Her first shop opened in northern California’s Grass Val-
ley in July, and already she plans to open two more. “Nev-
er in a million years did I ever think I’d do retail,” said
Giudicelli. “It’s something I never would have done had the reces-
sion not happened.”

Other self-employed couples are also being creative in response
to thinning wallets. Daryl Angney McCool ’87 and her husband,
who live in Superior, Colo., built a chicken coop and large garden
this summer to hedge against potential income loss. The project also
helps meet their goal of becoming more environmentally respon-
sible. “We’ll be able to can [what we grow] and sustain ourselves
throughout the winter without having to spend money at the grocery
store,” said McCool, a graphic designer. The vegetables and eggs are
tasty and healthy for their 5-year-old son, too.

The silver lining of the recession doesn’t have to be a new career
or a chicken coop. Time away from work, particularly extended
periods, can serve as an opportunity to strengthen ties with fam-
ily or the community. After 15 years working for Fidelity In-
vestments’ technology division, Tim Crowley ’84 was laid off
in December along with 1,300 of his colleagues. Since then he has
gone skiing and golfing with his 10- and 13-year-old sons, helped his
brother sail a boat from the Bahamas to Florida, and gotten involved
in local theater, acting alongside his wife. The Milton, Mass., resi-
dent is still looking for work but said he already sees this time off as a
“good thing.”

“At forty-six years old, it’s a great opportunity for me to be able to
take advantage of certain things that I kind of left behind,” he said.
“I really do think that this is a positive.”

Not everyone can afford to take their time looking for a new job
or following a long-deferred dream. Some alumni depended on un-
employment checks and savings to stay afloat financially while out of
work. Others relied on family and friends. Monika Thiele ’97 stayed
with friends for a month so she could sublet her apartment and re-
duce her expenses while starting an environmental consulting busi-
ness in Washington, D.C.

She came up with the idea after losing her job in the nation’s capi-
tal, where for five years she had worked in oceans and coastal man-
agement. She thought about moving to the West Coast, to be closer
to the ocean for her career and to live in a more eco-conscious area.
But in the post-presidential-election buzz Washington felt alive with
opportunity—and ripe for greening. “What started happening was
… a heart-change,” Thiele said. “There’s a lot I can do here locally if I
start to shift gears, look at my career through a different lens.”

That lens turned out to be the DC Green Connection, Thiele’s
new business, which helps consumers find and learn about green
products and services. “I wanted to be part of the awakening of hu-
man consciousness toward more sustainable living practices,” she
said. “I’m taking this leap of faith because it seems like what I’m
supposed to do for now.”

Rumbi Sundire ’04 follows that same line of thinking. She had
hoped to move home to Zimbabwe in the next few years, but with a
stable investment banking job just outside Washington, D.C., there
was no telling when it would happen.

Since she was laid off in May, Sundire finally made plans to leave
the United States at the end of August and bring some of her busi-
ness expertise to the rural village where she grew up. She plans to
teach villagers the skills and give them the tools to make cooking oil
out of sunflower seeds and to find markets to sell their products. A
maize-grinding project already is operational, she said.

“I’m able to explore my goal of bettering my community without
regretting ever leaving my job,” Sundire said. “Getting laid off gave
me the clean slate to explore what I have always wanted.”