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Harkness helps people change their lives

Career counselor debunks myths about getting fulfillment on the job

By JODELLE GREINER, Lifestyles Editor

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Are you still not sure what you want to be when you grow up?

Is the career you began in your younger days being phased out? Did you get fired? Are you just bored out of your skull? Then you need to talk to Helen Harkness, Ph.D., who was the guest speaker at the noon luncheon Saturday of the Soroptimist International of the Americas South Central Region District III 43rd annual meeting in Gainesville at the Civic Center.

Harkness is a career counselor who helps people match their talents and desires with a fulfilling career. She created Career Design Associates, Inc., in Garland.

Harkness' mantra is "Freedom is knowing your options." She believes that anyone at any age can change their career — and life — for the better.

She emphatically stated that the days of "one life equals one career" are over. Chaos in the job market used to be a monumental event because it so rarely happened — now it's a constant.

You can survive it, Harkness said, and not only just survive it, but create a life you enjoy with a career that fulfills you.

Harkness specializes in helping people find out what they love to do and then make a living at it. She says anyone can do this, but there are a few things you must remember.

The first one is to throw out all the old expectations, "You can't assume anything!" she stressed.

Too many people get caught up in what they think is true, but isn't, such as being too old, or someone like them (i.e. a woman) can't do that, or they can't make a living doing something that fulfills them.

Nonsense, Harkness insists.

One of the most important things to throw out was the "I'm too old" expectation. "Most of the important things I've learned in my life, I learned after 40 years old," Harkness declared.



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AIN'T MISBEHAVIN' —
Helen Harkness spoke at the Soroptimists' District III luncheon meeting on Saturday at the Gainesville Civic Center. She is a career counselor based in Garland. Harkness learned that to support herself and her children, she needed to throw out the old expectations, like "you're too old." She says anyone at any age can have an emotionally and financially fulfilling career.

Harkness went to college at a time when a woman was expected to come out with either a husband or a job as a teacher, nurse or secretary. She became a teacher in West Virginia, but decided that wasn't enough. She went

on to Stanford University and earned a master's degree in English in 1953

But she wanted a family, as well. She was already 25 and her brothers were telling her she was an old maid and the doctors at the time said that women had to have kids before age 30 or they couldn't have any. So she got married and unknowingly launched what would be her future career.

Her husband had always wanted to be a doctor, but he was in the Navy and "couldn't get out" because you didn't leave a good job once you had one.

He was 24 years old — too old to change careers by the conventional wisdom of the time. She talked him into leaving the Navy and going to medical school.

They were building a house, which took 2 years. They moved in on Labor Day and part of the house burned between Christmas and New Year's.

The firemen finished up and wanted her to go to a neighbor's with her kids. She refused, thinking of her mother's advice. "Mom said, 'Every time you have a fire, never assume it's out.'" One of the firemen drew himself up to his 6-4 height and insisted the fire was out and asked her how long she'd been fighting fires. Harkness said she caved in and went to the neighbor's.

In the middle of the night, the house caught fire again and burned to the ground.

The house burning down was just another catastrophe in Harkness' life at the time. Soon after, she and her husband divorced and Harkness had to start over at the age of 41.

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Back at a time when women didn't get divorced, Harkness had to find a way to support herself and her kids. She now uses what she learned the hard way to help others who need to take control of their lives.

She apologized for the language she was about to use, then told the group, "If you want to be successful, you have to have a sharp crap detector. The only way you'll have it is by listening and trusting yourself."

Before she wrote her first book, she was told not to bother because she couldn't get it published.

She wrote it anyway and the first publisher she sent it to published it. She has written four books, "Best Jobs for the Future" (1995), "The Career Chase" (1997), "Don't Stop the Career Clock" (1999) and "Capitalizing on Career Chaos" (2005).

Referring to the handout at each place setting, Harkness spoke about The Dozen Deadly Career Myths, especially Myth 3: "The best is over so go gently into the good night! Old dog can't learn new tricks!" "Chronological age is the biggest pile of crap we have in our society," Harkness said.

She went to a lawyer because she wanted to incorporate her business.

When she arrived, she found he had laid out all kinds of information on putting all of her assets into a trust fund so she could retire. "I was the age of his mother," she said ruefully.

"We have to think functional age," she said. "We are going to live 20 years longer because we're taking better care of ourselves.

"I started this business when I was 50. I should have started it when I was 30," she said.

When she was in school, science taught that peak brain power was achieved at age 19. But looking back, Harkness said, she had plenty of role models to the opposite, including her grandparents. Her great-grandmother was a mid-wife and delivered Harkness' sister, Madolyn Stewart, when she was 90 years old. Harkness' grandfather was still functioning and contributing at age 94.

So much of what we do is what we expect to do, Harkness said. We need to change what we expect. If you believe that you are washed up at 50 and can't learn anything, then you will be. If you decide that you can start a new business when you're 60, 70 or 80, then you can.

When asked how old she is, Harkness said she replies 50, because that's the age at which she functions. She started the business in 1978 and "I'll do it until I die." If she didn't have her work, Harkness said she'd just stay in bed longer and notice the aches and pains more.

"You have to have a passion if you want to live long and die fast," she said, which is what she intends to do.

The handout included a career survey to help a person find out why they are dissatisfied in their job. The results will tell you whether you need to change companies, get into another area of your career, or change careers entirely.

She explained the four-step process for taking charge of your career and deciding what you need to be happy.

She illustrated it by explaining about the different balls. Think about a juggler trying to keep several balls in the air. Some of the balls are rubber and it doesn't really matter if the juggler drops them; they'll bounce. But the glass balls won't bounce; they cannot be dropped without serious problems.

"You must know what your glass balls are," insisted Harkness. "Build your career on your glass balls." She said she can't tell anyone what their glass balls are; it will be different for each person. "You must decide for yourself what your glass balls are."

Conventional wisdom used to say that you can't get meaning and money out of your job. If you had an emotionally fulfilling career, you wouldn't make money. If you wanted to make money, you had to give up your creativity and work a job for a profit.

"The intelligent, creative person is going to get meaning and money," Harkness said.

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