straight shooter’s 4-step process has led thousands to passions

By CHERYL HALL

Think of Helen Harkness as the Fairy Godmother of career reincarnations. She doesn’t sprinkle magic dust or wave a wand. But the sepulchralian takes clients looking for a career change on journeys of the soul to find what will feed their passions.

Discover that, she says, and enjoy true success.

―Many executives have gotten to the top by leaving parts of themselves behind,‖ says Dr. Harkness, principal and president of Career Design Associates, Inc. "There’s a need for growth that isn’t being met." Since founding her practice in 1976, Dr. Harkness has guided more than 8,000 private clients—"and that doesn’t include the multitude who’ve attended her classes and seminars on what she calls ‘reacquainting.’"

―I’m not saying money’s not important, but there’s only so much you can do with it,‖ she says. "Money is a lesser need to achieve. Rubber balls you can drop and pick up later. But what makes Dr. Harkness so effective, clients say, is her ability to bluntly pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses and push them toward reality-based goals. And there’s simplicity in the truth she speaks.

Taking a step back

Perhaps her most famous clientele is Todd Wagner, who made his fortune when he and Mark Cuban sold Broadcast.com to Yahoo Inc. in 1999 for nearly $6 million. He now devotes much of his time and energy to his charitable foundation. "It takes some chutzpah to forge a new path," he says. "Dr. Harkness insills that in people. She tells you it’s OK to have those dark soul-searching moments. ‘Who am I, and what is the right thing to do?’"

The 43-year-old has worked with her since his early days as a lawyer 13 years ago.

―One of her key messages—and one I fully subscribe to—is that sometimes to move forward, you have to take a step back,‖ Mr. Wagner says. "Most people won’t do that. They don’t want to take a cut in salary or give up prestige."

Dr. Harkness charges a flat rate of $5,900 for 40 hours of group sessions and 11 hours of one-on-one mentoring, or $5,900 for a two-year retainer.

Besides sessions at her home office in Garland, Dr. Harkness also teaches much cheaper, informal courses at Southern Methodist University’s School of Continuing Education and at St. Paul’s School of Religion, an adult education organization that holds classes in the area.

Dr. Harkness appears grandmotherly at first, that impression quickly dissipates when she opens her mouth. "One of the key things you have to have in today’s world, she says, "is a very sharp crank detector," she says in a way that tells you hers is set on high. "There are too many old rules that simply should not be followed."

That’s why she has this thing about telling her age. "If you could show me any 50-year-old who does more than I do, then I’ll tell you my chronological age," she says. "It was born Feb. 29, 1928, so she’s technically still a teenager, since Feb. 29 comes once every four years."

Husband was first client

Born of "headstrong and heartfelt mountainsteering stock" in West Virginia, Dr. Harkness has her Ph.D. in higher education from the University of North Texas. But her true vocational education came through her life experiences.

In 1953, the 25-year-old graduate of the University of West Virginia married her brother’s roommate at the Naval Academy, "just like a Debbie Reynolds movie."

"Back then, a woman married a man with ‘potential’ and then you ‘activated’ his potential. That was your success. What a sham!” she declares. "But anyway, that’s what I did. I followed the rules."

Her husband became, in essence, her first client. Life aboard a submarine didn’t suit his nature, so she helped him get out of his military obligation. She sent him through medical school on her teacher’s salary and had three children during the process.

"He was a first-rate physician but a second-rate husband," she says. "The marriage ended painfully after 15 years."

She went back to school for her doctorate, which took her eight years as she juggled learning, teaching and parenting with only $300 a month in child support.

Many of her clients today are women whose husbands have abandoned them for trophy wives, she says. "These men hit their middle crisis, and instead of dealing with themselves, they dump their families," she says. "It gives me great pleasure to help these women find careers. My motto for them is: ‘Your success is the best revenge.’"

Dr. Harkness asks new clients to list three things that give their lives purpose. Then they evaluate how their jobs live up to these needs.

"This also becomes their prescription for what they’re looking for next," she says, calling these imperatives “glass balls.”

"We have to distinguish between the glass balls that we’re juggling and the rubber ones. If you drop a glass ball, it breaks. You can glue it back, but it will be distorted. Rubber balls you can drop and pick up later."

Her practice is growing. "Many successful people—both women and men—are saying, ‘My children are a big glass ball. I’m going to honor that and step back and go with a lesser need to achieve."

Predicting chaos

Defining yourself as a hyperkinetic Type A or an introspective Type B is irrelevant, she says. "We have to be Type CCs, Chaos Catalysts, because we live in a chaotic world. And while you may not be able to predict what chaos lies ahead, you’re prepared to handle it when it hits."

She doesn’t necessarily sell the idea of breaking out of corporate life. Independence isn’t for everyone. And you can be in the right career but wrong job, she says.

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Too often companies treat employees like machinery instead of human capital. She has a warning for them: “Your best people are not going to be cogs in anyone’s wheels. They have options.”

She has an equally pointed caveat for employees who toil in silent misery: "Dissatisfaction with your job will shorten your life."

And she intends to work for 25 more years.

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Entrepreneur has finally found calling in clarity

Todd Wagner describes people trapped in jobs as doing “the walk of the living dead.” He’s experienced it twice, and both times, career counselor Helen Harkness came to his rescue.

She and Mr. Wagner first crossed paths in 1991, when he took her informal course at Southern Methodist University called “Running from the Law,” sort of group therapy for disgruntled lawyers. At 30, he felt like he’d gone to law school for lack of anything better to do and graduated from the University of Virginia in 1986. At first he liked carrying a briefcase, acting like an adult and driving to the downtown Dallas office of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP. But that was fleeting.

Three years later, Mr. Wagner tried switching to another law firm, Hopkins & Sutter, hoping for something better. “I discovered that had nothing to do with it. I just wasn’t cut out to be a lawyer,” he says. “But like so many people, I still didn’t do anything about it.”

By 1992, he was a partner, pulling down $200,000 or so, but he was miserable. Dr. Harkness hounded him about escaping. The warning that finally stuck was: “If you don’t quit, you’re going to be dead of a heart attack or something by the time you’re 43.” He realized she was right. “When the pain becomes greater than the fear of the unknown, that’s when you go.”

Mr. Wagner says, “Finally the pain was so great, I didn’t care if I swept floors or bartended, I just wasn’t going to do that anymore.” When he resigned to explore “this thing called the Internet,” the senior partner of the law firm told Mr. Wagner he’d never make it as an entrepreneur. “I was scared because I didn’t know what I was going to do next,” Mr. Wagner recalls. “But you know what, I was really exhilarated. So, I was the happiest time maybe of my whole life.”

Well, perhaps the second happiest.

Harkness came to his rescue. “Giving money is the easiest thing on the planet to do. I’m giving my time and trying to make a difference for other people as well. “It helps me feel that it’s OK for me to live, it’s face, this dream life that I now have.”

Today, nearly five years, Mr. Wagner says he couldn’t be happier with where his life is headed. “I’m back on the entertainment and for-profit world again in the last two years. But it feels good because it’s a good balance.”

Cheryl Hall

Doctor shapes up her career

When Nancy Wise’s executive position at a major health maintenance organization was eliminated in early 2003, she offered several internal options. Instead, she opted out.

The 48-year-old doctor of osteopathic medicine was making “well into the six figures” as vice president and medical director of disability management for Intronix, a division of Cigna Corp. Today, she’s a Pilates exercises.

Dr. Wise says she’s not giving up her expertise in occupational medicine. “I’m very willing to work with people who’ve had multiple surgeries, injuries or disabilities and want to improve their wellness. I’m not dropping everything. I’m just taking it in a different direction.”

Remodeling her career has taken longer than she expected. Last year she explored other options before settling on Pilates, which she’s used to keep fit for years. For example, she spent two months as an organic winery in France, thinking she might like to be a vintner. She hasn’t ruled that out but figures that for the time being Pilates is less complicated and far less expensive.

“Not that easy thing Dr. Harkness always harpes on,” Dr. Wise recently chatted via email with her former client, urging him to give him a progress report. “He said, ‘It sounds like you’re following your passion. And I thought, ‘Yeah, I am.’”

Cheryl Hall

When making billions just isn’t enough

Helen Harkness charges $4,900 for testing, 40 hours of group sessions and 11 hours of mentoring, or $6,900 for a two-year retainer.

She also teaches informal courses at Southern Methodist University’s School of Continuing Education and at The S’Cool, a new, casual adult-education organization that holds classes in the area.

For more information about SMU courses, call 214-768-6030; go to www.informalsmu.edu, or e-mail smuhlink@smu.edu.

For descriptions of Dr. Harkness' classes and private sessions, go to www.careerdesign.com or for additional information call Career Design Associates at 972-278-4701.

How their lives changed

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‘It’s me, and I love it’

Leaving IBM has paid off for editor

Ed Bamberger has been through an evolution, not a revolution. In 1991, rather than relocate with IBM Corp., the marketing wunderkind decided to take a buyout and venture out on his own.

He went to career counselor Helen Harkness, and what she told him wasn’t exactly music to his ears. He wasn’t a strong creative writer but was talented at editing and organizing.

“She really focuses on strengths and weaknesses and pointed out things I was trying to do that were never going to work for me,” says Mr. Bamberger, who turns 60 today.

So he cobbled together a freelance editing business that incorporated his love of food and wine.

But it never brought in the kind of money that he needed. So three years ago, he bought the North Texas marketing rights to Single Gourmet, which holds culinary events for single professionals.

“It put together all of my passions: being a writer, a foodie, and I love being around people,” he says. “We do dinner parties in restaurants, hold cooking classes and wine tastings. I’m working about 70 to 80 hours a week, and I have four part-time people. This is a serious business making serious money. It’s me, and I love it.”

In October, Mr. Bamberger will lead a tour to France, where the group is staying in one of the world’s best hotels. “It’s a tough job, he says, but somebody has to do it.

Cheryl Hall

Doing it by the Book

Career again intrigues businesswoman

Harry Hunsicker Jr. has never met Helen Harkness or any other career counselor. He sparked up his career on his own.

The 41-year-old president of Hunsicker Appraisal Co. jokes – halfheartedly – that commercial real estate appraisals are for people who find working at a major accounting firm too exciting.

He added a healthy dose of creative energy to his painstakingly detailed world by writing—and selling—a crime novel.

Still Rivers Run Dead features a private investigator in Dallas and was rejected by 117. The court took about six months, proved to be the easy part. Finding an agent took three times as long.

He sent out query letters to 118 agents and was rejected by 117. The agent who took that chance lined up St. Martin’s in only a month.

And, Mr. Hunsicker says, having a creative outfit rejuvenated his feelings for the 37-year-old family appraisal business he took over in January.

“I’ve had so much fun, this should have been illegal,” he says.

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