

A Midlife Crisis Doesn't Have to Be One

By Kate Stone Lombardi

WE all know the stereotypes about male midlife crises. Men run out and buy red Porsches, get hair plugs and trade in their wives for younger girlfriends.

My husband, Michael, took a different route. He became a weatherman. Or at least, he will be one when he graduates from his meteorology program this spring. Let me explain.

Michael had been in corporate finance for his entire working life. When I met him 27 years ago he was crunching numbers and preparing financial forecasts for a public television station. He rose through the ranks at various media and sports companies, jobs that always sounded glamorous, because of the high profile of the places where he worked. In reality, though, little of the charm of association rubbed off on the spreadsheets and budget projections, even if the product was a professional basketball team or a hot TV show.

His last job was as chief financial officer of a television production company. When that company did a big reorganization, Michael did some soul searching. His discontent had been building. A few years earlier, he had been on a business trip on 9/11 — a 9 a.m. American Airlines flight from Kennedy International Airport to Los Angeles. His plane never left the tarmac. But, like so many others that day, he began evaluating how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

So when he came to a crossroads for his next professional move, he didn't follow the usual path of talking to headhunters, networking within the industry and finding another corporate finance position. Instead, he started thinking about the weather.

This was nothing new for Michael. He isn't one of those people who watch the Weather Channel simply to catch the local forecast. He has always been the kind of viewer who cares about the barometric pressure in faraway places. He monitors the rainfall levels in tropical climes. And in the Northeast, absolutely nothing gets him going like a good storm, particularly a snowstorm.

Every time we are in the middle of a near blizzard, Michael will look up at the yellowish swirling sky and say, in a deflated voice, "It's letting up." The storm in question may or may not be letting up, but Michael needs to prepare himself emotionally for the tempest's eventual end.



As much as he wants to believe those 18 to 24 inches may fall, he needs to temper his expectations.

His obsession with weather has been lifelong. As a child he built crude weather instruments. He constructed a hygrometer, which measures humidity, out of an old milk carton and strands of human hair. (His patient mother had to pluck a few strands to get the right length.) He put together an anemometer, which clocks wind speeds, out of a bicycle wheel frame, some funnels and a speedometer.

Over the years, he maintained his love. He subscribed to publications like “Windswept” (published by the Mount Washington Observatory) and “Weatherwise.” Just as some households receive mail-order catalogs that advertise gardening tools or kitchen gadgets, we receive titles like “Wind and Weather” that sell barometers and rain gauges.

Still, Michael had always viewed the weather as an avocation, not a vocation. He is facile with numbers, and after graduating from college and then business school, still saddled with student loans, he went directly into the corporate world and didn’t look back.

Until the day he finally did. Maybe it was a delayed reaction to 9/11. Maybe it was just one too many corporate reorganizations and the cutthroat politics that accompany them. But Michael maintains that far from having a crisis of midlife or any variety, he simply decided to become the person he always wanted to be.

Going back to school after 30 years is no easy thing. The closest meteorology program was at a state university in Connecticut. To apply, he had to dig up his original college transcript, which included 35-year-old SAT scores. When he was accepted, he had to produce his immunization records.

Michael called his mother, who after a pause informed him that his pediatrician was long dead and that she had no idea where his old medical charts were. After further research my husband discovered that he had actually already had the diseases today’s students are immunized for — like measles and mumps. His very age proved his immunity, and the university health department gave him a pass.

Attending school was another challenge. Our children told their father that he had inadvertently bought a girl’s backpack. (“But it’s blue,” he said. “Sky blue,” our daughter told him, as if that explained everything.) When Michael slung the backpack over both shoulders, our son demonstrated the one shoulder backpack slouch.

Then there were the academics. Things had changed considerably since his Ivy League days, particularly the computer technology. Just reactivating the brain cells to do advanced physics was challenging. The professors were his age or younger. His fellow students were our children’s ages or younger. His wife (that would be me) alternated between offering support and nagging about lost income.

He persevered. He studied climate and forecasting, not to mention physics, oceanography, thermodynamics, calculus and more. He did radio and Internet weather reporting. He had an internship with a meteorologist at a TV station. He volunteered at the weather observatory on Mount Washington in New Hampshire. This spring, he will get his degree and continue to pursue his dream.

We live in a competitive town, where one-upmanship is common. Yet time and again, people — usually men — pull Michael aside and say: “Man, you’re my hero. I wish I could do what you did. I always wanted to be a ...” Fill in the blank here — landscaper, sculptor, teacher, whatever.

“You still can,” Michael says.

But he is one of the few who did. I’m not sure what the future will bring. The uncertainty makes me anxious. In any case, my husband tells me that anything beyond a seven-day forecast is speculation.

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