

ACTiVATE®ing Women into Entrepreneurship at Mid-Career

BY JULIE LENZER KIRK

Changing careers is never easy, especially when you've spent years of hard work building one. For many women, however, there is a feeling or event that can open their minds to new opportunities.

For some, it is a burning need to be their own boss, while others are convinced they could run the business better. Still others find it hard to re-enter the workforce after taking time off to raise children or feel they've reached as far as they can go in their current career. Globally, women are largely underemployed and among the largest group of unemployed. So many of these women are compelled to change but have a hard time with the first step. They need to be activated.

Activating women into entrepreneurship at mid-career, once they've experienced

THE RIGHT TIME

Richelle Burnett was waiting patiently for the right time. As an idea person with a book full of potential businesses and products, she always knew she would have her own business someday. She had a rich professional career, with activities ranging from engineering to diving with sharks and helicopter skiing in Canada. She even went back to get her master's degree in business administration, followed by a short stint on Wall Street. Nothing could satisfy that entrepreneurial fire burning in her soul.

When she married an entrepreneur, she became more convinced she was being called to start her own business, but when they started a family, she was the one with the steady paycheck and health insurance. She waited patiently for her opportunity. Finally, with two young children at home and her husband's business doing well, the time seemed right.

"The stars were finally aligned," shares Burnett. "I was frustrated with 20 years of unproven, unrealized business ideas when I heard about the ACTiVATE® program."

ACTiVATE® is a year-long entrepreneurship program and a growing community of support specifically for mid-career women. Founded at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, through a grant from the National Science Foundation, the ACTiVATE® program was recently licensed to a new nonprofit, the Path Forward Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, for expansion in the U.S. and abroad.

Burnett was finally doing something for herself. She found that as she became immersed in a structure that gave her dedicated time every week to focus solely on her business ideas, the future began to crystallize.

ACTiVATE® teaches participants what constitutes a good idea for a business and how to find good ideas. The program introduces women to the intellectual property resulting from billions of dollars spent on research as it sits on shelves at universities, government labs, and corporations waiting to be commercialized. Burnett realized finding the right technology instead of creating her own could provide the perfect platform from which to launch her dreams faster. She has done just that in Madison Assessment, LLC (<http://www.MadisonAssessment.com>), which provides computer-based assessments licensed from James Madison University.



Mary Haskett



Kimberly Brown



Richelle Burnett

professional success, is hard. Our tendency to take on multiple responsibilities, too, means the timing has to be right.

Research shows women tend to be risk averse and therefore hesitate to take that leap, particularly without role models and mentors to show them how it is done. Once the time is right, they need a safe environment where they can connect with others like them, learn how to start and build a business, grow their skills and their networks, fail a couple times, and then repeat.

THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY

In contrast, other women see an opportunity in the market and feel compelled to fill it.

After spending years developing training systems to go with complex biometric systems being deployed to foreign governments in the Middle East, Mary Haskett had learned a thing or two about the technology. She became intrigued

with applying it to more commercial problems, like visually identifying lost people who can't identify themselves—such as Alzheimer's patients and children—and created Tactical Information Systems (<http://www.TacticalInfo Sys.com>) to offer biometric matching as a service.

For her, the timing couldn't have been better. She had recently sold her train-

ing company and after working for the acquiring company, realized her calling was really to be an entrepreneur. She joined the ACTIVATE® program at Texas State University after going through several other training programs, none of which offered both the structured process and the peer group of like-minded women.

“The most important thing to me, though, was the mentors,” Haskett shared. “Having done it (started a company) once the hard way, I was determined to meet people, build up my network, and get advice and help from experts in different areas.

“And unlike other courses I took, the ACTIVATE® program was much more hands on. We were constantly forced out of our comfort zone to move our company idea forward.”

A SAFE SPACE

Repeatedly, women who experience the program claim the single-gender environment provided a safe space to try out new ideas and skills. As a result, women like Haskett and Dr. Kimberly Brown report an unexpected shift in mindset.


When Dr. Brown interviewed to join the ACTIVATE® class at UMBC, she had been negotiating to buy the business she was working in but reached a stalemate with the owner. She was given advice in her interview that shifted her mindset and broke that logjam. She purchased her company less than a week after starting the program. Sticking with the program, she took advantage of the knowledge and connections it provided. What she didn't expect was to discover how valuable the support from her classmates, advisers, and program alum were in building her now-thriving company, Amethyst Technologies (<http://www.AmethystTech.com>), which provides cost-effective, cGMP-compliant services for Food and Drug Administration-regulated activities.

With the right environment, mindset, and support, how many more under-employed or unemployed women could make the mid-career leap into entrepreneurship? These women – and hopefully many more to come – are taking control of their futures by stepping out of their comfort zone to start something new. The resulting impact on these women, not to mention the potential in local communities and global

economy, is huge. After all, if the cure for cancer is sitting on a shelf somewhere or in a woman's head, we can't afford not to ACTIVATE® it.

For more information about bringing ACTIVATE® to your region or to find a program near you, email activate@pathforwardcenter.org or call 301-916-5126.

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utive officer of the Path Forward Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, a nonprofit dedicated to helping women worldwide expand economic opportunity through entrepreneurship. The Path Forward Center is the home of the internationally acclaimed and award-winning women's entrepreneurship program, ACTIVATE® (<http://www.ActivateProgram.org>). Kirk can be reached at Julie.Kirk@PathForwardCenter.org. 



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