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When your second career starts at 73

By: Jonnelle Marte | August 25, 2014



Richard Tiberius, 73, a former professor and researcher at the University of Miami, works on a painting in his home studio in the Coconut Grove neighborhood. (Angel Valentin for The Washington Post)

MIAMI — For Richard Tiberius, retirement didn't arrive from one day to the next.

As it does for many Americans today, the milestone came in phases. The first phase began two years ago when he went part time in his role as the director of the educational development office for the medical school at the University of Miami — and his \$120,000 salary dropped to about \$70,000. He was hoping to free up more time to paint, a second career of sorts that had been boxed into nights and weekends.

Tiberius, now 73, figured that between his wife's income, his Social Security benefits and the pension from his time as a researcher in Toronto, he could afford to spend more time in the studio at his Coconut Grove home. But he wasn't ready to quit the university.

“When you're cultivating something, growing something — whether it's a business, painting or academic work — it's hard to leave it,” Tiberius says.

Roughly half — 47 percent — of retirees say they are working or plan to work during retirement, according to a study released earlier this year by Bank of America Merrill Lynch and Age Wave, a research firm. And the motivation isn't always financial: As advances in health care make it possible for people to live longer — and healthier — lives, the idea of a part-time or flexible job appeals to people looking to keep busy. It's an added bonus if the job pays enough to keep them from tapping their savings.

Charles Sachs, Tiberius's financial adviser, says it's common for his clients to dedicate time to a new passion in retirement, though few leave their first careers knowing what that activity will be. Some people take college courses, start new hobbies or find flexible jobs in search of a challenge. Gone are the days of passing retirement in a rocking chair or at the golf course, he says.

“All the things we used to think about retirement have gone out the window because people are living longer, they’re taking better care of themselves,” he says. “What’s important is to know when you’ll be financially independent that you can walk away from that full-time job.”

Tiberius, whose studies were used to develop teaching techniques for medical students, quickly learned that going part-time meant cutting back on original research, or what he always considered to be the fun part of the job. And he says academia, like a jealous mistress, wasn’t leaving much time for anything else.

Hours he thought would be spent carving landscapes onto canvas were eaten up by conferences, lectures and speaking events. “He wasn’t really able to keep it at half time because he loved what he was doing,” says Mark O’Connell, a longtime colleague who still seeks his feedback on research projects. “He was working more like 75 or 80 percent at least.”

Late last year, Tiberius began feeling more prepared for this final phase of retirement. His paintings were selling regularly at the Coconut Grove gallery he’d been working with for years. And his youngest daughter, Kiry, who also picked up painting at an early age, wanted to learn his technique.

So he finally set a retirement date but told no one about it. Then he pushed it back, and he pushed it back again. It finally stuck when he learned he could take on a professor emeritus status, which would let him consult on projects and retain access to the library and other facilities. “What he’s finally done is left one full-time job for another,” his wife, Joyce Slingerland, says. “He’s been trying to ride two horses for the last 30 years.”

The retirement party came and went. In February, he also began drawing down 10 percent a year from a retirement savings account from Canada, where he worked for several decades before moving to Miami. Though he says he isn’t spending the cash. Most of the money is being reinvested in a brokerage account for the day his wife, who’s 56, joins him in retirement.

In the end, he says, he took so long to retire from his academic work not because he needed the money, but because he enjoyed the work.

“People congratulated me and I thought, ‘what are they congratulating me for?’ ” Tiberius says. “I think what they mean is that to them, they really couldn’t wait to retire.”

“But to me it was very different,” he continues. “I love working, but I also love my art.”

Now, instead of driving in on weekday mornings with his wife, who is the director of the breast cancer institute at the university, Tiberius exercises. Then he has breakfast, reads the news and heads into his studio.



Tiberius mixes paint on a palette in his home studio. (Angel Valentin for The Washington Post)

The room is lit with full-spectrum fluorescent lights that give it the feeling of being flooded with natural light. His easel and chair are on the left side of the room, near a stack of books on botany. On the right side, his daughter's chair and easel hold the painting she is working on: a blue heron at the beach.

In addition to submitting more pieces to a local South Florida gallery, he finally got around to sending some paintings to a gallery in Austin, where he says buyers have more of an appetite for the trees, lakes and mountains he likes to re-create.

He isn't selling enough paintings to replace his university salary, but at \$2,000 to \$10,000 apiece, the work shows promise, he says.

"I think he has huge potential," says Sheila Kuhl, co-owner of Coconut Grove Gallery and Interiors, where Tiberius is showing about 12 paintings, up from eight last year. "In five years he could be in a completely different place, career-wise."

Kuhl says it's rare to see an artist who creates realistic images using a knife palette, the way Tiberius does. (More often than not those paintings are impressionistic.) His pieces, sculpted from a thick oil paint he often has to order from Europe, also have a three-dimensional feel, she says.

The last painting he sold, a joint one between Tiberius, who prefers to paint landscapes, and his daughter, who enjoys painting birds, went for \$4,700, he says. In the bottom right-hand corner, the signature is etched: Tiberius I & II.

Roughly six months after his last day of work, Tiberius still thinks of the research papers he didn't finish. His wife says she can tell he misses the social aspect of his old job, the interesting dialogue with professors looking for his help. "Painting is a lonely business," she says.

Tiberius stops by the university once every few weeks to consult on new teaching methods, O'Connell says. The department is compiling the books he used for research, along with some of his paintings, and dubbing it the Tiberius library.

Some days, Tiberius finds his time in the studio is interrupted by a call or a visit from a former colleague hoping to get his feedback on a proposal. After taking a moment to offer his thoughts, he returns to his easel.

“I’m happy with the arrangement,” he says. “It feels good.”

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