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From the Los Angeles Times

Encore careers give 'retirees' another chance to do their dream jobs

A new wave of people take joy in switching to public-service work.

By Maria L. La Ganga

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After 50 years practicing dentistry in Santa Monica, Cal Kurtzman hung up his drill and embarked on a well-deserved second chapter of life.

Not golf. Not rest. Not even volunteer work. Although he spent a short stint as an unpaid advocate for foster children, the families' problems were "really beyond the scope of my education."

What he knew -- and loved -- was dentistry.

So three years ago, Kurtzman outfitted his aging Nissan Pathfinder with the latest in portable dental technology and began treating frail, elderly patients and people with dementia in the familiar confines of their nursing home rooms.

All of which, at age 74, makes him a trailblazer -- in the large and growing population of underserved elderly patients he treats and in the way he's living his own life.

"As my practice and I got older, my patients got older," Kurtzman said. "I began to notice a lot of patients coming to the office who shouldn't have. By the time they got there they were exhausted, and whoever brought them was annoyed."

And then there were elderly women and men who couldn't even make it to a dental office for care. A recent survey of older Los Angeles County residents revealed that nearly a third hadn't had a dental exam in three years, largely because of cost and transportation problems.

"I saw this unmet need," Kurtzman said, "and it ate at me."

The bearded traveling dentist, who spends three days a week on the road in Los Angeles County, also is part of a new wave of "retirees" searching for meaning through so-called encore careers.

In recent years, the high cost of living and the lack of savings have translated into more Americans saying they will need to work beyond the average retirement age of 63.

But a new national survey released Wednesday found that nearly 10% of baby boomers polled are currently pursuing "work that matters in the second half of life, work that they want to do and that society needs doing."

And half of those surveyed who do not have encore careers -- jobs in such fields as teaching, public service, healthcare and the nonprofit sector -- said they were interested in doing so.

What's at work here "is the intersection of several powerful forces," said Marc Freedman, chief executive of Civic Ventures, the San Francisco-based nonprofit that teamed up with the MetLife Foundation for a phone survey of 1,063 men and women ages 44 to 70 and an online survey of more than 2,500 people in the same age range.

There is "the necessity of longer working lives to continue drawing an income and getting health benefits," Freedman said in a conference call with reporters Wednesday, "and the search for meaning. . . . Purpose is as important as income."

According to the survey, those involved in service-oriented second careers trend toward the higher end of the socioeconomic scale and are more likely to be college graduates. They value flexibility, and three-quarters said they are earning sufficient income and benefits.

Kurtzman said he wants his colleagues to join him in the brave new world of mobile dentistry, "to know it's rewarding both mentally and financially and they can help bring dental care to an entire untreated population.

"I am happy to get up each morning," he said. "Not too many retired dentists can say they have renewed interest in the field after their career has supposedly ended."

Wednesday was a typical day: A 6 a.m. workout at the YMCA, breakfast with friends and then off to West Los Angeles to smooth off a broken front tooth in an Alzheimer's patient he'd never treated before.

Then he headed to the San Fernando Valley to examine and clean the teeth of another Alzheimer's patient he's seen regularly for a year. After that it was a Santa Monica nursing home, where he took impressions and prepared several teeth for a patient who needed a new bridge.

He ended up back in West Los Angeles at a board and care home for his most challenging patient of the day, a woman who needed an abscessed tooth pulled but cannot sit up without difficulty.

The solution: Work on her in her own bed.

Kurtzman's most complicated case since opening Comprehensive Mobile Dental Care in 2005 was a 68-year-old recovering drug addict and alcoholic who lives in a Westside assisted living facility, is petrified by dentists and whose "teeth were a mess."

"I had to take 23 teeth out," Kurtzman said. "We brought in an anesthesiologist. Then I made dentures. We're still working with him. . . . He looks like he's terminal at this point, but I feel like I helped him during the latter part of his life feel that he looked better," he continued. "That's the kind of thing that's nice."

And, unfortunately, not that common.

Holly Hargrove, director of nursing at Berkley East Convalescent Hospital, said it often took a month for a dentist to visit patients needing care at her Santa Monica facility.

And when the practitioners finally arrived, she said, they'd invariably say the bedridden patients required office care after all. That changed when Kurtzman arrived.

"He's probably seen 75 to 100 patients here," Hargrove said. "As they need help, we give him a call, and he comes right in, sometimes the same day."

He has refitted old dentures to let frail elderly patients eat solid food for the first time in years. He's cleaned teeth and pulled teeth and arranged care with absent family members.

"The day he walked through our doors," Hargrove said, "was one of the best days ever."

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