

Back-Seat Driving

Being a mentor is the best of both worlds: a great ride without having to do all the steering

By ELLEN GRAHAM

AS I WRITE THIS, about a dozen neighbor kids are squealing with delight from nearby yards in the vanishing midsummer twilight. Hearing their shouts and laughter—it's vibrant music, really—I'm reminded why we chose to retire to a neighborhood not barricaded with a guardhouse, or restricted to occupants of the 55-plus persuasion.

I may be older, but I still like to mingle with the young. I like it when the kids down the street wave when we drive by, or come calling in Cub Scout regalia selling peanut brittle and tacky greeting cards. Watching the gaggle of young mothers chatting at the corner each morning after the school bus pulls away, it might as well be yesterday when I was part of a group just like them.

All of which brings me to my friend Elizabeth. We met a couple of years ago during a political campaign. I was recruiting volunteers, and she turned up. I liked her last name—Outlaw—and her obvious smarts. A doctoral candidate in education at the local college, she is studious and sensitive, kind of like I was at her age, which is 28. She bears a passing resemblance to Reese Witherspoon, whereas at 62, I am more the Angela Lansbury type. But we hit it off anyway.

Our friendship is really a surrogate mother-daughter relationship, minus the friction and emotional baggage. Elizabeth actually seeks my advice and often heads it, unlike Julia, my independent-minded daughter of the same age. (Julia may bris-

tle when I butt into her life, but to be fair, she usually comes around—sometimes portraying my ideas as her own.) Another plus: When Elizabeth grappled with the problems of young adulthood—wicked landlords, job tensions, deadbeat roommates—I could listen without going around the bend with worry, as I sometimes do when living through Julia's ups and downs.

War Stories

My first role vis-à-vis Elizabeth was as a sort of Miss Lonelyhearts. New in town, she was reeling from a string of disastrous dates arranged over a singles Web site: guys who stood her up, guys six inches shorter than advertised, guys who stuck her with the check for her own drinks. Bad behavior left her thunderstruck. I, with a few more decades under my belt, am no longer surprised by anything. As consolation, I could only offer dating horror stories of my own. Had she been stranded at an out-of-town fraternity weekend, where her blind date was already blind drunk when he was carried downstairs to meet her? Had she endured a formal dinner dance where the same drunk date instigated a champagne-and-mashed-potato food fight? Of course not. But I had—and lived to laugh about it.

The breakthrough came at Christmas, when I gave Elizabeth a copy of the best-seller "He's Just Not That Into You," by Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo. The authors' no-brainer advice: Don't make excuses for jerks and cads. If he doesn't call, well, don't spin tortured fantasies that he's shy, or out of town. Face the fact he's just not that into you.

By the end of winter break, Elizabeth had ingested the book's message. Over coffee, she told me she was at peace with the notion that she might never find Mr. Right. In any



Roger Roth

case, she said, she wasn't going to settle. She was about to cancel her subscription to the dating service when she decided to give it one last try. That's when John Crawford, a handsome graphic designer, showed up online. He was thoughtful and attentive—"very into me," Elizabeth says. They talked nearly till dawn on their second date and were married within six months.

John may have robbed me of my chance to play matchmaker. (I had been hatching plans to introduce Elizabeth to one or both of my nephews.) But I found my role toward Elizabeth morphing again, to that of professional mentor. During my career in a large newsroom, I had lots of contact with younger reporters, some of whom became close friends. As an editor of advanced vintage, I even took some of them under my wing in a quasitutorial role—a newsroom Mrs. Chips. (By the time I retired, I'd kicked around the office for so many years that a young, glamorous editor I reported to congratulated me on adjusting to some new procedure with a veiled insult: "See, old dogs can learn new tricks.")

When I left the newsroom for the last time, my days as adviser to a younger generation seemed over. Retiree labor sustained the volunteer organizations we joined in our new community. Even though our neighborhood was full of young couples, they were absorbed in juggling kids and careers, so that social encounters were

infrequent. Elizabeth, however, seems to be that rare young person who enjoys, and seeks out, the company of her elders. "They are wiser, they have things to teach me," she says. In my case, it didn't hurt that our politics meshed, or that I seemed, in her words, "straightforward, blunt—but not in a hurtful way."

Cultural Exchange

In particular, I admired her passion for her work. After her marriage, Elizabeth and I still met for lunch or at the gym. She and John would join my husband, Don, and me for dinner outings, sometimes with Julia and her husband, Silver. Julia put Elizabeth in touch with her friend Eric, a Peace Corps volunteer in South Africa looking to set up a cultural exchange with an American school. Elizabeth found a local preschool teacher receptive to the idea and visited the class each week, teaching about African culture with photos, music tapes and letters Eric sent from his village. I attended a class party where the children ate African dishes Elizabeth had prepared and chattered about their adopted African village.

Last spring, Elizabeth mentioned that she hoped to find a summer internship in educational policy at the state level. My husband and I offered to write on her behalf to the governor, for whom we all had campaigned. In his letter, Don said he had

always told the governor he would never ask for any favors in return for our support. But, in recommending Elizabeth, he said, "I believe we're the ones doing the favor." In short order, an aide to the governor called, encouraging her to apply to the Governor's Fellows program, a prestigious internship that would allow her to work at top levels of state government.

Amazingly, though Elizabeth had held several teaching jobs, she had only once before actually had a face-to-face job interview. So I coached her on interviewing and tried to allay her anxiety, while never doubting that she would be accepted. When she was selected, she called us with the news even before contacting her own parents. The internship led to an exciting state job in early-education policy while she finishes her doctorate.

If you listen to the cliché, hanging out with Elizabeth is supposed to keep me young. In fact, it's had an even more valuable effect. Back-seat driving with a young person at the wheel—figuratively, of course—has reminded me that there are blessings to be counted as the years pile up on us. As Elizabeth and Julia careen ahead, I am beginning to look at youth not so much with envy as relief, grateful that I'm no longer in the driver's seat. It is they who now must steer around the bumps and obstacles that come their way, while I sit safely in the back seat, enjoying the ride. ■

Prize

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credit standing, they accept loans with interest rates of 17% to 35%. "I saw [salesmen] high-fiving when they got a \$5,000 profit on a car that was going to die in a year."

So, after musing with a friend and talking to some bankers, in 2001 Mr. Chambers started Bonnie CLAC (for Car Loans and Counseling). It steers low-income people to buying new, base-model cars at prices and on loan terms equal to those obtained by people with more negotiating savvy and solid credit. Bonnie CLAC guarantees the loans—more than 750 of them so far.

Mr. Chambers has arranged price and extended-warranty deals with a dozen auto dealers and interest rates with some banks. He says the average purchase involves a total, with financing, of less than \$15,000, with no money down; a warranty; interest at just over 6%; and an \$800 fee to Bonnie CLAC. The average monthly payment is around \$270.

"We don't give things away, we give a hand up," Mr. Chambers says. "They have to work hard to achieve the rest." Buyers must have a job and be able to meet the monthly payment, and Bonnie CLAC gives them basic training in managing their finances.

Auto dealers and banks make a fair profit. Bonnie CLAC, a nonprofit, pays a dozen employees and doesn't rely on volunteers. The program has branches in New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine.

The satisfaction for Mr. Chambers: "Once people get this stability, they can focus on other things besides getting to the job.... Many go on to better-paying jobs [and] get into the mainstream."

(For more information, see www.bonnieclac.org.)

ing grant from her church's community fund; opened a used-furniture store in a crime-ridden district of north Richmond; and began a job-training program. Next, she broadened her mission to include raising the downtrodden and bridging the cultural gap between Richmond's white and black communities.

While her husband, a retired lawyer, took over the antique shop, she added to her nonprofit initiative with such side businesses as furniture restoration, a cafe, catering, home repair and moving—ventures that provide training, jobs and revitalization for a blighted black neighborhood, and that produce revenue to keep things growing.

Ms. Rollins named her organization Boaz and Ruth, after a biblical couple who taught that giving and receiving become reciprocal—a lesson she learned years ago. With degrees in religion and teaching from Duke University, she was bored as a young housewife and considered entering the Presbyterian ministry, but wound up running her own business for 30 years. During that time, she was active in programs to improve conditions for the poor, but wasn't content as a part-timer. Then, cancer surgery at 51 increased her need to realize her dreams, even as it slowed her pace.

Finally, the challenge issued by her customer made her think: "Maybe that's my gift, being a catalyst for other people to give money.... The [customer] found that their gift is to give seed money."

And the balky horse? Ms. Rollins remembers that episode when asked about the prospect of winning—or losing—the Purpose Prize: Her horse kept stopping at a jump, and, "My instructor said, 'That's because you're looking at the jump, not beyond it.' So if I look at the prize, I'm stopping my need to look beyond it, to share and give back what I already have received."

(See www.boazandruth.com.)

He approached the tree planting as though it were his own commercial venture and applied orchard-production techniques to invent a new model for flood control, river restoration and wildlife preservation.

His success inspired him to spread the word to neighboring farmers and communities, ecologists, and state and local agencies. In 1998, he helped found River Partners, a nonprofit based in Chico, Calif., that is operated with businesslike efficiency by a fully paid staff to stimulate, plan and help carry out thousands of acres of river restoration in extended areas of California. About half of River Partners' projects involve competitive bids for government contracts, jobs from which it may make a profit. Any profits, though, are plowed back into paying overhead costs.

Mr. Flynn's broad purpose: "We need to keep our environment whole, a...concern that wouldn't ordinarily be dealt with by the economy at large."

And what he has learned for himself: "Involving yourself in...filling gaps left by our for-profit economy is a transforming experience. Just as important is what is going to happen to you. Forming a new organization in later years with younger people is an asset to personality development, and it transforms the way you look at the world, through the lenses of other people's eyes."

(See www.riverpartners.org.)



HERBERT STURZ

"I keep doing it because I think I can make a difference, and I get pleasure from doing it."

AT 75, HERB STURZ has a résumé of public-service achievements that began in his 20s and won't stop. His imaginative nonprofits have left indelible marks all over New York City, on criminal-justice reform, affordable housing for the homeless, support for victims of abuse, and other vital causes.

While shunning elected office, Mr. Sturz has served as a deputy mayor for criminal justice and a chairman of the City Planning Commission. And he is a trustee of the Open Society Institute, New York, a foundation created by financier George Soros to promote democracy, education and human-rights causes. In sum, Mr. Sturz over the decades has forged a solid link between the lowly and the high and mighty.

His two current interests, as usual, are diverse—at opposite ends of the life line. The After-School Corp., started with a challenge grant from Open Society, has sponsored programs in New York to help working parents keep their children off the streets. He is undertaking to develop such programs across the country.

The other enterprise reflects Mr. Sturz's own feelings about aging and service: "As I've gotten older, I've won-



MARTHA FRANCK ROLLINS

"I thought, how can God use an antiques dealer?"



BERNARD FLYNN

"One of our goals is to get a place at the table for environmental concerns."

LISTEN TO 63-YEAR-OLD Martha Rollins, of Richmond, Va., and you discover that she is driven by her nature and her religion to try to connect the poor and the privileged in ways that can "energize" both.

Ms. Rollins has a reputation for overcoming adversity, be it a balky horse or breast cancer. Four years ago, a long-time customer of her prosperous antique shop gave her a new challenge after hearing how urgently she wanted to rehabilitate former prison inmates. He offered a grant of \$150,000 if she would start making her dream come true.

The customer's largess was like a starter's pistol shot for a sprinter. Within nine months, Ms. Rollins won a match-

BARNEY FLYNN'S FAMILY was farming 1,400 acres of almonds and prunes near Red Bluff, Calif., when he got involved in flood control to protect the property. In 1989, the family sold 500 acres behind eroding levees along the Sacramento River to a federal agency for a wildlife refuge that would become a bulwark for the remaining farmland.

A nature lover, Mr. Flynn asked the agency to allow the river to breach its levees and to plant native trees to shore up the land. The agency responded with a contract for him to do the job.

Mr. Flynn, 71, is a Harvard University graduate who once worked as a computer programmer and is well-grounded in agricultural technology.