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Second career has its rewards

By Laura Raines
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After a full performance in one career, would you consider starting another? More senior workers who could be retired are taking on second careers these days, and, surprisingly, it's not always about the money.

For Dr. Jack Klippel, CEO of the Arthritis Foundation, it was a passion for meeting the needs of patients with arthritis. The rheumatologist spent many years as a senior investigator and then clinical director at the National Institutes of Health researching lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. The Arthritis Foundation asked him to become its medical director in 1999.

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Leita Cowart / AJC Special

Dr. Jack Klippel is CEO of the Arthritis Foundation, following a career with the National Institutes of Health.

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When the CEO left in 2003, Klippel knew that the organization had been struggling post 9/11 with direction and finances. "I thought I could hang in there and see who would lead it, but I like to work. I like doing hard things, so I stepped up," Klippel said.

He knew that CEO would be a very different job, but he had managed and mentored others and wanted to help the organization form a strategic plan and vision for the future. He moved from Washington, where he and his wife had lived for more than 30 years, to Atlanta. He began thinking about the disease in terms of public health and prevention instead of medical care and research. He learned a lot about business, marketing and fund-raising.

"It's one of the more exciting things I've ever done. It has re-energized me," Klippel said. "It opened my eyes to how complex and interesting any disease is, and how important advocacy and empowering patients are. It's unbelievably rewarding to know I'm making a difference and to work with such a diverse range of people."

At 64, he's working harder than ever and finding the satisfaction a great trade-off.

"I'm learning new skill sets I didn't know I had, forming new relationships and understanding myself better," he said. He knows he's making a contribution and believes that older workers have the right "combination of experience and confidence" to do new things.

After years of working with the blind and visually impaired as a special-education teacher, Bill Whittaker wanted to give something back. He retired from Atlanta City Schools in 2004, at age 63. "I believe that to whom much is given, much is required. I loved my first career, and it felt strange to just stop and not do anything. I

thought I would use this time to give back," he said.

While volunteering with the Georgia Council on Aging, his talent for working with seniors was noticed by the director of community relations at Care Improvement Plus, a Medicare advantage provider. She offered him a part-time job. "Since 2007, I've worked as a community outreach ambassador — a fancy title for serving the needs of our members at community events," he said.

Whittaker found that his education skills transferred well. He had the necessary computer skills, and he knew how to listen and pay attention to detail.

"I enjoy interacting with others. I've learned a lot about Medicare, and they tell me that I have a Ph.D. in organizing," he joked. Whittaker has organized all the educational materials and brought new structure to the organization's road shows.

"I didn't expect to have a different career, but it has been rewarding," Whittaker said. "It's a great fit for my skills and my desire to grow old gracefully and keep my mind active."

Vicki Gordon had specialized knowledge she wanted to share. As senior vice president of corporate affairs, Americas Region, Intercontinental Hotel Group, she had broad responsibilities, including government relations, public policy issues, community outreach and philanthropy. She helped link her industry needs for an educated work force with the type of issues and programs it supported, such as Literacy Action Inc. "I loved my work, but as I met my counterparts in other companies, I realized that most companies never make those connections and I saw an opportunity," she said.

At 60, with 36 years in the industry, Gordon retired and founded the

CollinsGordon Group this year. She uses her skills to help organizations form strategies that achieve strong business results while fostering sustainable, positive change in issues allied with the company's mission.

Being a former restaurant owner and having good communication skills helped prepare her to be an entrepreneur.

Despite the economy, Gordon said it was a good move. "I'd been thinking about this a long time. I didn't consider retiring because my interest is business and I want to stay engaged and help others," Gordon said.

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“Like Jane Fonda, I believe that the longer you stay engaged, the more fulfilling your third act will be.”

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