

Company specializes in 'Vocation Vacations'

By Susan Chaityn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent | March 25, 2008

During one of his many shuttle flights between Boston and Manhattan, William W. Moyer wound up sitting with a few sportscasters from CBS. One of the men told Moyer he had a great voice and should consider doing voice-overs for television and radio.

"I'd never heard the term," said Moyer, 62, who'd spent 40 years working in finance for Merrill Lynch and the Investment Technology Group. As his career was winding down, Moyer became more intrigued by what the sportscaster had said.

Soon after Moyer retired, his wife bought him a "Vocation Vacation." It allowed him to spend two days with Kim Crow, a professional voice-over artist in Florida. They began with the basics - reading stories and ad copy - then worked on intonation, speed, and inflection. Crow taught Moyer how to download backgrounds from the Internet, mix sound on the computer, and create a website. She taught him how to find work, and explained the pros and cons of having an agent.

Moyer and his wife recently moved from the Back Bay to Bonita Springs, Fla. He said he's still unpacking boxes but just picked up a MacBook Pro and plans on pursuing a part-time career in voice-overs.

Vocation Vacations is the brainchild of Brian Kurth, a former business executive from Oregon. His company, born in 2004, connects curious people with mentors who have the jobs they've only thought about pursuing. Vacationers pay a fee ranging from \$545 to \$2,000 (airfare and lodging not included), though most are under \$1,200. Kurth estimates that roughly 40 percent of his clients are baby boomers looking for a career change, 40 percent are Generation Xers (born in the 1960s and 1970s), 10 percent are Millennials (born between 1980-1995), and 10 percent are retirees who are signing up for fun.

Kurth, who spent much of the 1990s in product management in the United States and abroad, said he began taking informal surveys in 2002 to see if people would pay to have a two- or three-day experience in a dream job. Two years later he launched Vocation Vacations, starting with 10 mentors in Oregon. Today he has 300 mentors, who are paid each time they work with a client.

Debra Piver, a 47-year-old theater educator from Los Angeles, flew to Nantucket to explore perfume making. She paid \$949 to spend three days with John Harding, founder of Nantucket Natural Oils.

"We started by training my nose - placing different drops and combinations of essences on coffee filters, as they have no scent," Piver said. Between a drop of rose, a drop of petruilli oil, and a drop of orange, Piver was asked which smelled sweeter, richer, more feminine, and sexier, to train her memory. She also learned how to identify oils such as amber, sandalwood, and peony, and how best to combine them.

Piver had planned on spending her last two days at the beach, but when one of the shop assistants fell off her bike and hurt her ankle, Piver volunteered to work behind the counter. "I just loved it," she said. "I'm studying more now, taking workshops in blending, and want to create my own perfumes."

Harding, a 58-year-old jazz musician from Indiana who landed on Nantucket after taking saxophone classes at Berklee College of Music, started his perfume career in 1983. "The art of perfumery is making the balance," Harding said. "People leave here feeling confident that they can buy oils on their own and make mixes."

Kurth says he views Vocation Vacations as an instrument that helps people get closer to seeing whether they want to pursue a particular career path. "We're not the Holy Grail," Kurth said. "You're not suddenly going to be able to become a sports announcer, clothing designer, or day-care owner, but you may be able to learn if you want to go on to write your business plan or go back to school."

Elizabeth Nill, 60, who spent 20 years in higher education, learned about Vocation Vacations from a colleague during a discussion about how to spend the rest of her life.

"I wanted to indulge my creative side, which I'd never had time to do working full time and raising a family," said Nill, who lives in Barnstable. "I was describing my fantasy of designing clothing for women between the ages of 55 and 70, and he mentioned [the organization]." Nill's mentor was a fashion designer in Los Angeles.

"I got a feel for what the economics are and made a huge number of contacts," Nill said. But what she mostly got out of her work experience, she said, was the reinforcement that she wanted to try it. Nill has devoted two years to launching her own line.

Carol Greenfield, founder of Discovering What's Next, a Newton-based nonprofit that helps midlife and older adults negotiate the transition to retirement, said Vocation Vacations fills a need for people considering a completely different second career. "It's an easy entrée into finding out about things to explore - whether it's to start a business, or rediscover missed opportunities of the past," said, Greenfield, who is not financially involved with Vocation Vacations.

Roberta Taylor, a life planning coach from Wellesley, works with Vocation Vacations as a consultant as well as her in own private practice. "People often come in and say, 'I don't want to be doing what I've been doing for the past 25 or 30 years, but I don't know what it is that I want do.'" She's placed 10 people in the Vocation Vacations program over the past eight months.

Kurth said his company especially excels when there's a barrier to break, such as in the fields of fashion design and sports announcing. "You can't just show up in a stadium and say, 'Hey, can I join you up in the box?'" Kurth said. Mike Capps, sports announcer at Round Rock Express, a minor-league baseball team in Austin, Texas, is one of the Vocation Vacations mentors.

One of the more popular career changes right now, according to Kurth? Bakery owner. "Sure, you can walk in, but you're in front of the retail counter," he said. "We can get behind it."

Dedra Lombardi, a 37-year-old operations manager for a heating and air conditioning company in New Jersey, spent her vacation in Burlington Vt., with Mike Loner, executive director of the nonprofit DREAM (Directing through Recreation, Education and Mentoring), who works with children living in subsidized housing developments. "Each night when I left DREAM I went back to my hotel and thought about my life and my career," Lombardi said. "My current plan is to open a teen center [in New Jersey]."

But it's not just career switchers who sign up. Adam Maltais, 18, of Framingham, a history major at Franklin Pierce University in New Hampshire, spent two days learning the art of sword forging in New Glarus, Wis. It was a high school graduation gift from his parents.

Kurth pointed to his family as inspiration for the service Vocation Vacations offers. "My dad was a very unhappy insurance claims manager," he said. "He had been a police officer, and his true passion was to be a private detective. . . . We're working with people who want more happiness in their life."

Brian Kurth will speak at the Newton Free Library April 7 at 7 p.m. Admission is free. Register at discoveringwhatsnext.com or call 617-796-1419. Susan Chaityn Lebovits can be reached at Lebovits@globe.com. ■