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20s: A Life of your Own Series: Defining Moments: A Journey through the Decades

Cassandra West, Barbara Rose, and Kathy Bergen, Tribune staff reporters Lisa Skolnik contributed. Chicago Tribune.

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Oh, the joy of breaking free--of parents, of curfews, of too many rules.

Oh, the terror.

You've reached the 20s.

When the independence you've craved, at last, is yours. Just on the other side of those wacky, wild teenage years, grown-up life begins.

You are on your own. You can always go back home. You cannot ever go back.

You are free, yet suddenly saddled with new, adult obligations. It's liberating. It's a drag.

Everything is ahead. This is your make-it or break-it time.

With it comes: Getting your first apartment. Managing funds that are never quite adequate. Having credit cards embossed with your name. Losing friends to faraway places. Gaining new ones. Discovering worlds and ideas within your reach--and terribly beyond. Keeping late, late hours, studying, partying, burning the candle at both ends.

These are the years to put your plan in place, to push--hard, harder, hardest. To make your mark. To navigate your way in an uncertain world, prepared or not.

At 20, you ask: Do I have what it takes? By 28, 29, you are closer to knowing the answer, you think.

College graduations. Grad school. The first real job. Will the personal and the professional collide? Can you find true love and still build the career of your dreams? Is marriage in your future? Children? Maybe a little person is already calling you Mom. Or are you listening quietly to the tick-tock of your biological clock?

You are a woman now. And exactly what does that mean? You know and you don't.

You are still awakening, evolving in wonderful, crazy ways.

Mistakes will be made. And the hard lessons will come.

So much living to do.

But the race is already on. The big 3-0 is already in view.

Poof! The 20s are gone. How quickly, those who have lived them say, they seem to go.

-- Cassandra West

A plan and a passion

SARAH STIGLER / AGE: 21 / CHICAGO

Sarah Stigler's fingers on the handle of an espresso cup are those of a construction worker: nails trimmed to the quick, cuticles cracked.

She's sipping her second cup of the evening. It's late, but she'll be up half the night, studying before reporting to work again before 6:30 a.m.

Sarah is one of only four women--and, at 21, one of the youngest- -in a group of 140 accepted this summer into a five-year apprenticeship with Local Union 130, which represents plumbers.

She's going through "hell week"--wading through OSHA regulations, union history and formulas for calibrating machine tools. Her first week is crammed with classes, part of her demanding initiation into a fraternity of workers.

Sleep-deprived and high on caffeine and her vision of her future, she talks with a trailblazer's passion and no small measure of idealism about what it's like to pursue her dream.

She can't imagine a better calling than becoming a union plumber.

I feel like very few women have been as blessed as I have, being able to pursue what they want and not getting forced into somebody else's plan.

It's hard to imagine her following anybody's plan but her own. Her handshake is firm enough to make you wince. Her black hair is cropped short. A tattooed flame encircles her right wrist.

Her eyes, soft and brown, meet yours and hold them with the forthrightness of a person who is comfortable in her own skin.

It can't have been easy to develop such assurance. From early on, all her instincts led her away from the activities other girls chose.

I'm not really interested in what people think I should be doing, because if I was concerned about that, I would not have pursued anything I loved.

We put this pressure on our young women to grow up a certain way. It's still such a pink and blue sort of world.

She was the little girl scrambling up trees in a pair of ripped jeans while others played dress-up. From the time she was 14, her head was under the hood of a car.

I was my father's shadow.

Her parents, now divorced--a Milwaukee police officer and a Lake County graphics designer--let their stubborn daughter find her own way.

She poured her adolescent emotions into art--monotone abstractions of women; sculptures depicting women's cracked torsos. Most of her work was too graphic to display in high school.

The school's art studio became her refuge. A benefactor paid for her summer classes at Chicago's School of the Art Institute. She was accepted there full time when she graduated from high school, but she couldn't afford the tuition.

An ad in the Chicago Reader caught her eye. Wanted: trainees to reglaze ceramic tubs. The pay wasn't bad. She was strong enough to lug 100-plus pounds of chemicals and equipment wherever her work took her from dilapidated apartments in Section 8 buildings to North Shore mansions.

It was a terribly stinky, smelly eight hours, but it was a good day's work. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Her work ethic impressed her bosses. She kept her politics to herself, but her beliefs about social justice bled into the bathtubs she refinished.

When a Section 8 landlord told her not to mind the rust--just glaze right over it--she worked the extra hours, without pay, to do the job right.

She couldn't stand the idea of some mom sitting her toddler's bare bottom down in a tub with rust peeking through.

Last year she enrolled in a program at Chicago Women in Trades that prepares women for union apprenticeships. It changed her life.

It wasn't just the union wages that drew her, or union politics or the satisfaction of learning something useful.

It was all that and more. The work itself beckoned her, especially that of a plumber--not so different from that of an industrial artist.

I like to weld and I like to solder. I like to construct with metals. So I was given a beautiful opportunity.

When the union's first response to her application arrived in the mail, she climbed the stairs to her Uptown apartment and shut the door before tearing open the letter. Her hands were shaking.

The reply was heartbreaking. She hadn't made the cut. She took a deep breath and called her mentor at Chicago Women in Trades before deciding to reapply.

She enrolled in math and engineering classes at night at Truman College--subjects that don't come easily to her--while reglazing tubs by day.

She pursued her goals with burn-the-candle-at-both-ends intensity.

I've never really hesitated about anything I've done. I've never sat back and fretted, 'What should I do?' There have been things that smacked me upside the head like a sledgehammer, so then it's on to Plan B. I feel more directed and focused than ever.

What I want out of life is really pretty simple. I want a home, a family, an honorable and respectable career and just enough breathing room to pursue some of the things that aren't utility-based.

She has no trouble imagining where she wants to be when she's 50. For starters, she'll be with her partner, a woman she met five years ago.

We'll have a plot of land with a couple of big old barns to make lots of artwork.

Of course, she'll be pursuing her trade.

I don't see myself as a contractor. I'm not money-driven enough. I care about doing the work and being part of the team. Maybe I'll be a foreman.

Certainly I'll be involved with other women, giving them the opportunity to succeed, to help assure that for the next generation behind me, these options are open.

For now, what makes her happiest?

Having the freedom to do what I think is right. That's what it's about for me. Just going for it.

--Barbara Rose

On the mommy track, happily

BRIGITA DIMANTS / AGE: 28 / CHICAGO

Back in the 1950s and '60s it would have been wholly unremarkable for an educated young woman from a well-off family to marry right out of college and start a family of her own.

Very few strayed from the path, a path preserved for posterity by numerous swell TV moms.

But now, it is a path less frequently taken by college-educated women in their 20s.

And it was hardly the path that Brigita Dimants envisioned for herself when she was a business student at Loyola University in the mid-1990s.

"I envisioned myself being single, and with a career, and I wasn't thinking 'family, family, family,' " said Brigita, who at 28 has established herself as a stay-at-home mom with two young children.

"I'm like Mrs. Domestic, and I love it, which surprises me," said Dimants, the daughter and granddaughter of professional women who worked while raising their own children.

"I love when my husband comes home, and dinner is on the table, and the house is almost clean, we've picked up almost all the toys, and when he comes home, it's quality time," she said from the living room of her family's high-rise, Lincoln Park condo with views of the lake and downtown skyline.

Breakfast is ready

On a recent morning, Brigita fixed crepes for her daughter, Lillia, 3, and French toast for her son, Denver, 4.

"My husband says I spoil them, but they eat well and that's so nice," said Brigita, a spirited, talkative woman with the casually chic look of a model.

By 9:30 they were cleaned up, dressed smartly and pulling bikes from a storage room for a trek to a playground a block away.

Once at the park, Denver called out,

"I want one of those," pointing to a street-cleaning truck rumbling along Lake Shore Drive.

"Mmm, hmm," Brigita murmured in reply, as Lillia pedaled her bike over to the swings.

"I love my life--I get to go and do fun things with my kids," Brigita said. "And I know the other side of it. When my parents were working, I'd be stuck at home until they got home."

Life's unexpected turns

When Brigita was finishing her bachelor's degree in business she figured she would follow in her mother's footsteps, as a career woman with AT&T.

She interned with the company, but then came love, a pregnancy and marriage to Andis Dimants, a business owner who like Brigita is of Latvian descent.

"When you're talking about having kids, it's very easy to say, 'Oh, we'll put them in day care' . . . but when it's something more real, we're, like, 'OK, what are we going to do? We don't have family here,' " recalled Brigita, who grew up in a wooded suburb in New Jersey.

The couple, who speak Latvian at home, decided to try having Brigita stay home with their baby, and if she wasn't happy, they would craft a Plan B.

There were some initial shocks for her: guilt at not bringing home a paycheck, a feeling of isolation when her husband had to travel for work, disappointment at times when she couldn't join friends at gatherings.

But she found her ticket to enjoying motherhood was to get up and go, every day, to the parks, the beach, the museums, or even just to the store.

"I do not put on sweats--then I'd feel all slumpy," said Brigita dressed in a shapely black T-shirt, pink flowered capri pants and pink flip-flops, her toenails painted a deep red. "I take a shower, put on lipstick and go ... I'm strict with myself, we're out the door by 9."

A 'feminist way'

When Brigita decided to become a stay-at-home mom, it sparked some consternation in her paternal grandmother, a physician who worked and studied as her own children grew up.

"She said, 'You know, it's different times--women don't have to stay home,' " Brigita recalled.

On the other hand, her grandmother acknowledged that women have more of a choice now.

Brigita said her grandmother ultimately concluded, "You did it the most feminist way. ... You made your own decision, there was no male telling you to do that, there was no society telling you to do that."

And it's a path she plans to walk down for some time.

Though she suffered a midterm miscarriage in March, she and Andis very much want to have at least one more child.

For now, in addition to her mom duties, Brigita does some at-home bookkeeping for her husband's business, National Focus USA, a Chicago-based manufacturer of picture frames and clipboards.

She and Andis, both avid skiers, also own a condo in Keystone, Colo. And Brigita handles rentals of that unit, which they use three times a year.

And she shops, packs and cooks for weekend trips to their summer home in Michigan.

Clearly, the Dimants have the wherewithal to make it possible for Brigita to stay home with the kids. She is aware of that privilege.

Yet, she points out they made a conscious financial decision--to stay in their cozy condo rather than buy an expensive suburban home--that enables them to have this lifestyle.

"It allows us to save up more money, it allows us to do other things," she said.

And she has other ambitions for when she's older.

"I've always had this dream of opening a diner because I love cooking," she said.

Right now, it's just a dream.

"It all depends on how many kids we have," she said.

Meanwhile, she said getting married and starting a family in her 20s--and pouring her energy into helping her husband and kids--has been a transformational experience.

"Growing up, I was more of a selfish person," she said. "But what's so great about kids is that you just don't think about yourself as much ... it's such a great feeling that maybe I'm really not as selfish as I thought I was."

-- Kathy Bergen

Achiever takes time to catch her breath

SHANNON BARTLETT / AGE: 25 / OAK PARK

It is a clear, warm, Friday evening in late May. Friends and family of Shannon Bartlett are mingling in her parents' Oak Park home. They are here to celebrate Shannon's graduation from DePaul University Law School.

Shannon is radiant, relaxed--and relieved--dressed for the evening in a festive, sleeveless dress. Her four years of law school (she went part time) are over. Tonight, though, is all about enjoying the company of the people she loves--and partaking of a few margaritas.

Shannon's mom and dad make a toast, exclaiming their pride in their only daughter. Ted Stein, a civil rights lawyer who was her boss for three years, exudes pride too. Shannon, he says, toasting her, has "made so many contributions to a society that needs a lot of help."

Ideals and realities

She went to law school for that reason, believing the world still has use for someone with a genuine concern for others. Conversations with her easily turn into idealistic discussions about social policy issues--poverty, criminal justice, discrimination. In the last year, she worked in DePaul's Death Penalty Clinic on the Madison Hobley case, helping draft clemency petitions, which helped Hobley, convicted of setting a deadly fire, gain his freedom from prison earlier this year. The experience was both amazing and draining, she says.

"One day I was talking to my professor for the death penalty clinic and I said, 'How can you have done this for 20 years and still be this sunny, optimistic person?' . . . And she just said, 'Justice is not a place you get to, but an ideal you work toward.' That helps some days and some days, it just doesn't.

"I don't like this country for what it is, but I like what it can be, has the potential to be. And some days that's enough, and some days it's, 'OK, work to make sure everything that you do helps move it in that direction.' "

On a Saturday afternoon a couple of weeks after the party, sitting in the living room of her own apartment, mere steps from her parents' home, Shannon, 25, is less certain about her immediate direction. "I'm in the middle of my career crisis," she says, sounding, though, nowhere near panic.

Post graduate dilemma

As she prepares to take the state bar exam next week, thick review manuals create a paper tower on her small dining room table. But it's the career decision that weighs heaviest on her mind, not whether she'll pass the exam.

A few weeks after graduation, she found out that she had graduated summa cum laude.

The big question now: Should she focus on litigation, social policy, or even practice law at all?

"I went [to law school] thinking you can do a lot more than you actually can. . . . it's a field that values form over substance, in some ways. It just becomes very frustrating if what you're looking to achieve is something a lot bigger than a practical practice."

Because her goal "has always been to do something to help," she thinks she will end up doing social policy work. But before she makes a decision, she wants to chill out, perhaps do freelance legal work.

"I'm tired because I've been going non-stop since I was about 6," she says, referring to the years she drove herself to excel academically and socially, "trying to get to know people."

An early drive to succeed

A lot of that drive came from Shannon's feeling she had to prove herself because of her background. Her father, Bill, is white, her mother, Actress, is African-American and Native-American. They married in their teens, after being best friends since 7th grade.

When Shannon and her two brothers, one older, one younger, were growing up, they lived in an all-black neighborhood in Hammond. The siblings attended an all-white school.

"At one point, my brother and I were the only people of color. We were called this, that and the other . . . part of the reason I felt so driven to do well academically was my way of saying, 'I belong here. I fit here. I can do well here.' "

Now, she says, her identity issues are behind her. "I work hard because I want to work hard."

She appreciates the experiences that have brought her to where she is.

"There's always something that shapes you, and for me it was [being biracial] . . . and it'll be something else later. You grow throughout your changes. You change throughout your life. What seems so important at one time, in a year, two years, five years, 10 years, turns out to not seem so important at all."

And for Shannon, the important milestones of young womanhood-- kids, marriage--somehow seem less urgent, at least, for now.

"If I get married, I'll get married. If not, I won't. It's not one of those things I have to do on my list of things before I die . . . Sometimes I think it would be nice to have a kid, but I don't have to have that. I have cats, and that's cool. That's enough for me at this point. But I always said that if I had kids, I'd like to have them before 30. It's approaching fast, so I might bump that up a little bit."

-- Cassandra West

Closet revelations

We would not think to scrutinize our closets for psychological truths about ourselves. Yet just as our body language or handwriting reveals volumes about our personalities, so too can our closets, according to clinical psychologist Marilyn Salomon. Closets are part of our personal space, and "space, especially for women, is an extension of their bodies," she says. "How you construct and organize it can reveal how you feel about and care for yourself." For someone in her 20s, which is "an important phase of identity development, you can see lots of trying on and change. Their closets can reveal everything from confusion, excess, disguise and inhibition to exploration, exuberance, spontaneity and assurance." Here's how four twentysomethings see their closets.

--Lisa Skolnik

Susan Beverly, 26, public affairs specialist at Abbott Laboratories

Susan has lived in her South Loop loft since 2001. She acknowledges a healthy passion for fashion, says she "only shops on sale" and makes jewelry in her spare time. She loves her closet because "the one I had at home was very small. Once I started working and buying appropriate outfits, I really needed more space." She groups like items together, rotates items seasonally and purges pieces often, and she has turned the dead space between the top of her closet and her soaring 16-foot-high ceiling into a shoe bank by stacking boxes as high as they will stand.

Marilyn Wong, 28, sales associate at a wholesale accessories firm in Chicago

Bridgeport has been Marilyn's home base her whole life, so when it came time for her to live alone, she stayed in the neighborhood. "I shared a room with my grandmother at home, but since I moved

I've never had a roommate because I can't deal with other people's messes. I'm a neat freak. ... I put all my clothes away after I wear them, and have them all organized in categories. ... I also use plastic bins and drawers to organize the space. I want to look nice and love to shop, and I do--but only when things are on sale. It looks like I have a lot of clothing, but I've actually been very careful."

Leanne Levy, 23, credit analyst at LaSalle Bank

In 2002, Leanne graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, entered a training program and got a Gold Coast apartment with a roommate, all in one month. She owns up to "a good-size walk-in that's still not large enough for all the work suits I had to buy. I love clothes and have a ton of them. Way too many." She buys pieces "mostly on sale or on family vacations to Europe. ... I definitely spent more on clothing when I lived at home. I haven't a clue how to start [organizing her closet] ... and won't now since I'm probably moving to my own apartment in the next couple of months. But once I move I will organize it all. The hardest part will be keeping my closet that way."

Belen Donahue, 23, student at Northeastern Illinois University and emergency medical technician

Clothing is not a priority for Belen, though she likes to look good. At work she wears a uniform and at school she dresses casually, but after graduation, she wants to teach and says she will "definitely have to go clothes shopping." In June, she moved out of her family's home into an apartment in Niles she shares with a friend. "This is the first time I've experienced personal space and have my own closet. I ... find it much easier to be organized now because I don't have to worry about anyone else's stuff. But most people would consider this a really small closet, though I can't imagine ever filling it up."

BY THE NUMBERS

Attitudes and opinions of women in their 20s

Health

38.8% say they are in excellent health

47% good health

12.7% fair

1.5% poor

Home ownership

35% own or are buying a home

60.5% rent

Personal finances

20% satisfied with their financial situation

48% satisfied, more or less

32% not at all satisfied

Premarital sex

22.6% believe premarital sex is always wrong

7.9% almost always wrong

23.6% sometimes wrong

45.9% not wrong at all

Happiness

28.9% are very happy

59.2% pretty happy

11.9% not too happy

Political views

32.3% consider selves moderate

11.9% liberal

7.3% conservative

Labor status

51% work full time

18.7% work part time

1.5% temporarily not working

3.2% unemployed, laid off

9.3% in school

15.3% keeping house

Source: NORC, general social surveys, combined data from 1998, 2000, 2002

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