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AN ENCORE JOURNEY: ONE PROFESSIONAL WRITES HER SECOND ACT

*At last spring's Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and National Council on Aging, Jennie Chin Hansen delivered a special lecture with rare personal reflections about embracing the transitions of midlife—including quitting her impressive job to explore new possibilities. **Ageing Today** asked Hansen, a former chair of the ASA board of directors and president-elect of the national AARP board, to share her experience with our readers. Following are her thoughts.*

By **JENNIE CHIN HANSEN**

I imagine that many of my professional colleagues in the field of aging—both those who have passed the midlife stage already and those currently going through it—know the feelings that come during this bio-psychic-social cycle of our lives. For many, this new life stage signals a time for change, a time to find endeavors one really loves.

But why would one leave a job that provided a seemingly good fit and career role? In my case, many people were surprised when, two years ago, I chose to leave On Lok Senior Health Services after an incredible stint of nearly 25 years of being part of an organization, a set of people and elders, as well as a movement, that I believe in, love and cherish. For me, some reasons were evident and others were more ethereal and are yet to be understood.

GEARS NOT CLICKING

For people facing this change, I think something first happens deep inside: They have a sense that the gears are not clicking together as smoothly as they had before, even though the external world seems to be going along all right. In my case, this feeling started about two years before I actually left On Lok. I remember telling my husband to please bear with me as I was feeling somewhat out of sorts, but I didn't know what this inner shift really meant. I felt that a change was coming—of what, I did not yet know.

On the work level, I also started to feel that the organization was getting to a point where it needed a different set of leadership skills than the ones I could offer. I began to feel that I was not the right leader for On Lok at that time in its history, and I thought that I should step aside—both to ensure leadership that would optimize the organization's well-being and so that the work could continue to thrive and flourish. I think it is important to know when to step aside for the good of the entity, whose work and mission are much larger and more important than the goals of any given person.

I was no longer always hitting my sweet spot, the place where I could consistently drive home runs for the organization. I also felt comfortable leaving when I did because the organization was very solid and stable, financially strong and with key staff in place, ready for its next journey of growth and service. Had On Lok been in a bad stretch, I don't know whether my moral code would have allowed me to leave—unless, of course, my departure at that point would have helped the organization. Fortunately, I didn't have to make that decision.

I anticipated that my leaving after such a long and productive relationship would come as a surprise to the organization's board and staff, and I certainly felt significant anxiety about the best way to make my

announcement. My first responsibility was to On Lok's board chair, who was quite surprised by my decision. We worked together to determine the best way to notify our multitude of stakeholders, such as funders, donors, staff and our local and national community. We planned the transition and the recruitment of my replacement, as well as worked around the time frame of my departure, which I had set at about nine months.

INTERNAL BALANCING

Once I made and conveyed my decision, I felt relief and a sense of internal balancing while externally I set about filling my fiduciary role of caring for this shift in the organization. Still, it was very hard for me to tell many of my close colleagues and frontline staff with whom I had worked for nearly a quarter century.

One good friend, whom I had used as counsel during the thinking and sorting process surrounding my move, said that she sensed I'd been wearing what she called tight shoes. It was time for me to wiggle my toes, stretch and try on new soles.

As 2007 begins, I have been away from On Lok and wearing new shoes for two years. The renewal has been fascinating; I've been feeling as if I'm going through a kind of older adult self-managed fellowship. I've learned much, met many and delighted in my new discoveries and lessons during this transition.

I make enough income through part-time teaching and consulting work at this stage and I continue to have the security of health benefits. I will likely grow toward obtaining a fuller position after I complete my volunteer efforts. I've learned to avoid any preconceived ideas about what I will do—but whatever it is, I know it will be stimulating, with people I like and respect, and will add somehow to the greater social good.

FIRSTS FOR AARP

As many know by now, I have been elected by my peers on the AARP board of directors to be the next president of the 37-million member organization. I am a boomer, a nurse, an Asian American and a longtime gerontologist. Each of those qualities will be a first for the AARP presidency. Having this position is rather surreal for me, especially as a daughter of immigrants whose first language was not English and whose local Chinese culture didn't expect its girls to go to college.

Taking on this AARP role was not what I had in mind or planned for when I left On Lok. I had first become a trustee of the organization's Andrus Foundation (now merged into the AARP Foundation), whose director then, John Feather, thought I would bring a helpful outside perspective to the foundation. Four years ago, I was honored to be asked to join the full AARP board.

As I take on this new leadership role, I hope to follow in some measure the work and footsteps of the late educator John Gardner and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. I want to make a contribution with meaning and substance to the yet-to-be-written chapter of our aging America. I plan to capitalize on my years of experience and relationships as a health and long-term care professional. And I hope to bring along more recent personal lessons about life at this transitional stage, as well as in our later years, when addressing major concerns of our time.

Especially important is facing the conundrum of providing healthcare and long-term care in the United States. But it's also time to bring attention to the underlying need for this society's moral compass to point American culture beyond its short-term focus on immediate problems and to the horizon issues that we need to solve in the decades ahead. So I find myself taking the next steps of my journey as part of the generation of leading-edge boomers with a sense of responsibility for advancing our next social movement. It is one that I hope will help ensure a civil and global society responsive to both young and old. ❖