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Encore Careers: Service in the Second Half of Life

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By Marc Freedman | FAST Company – Fri, Feb 17, 2012 11:31 AM EST

People who are between midlife and old age are looking for another round of service with the same motivations that young people have--to give back, to have an adventure, to acquire experience, and to gain credentials and credibility.

In a turnaround of the old pattern, Paula Lopez Crespin followed in her daughter's footsteps. After leaving an executive job at a credit union in her fifties, Crespin applied, as her daughter had, to Teach for America, an intensive immersion program designed to help the best and brightest young people become teachers. She was accepted.

Like all TFA recruits, Crespin spent six weeks living in a dorm and working 20-hour days to prepare for her own classroom. "Honestly," she says, "to live in a dorm room at this age is no picnic. It was like boot camp. You're in the trenches." She got up at 6 a.m., taught summer school during the day, took classes at night and did lesson planning into the wee hours.

Today Crespin is teaching math to third graders at the Cole Arts and Science Academy, a charter school in Denver -- and loving it.

John Kerr also found his way to an encore career in public service via a passage aimed at younger people. And he, too, followed in his daughter's footsteps.

At 65, Kerr retired from WGBH in Boston. With encouragement from his daughter, a forestry school graduate and founding director of Gray Is Green, a group designed to encourage sustainable retirement communities, Kerr headed to Wyoming with the goal of working in the national parks.

To realize his dream, Kerr joined the [Student Conservation Association's](#) internship program designed for people just like him. Well, just like him, but almost a half century younger. Everyone else was about 19.

Today Kerr is a summertime park ranger in Yellowstone, with the job of keeping people and bears away from each other. He proudly wears "one of those ranger hats" and a badge to boot, and he draws on newly acquired EMT skills in the conduct of his job.

Paula Lopez Crespin and John Kerr are part of a vast movement of people in the second half of life. Neither young nor old, neither ready to be retired nor able to afford it, they are in a new, "encore" stage of life, one characterized by a desire to give back.

Like Crespin and Kerr, they are unsure how to get from what's past to what's next. Without clearly defined and well-established rites and routes of passage, it's as if they are sneaking in the side way, contorting and distorting themselves to use the pathways and resources readily available for a life and work transition but designed for a target audience about half their age.

Service programs can help. Programs like the Peace Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps--which already have a track record of service as transition vehicles for young people--are enrolling more and more individuals in their encore years. Thanks to a merger with AARP, [Experience Corps](#) (an AmeriCorps grantee that recruits people over 55 who want to help children learn to read) is poised to expand dramatically over the next five years.

I'm hoping that a new concept -- encore fellowships -- is a big part of the answer. Initially piloted by Civic Ventures with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and HP, encore fellowships match skilled, experienced professionals at the end of their midlife careers with social-purpose organizations. The goal: to deliver new sources of talent to organizations solving critical social problems.

Encore fellows typically work 1,000 hours over the course of a year for a stipend of \$25,000. While on the job, fellows take on high-impact projects, learn about social-purpose work, and develop a new network of contacts and resources for the future. Most go on to encore careers for nonprofits or government.

Just a few years ago, President Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which called for dramatically expanding service options for people over 55 and establishing federal encore fellowships in each state for Americans over 55. Funding has yet to be approved for these fellowships.

More promising, Intel, the giant chip-maker, announced just a few months ago that it will offer all of its retirement-eligible employees in the United States a chance to do encore fellowships. I hope many other companies follow suit.

New research shows that millions of people -- 31 million between the ages of 44 and 70, to be exact -- want work that contributes to the greater good in their encore years. But they don't want to sneak into pathways designed for their children. They want a front door big enough to accommodate the vast opportunity headed our way.

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