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Baby boomers face financial distress and age discrimination

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11-14 minutes

They were born and raised during the [Golden Age of the U.S. economy](#), which lasted from 1948 through 1973, when a high school diploma could be a ticket to a well-paying job, a vacation home and a college degree for the kids. It was the [postwar American dream](#), and millions considered it their birthright.

But now, after decades of economic upheaval, including three bear markets and two deep recessions in just the past 20 years, many baby boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1964, are struggling. The eldest boomers have mostly retired. But millions of boomers in their 60s still want or need to work, and are having a hard time finding jobs.

COVID19 made the problem a lot worse. Nearly 900,000 Americans between the ages of 60 and 69 lost their jobs between December 2019 and December 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a 5% decline in the number of employed people in that age group. Some 21.2 million Americans in their 60s are no longer in the labor force, the BLS reported.

Millions of Americans of all ages are suffering in COVID's

aftermath. Already [100,000 small businesses have closed](#). Thousands of cars [wait hours at food banks](#). Nearly eight million Americans [fell into poverty](#) between June and November. Black and Latino people are [bearing the brunt of it](#), in COVID deaths and economic damage, while unemployment has hit women harder than men.

But it also has made things worse for Americans in their 60s looking for one more act in their professional lives and whose prospects are as foggy as the legacy of their generation, which started out wanting to change the world and found, late in life, that the world had chastened them instead.

Behind those numbers are real human beings with stories to tell. MarketWatch found four of them, all people in their 60s with long records of professional success who were now trying to find purpose or, at least, some income to help pay the bills. None of them ran a hedge fund or cashed out in an IPO. None attended Ivy League colleges but went to state universities or technical schools and lived solid middle class lives as loyal, productive employees, raising families on high five- to low six-figure incomes.

Some had set aside a decent nest egg to tide them over while others had little cushion to face what may be involuntary retirement. According to a [study commissioned by the National Endowment for Financial Education \(NEFE\)](#), 96% of Americans face four or more “income shocks” during their lifetimes, which can reduce their retirement savings.

We contacted them after they responded on LinkedIn to an October column, “[Half of Americans over 55 may retire poor.](#)” They were in varied financial shape—one had just emerged from

personal bankruptcy, another had a well-funded retirement plan—dealing with aging parents, illness, even the sudden death of a spouse. All had been laid off with no explanation, some before COVID 19 hit. Since then, they had sent out dozens of resumes yet got few job interviews and even fewer offers. All firmly believed they faced systemic age discrimination.

Curtis Berndt, 65, felt that people eliminated him because of his age, “You go in, they look at you and they say ‘too old’ and you’re done.”

“I just find it discouraging. People don’t want to give you a chance,” said 61-year-old Karen Mater.

Here are their stories.

Curtis Berndt and Lu McCarty

Curtis Berndt and Lu McCarty spent their careers at the nexus of skilled craftsmanship and technical engineering.

Berndt began as a draftsman and then moved into product design, thanks to an associates’ degree in mechanical engineering from what is now Purdue University Fort Wayne. For 43 years, all in Indiana, he did advanced quality control, made mock-ups of new products and streamlined manufacturing processes to reduce defects and improve efficiency.

McCarty started out as a machinist working race cars and locomotives, then got a degree in mechanical engineering from a technical college in Sacramento, Calif. He worked as an engineer and product designer at companies like Hughes Space and Communications and Autodesk before eventually relocating to North Carolina and then to Connecticut.

For both men, the ax fell early in 2020.

Berndt had been working for a decade as a senior mechanical designer.” Everything was good and then all of a sudden — and I mean, really, all of a sudden—there was a huge financial issue and they decided they were going to have to get rid of people,” he said. “I had just turned 65 and three days later they didn’t need me anymore. It’s impossible to prove, but they assured me that my age had nothing to do with it.”

McCarty’s layoff was equally abrupt, just before his probation period ended and he would have been hired on permanently: “I got to my 59th day of probation and they told me I wasn’t a good fit for the company,” he said. “I had glowing reports from my colleagues, and then I was handed a ‘see you later’ notice.”

McCarty speculated his layoff came in the wake of a review of health care insurance premiums by a new insurance broker the company hired. “They’re trying to reduce costs,” he said.

It’s an all too familiar story with a just as familiar human toll. “I was treated so shoddily,” said Berndt, the shock and hurt still in his voice months later. “They had people there that were younger than me, that had less experience than me, but then I was probably getting paid more, too.” He also didn’t think COVID19 had much to do with it, since the pandemic still wasn’t on many people’s radar screens.

Berndt has applied for about 50 full-time job openings and gotten a handful of interviews.

“They say everything’s good until the face-to-face interview, and then it’s dead. From other people I’ve talked to in my age group, that’s pretty much the pattern,” he said.

“I’m searching all the time, every day,” said McCarty. He’s dropped his required salary to \$45,000 a year, less than half of the \$80,000-\$120,000 he used to make. And he’s resigned to not getting a full-time position with benefits.

“I think you have to market yourself as a consultant contractor,” he said. “Otherwise, you’re not going to make any money at all.”

He’s worried his skills will atrophy if he doesn’t find work soon. “In today’s job market, if you lose your edge, you’re screwed,” he said.

McCarty is drawing unemployment benefits and qualifies for Medicare in September. His four children are grown and his domestic partner has a job. But he doesn’t have much saved in his bank account, or in his IRA, from which he has made a partial withdrawal.

“At least I have the motivation knowing that I don’t have the cash to fall back on,” he said, “So, when I’m 68 or 70, I don’t want to be sitting with a can and a sleeping bag on a corner somewhere, begging for food.”

Berndt’s children also are grown and his wife works full time. He qualifies for Medicare and plans to take Social Security when he reaches full retirement age, just past 66. But though he’s in decent financial shape, he said, “I think I still have a lot to contribute,” and is even considering a career change.

“I’ve decided I’m going to pursue something other than engineering,” he said in a message. “45 years is enough. I just haven’t figured out what that will be yet.”

Karen Mater

When Karen Mater was a young geologist working on oil wells in

southern Indiana, a male rig worker said to her one day, “I don’t think women belong in oil fields. What do you think?”

“I said, ‘Well, I’m the wrong person to answer, because here I am.’”

It was the kind of super polite comeback you’d expect from a mother of three from the Great Lakes State. Yet Mater’s quiet determination made her a pioneer in an overwhelmingly male-dominated field.

But the strain on her young family of being away for two or three weeks at a time caused her to change careers. Using the computer knowledge she’d acquired as a geologist, she took a job at nearby Central Michigan University, where she had earned her master’s degree, working in the department that oversaw charter schools, which were then launching in Michigan and across the country.

Twenty-three years later, in August, the university let her and others go. “They decided they had to really slim down and for whatever reason, they picked my job to eliminate,” she said.

Since then, she’s applied to “at least 45” jobs, but with no luck. “I think this online hiring has made it worse,” she said. “The human factor has totally gone out of it. You can’t fight the computer.”

Fortunately, Mater put aside 13% of her salary each year in her retirement plan and the university made generous matching contributions. Her three daughters are grown (one is in divinity school) and her biggest financial challenge is a jump in medical insurance premiums to over \$600 a month. This year, she’s eligible to get [Social Security survivors’ benefits](#).

That’s because in June 2019, Wayne, her husband of 32 years, was suddenly rushed to the emergency room, where doctors

diagnosed him with kidney cancer. Later, specialists said they couldn't give him chemotherapy, dialysis or even a biopsy. "I knew 14 hours before he died that he wasn't going to survive," she said. "His last week of life was his first week of retirement." He was 67. Almost a year later to the day, her father died suddenly of a blood clot that traveled to his heart.

Such devastating losses make a job search look unimportant. "Emotionally right now I think I'm OK. But some days I get real down and out," she said. She is working part time at her church for a lot less pay, but it keeps her busy and she finds comfort in her faith.

"I go to church and I say, well, it's in God's hands. Whatever He wants He'll do and I'm good."

William Budd

William Budd, 67, is one of the few people who served in both the U.S. Army and Air Force. He put in 3 ½ years in the Air Force right after high school, then did a two-year mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, followed by 17 years in the Army, mostly in Germany.

When he retired after 20 years of service, he pursued his dream of being an accountant, getting his bachelor's and master's degree in accounting from the University of North Texas when he already had three teenage daughters.

Nearly two decades of financial analysts' positions followed at companies that ranged from defense contractors Raytheon and Honeywell to restaurant chain Panera Bread, largely in Arizona. But in early 2017 he found himself, at 64, out of a job. He's been struggling to find full-time work ever since.

“I have had interviews on site, telephone, or internet with 176 different companies in the Phoenix metropolitan area,” he told me, but until recently got no full-time offers. He’s filled the gap with substitute teaching, volunteering at his church and a job as a courier that paid half as much as his previous jobs did.

He has struggled financially, too. He and his wife, who works in a bank, sold their home and now live with his mother and two of their four children. “We’re kind of like the Waltons,” he said.

Years of big expenses and salaries that couldn’t quite cover them took their toll. “Not having a paycheck for 2½ years, I actually had to do a chapter 7 bankruptcy. I probably mismanaged my money a bit,” he acknowledged. “Sometimes the more money you get, the more money you spend.”

He still has little personal or retirement savings, though he’s been getting a military pension since he left the service and started taking Social Security benefits at 64.

A few weeks after I interviewed him, Budd messaged me to tell me he got a full-time temporary job, which he hopes will become a permanent one, as an accounting specialist with the state of Arizona. At least there’s good news for somebody at a time where there hasn’t been much for anyone.

He started late in December and, he wrote, “I had to take a 60% cut in pay” from his last full-time job. “My passion for the work I do is sufficient payback,” he wrote. “It certainly made my Christmas wish come true!”