



**MARIAN KRAMER  
'04 AND ERIC  
SAMPSON**

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- ☺ Had great jobs and lifestyle in California, but they missed their Minnesota roots.
- ☺ Gave up high-paying jobs to return home to family and friends.

# FRESH

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BACK IN 2009, while the country was in the darkest days of the recession, Marian Kramer '04, a hydrogeologist, and her engineer husband got lucky. Right after Kramer earned her graduate degree at the University of Minnesota, they both landed what she describes as “flashy” and “jet-setting” jobs at Chevron, with handsome salaries to match, and they relocated to Bakersfield, California. “It was awesome,” Kramer says. “It was a really wonderful place to work.”

Three years later, however, they are back in Kramer’s native Minneapolis, in a temporary apartment. Kramer now makes half of what she earned at Chevron, and her husband has taken a 20 percent pay cut. But here’s the clincher: They couldn’t be happier.

By Jennifer Maddox Sargent '91

# STARTS

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*Everything in our culture tells us to hang on to our dreams. But what if those dreams lead us in the wrong direction? Alumnae reflect on times they had to start over, give up, let go or turn around to find a better, more satisfying path.*

What happened? The couple decided that living half a continent away from their family and friends—their roots—was too high a price to pay for their career ambitions. As much as they loved their jobs, and as nervous as they were about the economy, they took a gamble and quit. “To be here, it just kind of fits,” Kramer says of being back home.

Kramer was among dozens of alumnae who wrote lengthy, heartfelt missives in response to a query from the *Quarterly* about instances when calling it quits—across a variety of life pursuits—might have been the best thing they ever did, even though the decision to do so was often gut-wrenching.

“Would I be letting the other corporate, career-ladder-climbing women down if I chose a different career path? Would Sophia Smith disown me?” Kramer wrote. “What would I be saying about myself and my ambitions?”

That’s the eternal tension: the intense pull between inner passions and desires, and outer goals and expectations, say Smith faculty and deans.

“Smithies are Smithies because they have checklists and plans and goals. Sometimes what gets lost in this is their inner voice,” says Patricia Marten DiBartolo ’89, a psychology professor who studies perfectionism and the anxiety it creates in young people. “Even the notion of ‘calling it quits’—that’s exactly how a perfectionist might frame it, instead of redefining their lives in some way.”

In study after study, DiBartolo says, people who are motivated by external pressures, such as money, awards and praise, fear of failure or the expectations of others, almost never report being happy or fulfilled. Those who are motivated by their own desires and place expectations

#### ON QUITTING

The decision to quit something you love is not an easy one. Just because you decide to quit doesn’t mean that it was all bad or that you have to regret it. Allow yourself to remember the good times and the things you loved about it.”

—KAREN SISE

AC ’10

Calling it quits doesn’t mean you’ve made a mistake; it means the wisdom you’ve gained from all your experiences is suggesting a new direction.”

—TRACY GLAZER

ESSAYAN ’84

## Graduate school “was a commitment to a career that, at 22 years old, I wasn’t ready to make.”

on themselves to meet them, are much more likely to be happy—and to succeed.

Yet in the competitive, ambitious environment of an elite campus such as Smith, measuring your own achievements and goals against your peers is nearly unavoidable. “There’s this false idea of the perfect Smithie,” says Jessica Bacal, director of the college’s Wurtele Center for Work and Life. The perception, she says, is “they need to do everything, and they need to do everything right, but that’s not a way to live your life.”

Along with regular lectures and workshops, the center organizes the Women’s Narratives Project, an annual retreat for juniors and seniors. It teaches them “to consider the paths that suit their own values, talents and needs—and embrace the unexpected turns.”

Today’s Smith grads, who are just beginning their adult lives, are indeed realizing that they need to follow their own paths, says Maureen Mahoney, dean of the college and vice president for campus life. “The challenge is to disentangle what they want from what their parents want for them, from what Smith wants for them,” she says. “Any thoughtful, educated woman really needs to allow herself to take the time to reflect. Sometimes you have to make adjustments as you go along—sometimes those are radical adjustments.”

In Marian Kramer’s case, the tipping point for her own radical adjustment was a funeral she

Ally Einbinder ’10, with her band Potty Mouth, from left, Ally, Abby Weems, Victoria Mandanas ’13 and Phoebe Harris ’11.





**ALLY EINBINDER '10**

☹️ A prestigious scholarship meant committing to grad school before she was ready.

☺️ Instead she's taking time to have fun playing in a punk band.

## → Alumnae learn from making hard decisions



MARTHA CRAM '50

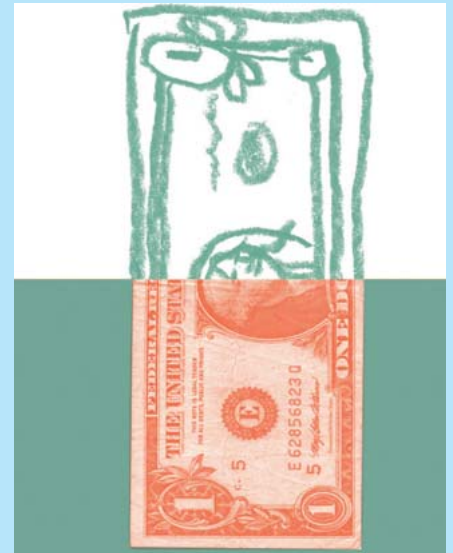
*Quit: Her house of 52 years*

“WE MOVED INTO A DOWNTOWN RETIREMENT HOME, WHICH REQUIRED a huge adjustment. We have made many new friends, found several Smith alums living here and are enjoying many activities that we could never have done if we had stayed in our house. It was a good choice.”

JENNY GUTH '07

*Quit: A graduate program in mathematical neuroscience*

“SHIFTING MY IDENTITY WAS ONE OF THE HARDEST PARTS AND also one of the most rewarding parts of leaving science. I used to see myself as being made up of a few pieces: a mathy piece (which was how I figured I'd be successful) and also these arty and people pieces (which made me well-rounded or something). When I left grad school this whole identity fell apart. I struggled a lot at first, thinking I was somehow a failure. Now I've been picking up the art pieces and the people pieces where I left them, going, ‘Why did I abandon that?’ I've been learning so much. And it's been really interesting thinking about what I want to put at the center of my life.”



TRACY GLAZER ESSAYAN '84

*Quit: Unsatisfying career in finance*

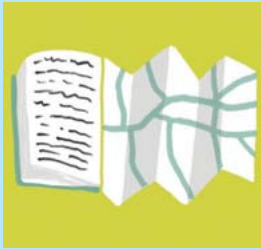
“I DISTRACTED MYSELF FROM THE discomfort underneath by chasing promotions, investing in an M.B.A., transferring to a foreign country, getting married, having a baby and ‘getting entrepreneurial’ as a lone consultant to turn around companies. Only after all these attempts to address more superficial dissatisfactions did I begin to consider taking myself back pre-1984 to begin again. This time, I started slowly, testing my hypotheses with small trainings and part-time jobs before eventually throwing myself into a master of science and a new career in the National Health Service as a child art psychotherapist. It's a great story now, but for 10 or 12 years I (masochistically) compared myself to peers with successful business careers, struggling with feelings of failure for having ‘given up.’”

DERRY VOYSEY WADE '95

*Quit: Her plan to enter a doctoral program in English language and literature and become a professor*

“AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT, MY work-study job that year was to assist a former president of the University of Virginia with his correspondence and research. He was on the board of a local foundation that was about to add an international research center that needed staffing, and he connected me to them and provided a recommendation. I learned so much in that first job, and from there launched a career in communications/public relations. I know now that the decision to quit grad school when I did was a significant and positive step in my life journey, even though I distinctly recall the sensation of stepping off a cliff while I made it.”





ANN LUMPKIN  
SUDDUTH '61

*Quit: An honors thesis  
on Faulkner at Smith*

“BECAUSE I WOULD not be writing a thesis, I had to fill that slot with a class. About the best I could come up with was a course in the geography of North America. I could have no idea that this course would be one of the most important I studied at Smith. I learned so much about agriculture, topography and other technical aspects of geography. I fell in love with maps. Most importantly, I was fascinated by how the climate and raw materials available influence the art that is created in an environment. I have counseled our five children over the years to take an unexpected change in one’s plans as an opportunity to discover hidden blessings. I still enjoy Faulkner and have visited Oxford, Mississippi, several times, but I am so grateful that I was forced to drop my studies and have a new world open up to me.”

and her husband attended in Bakersfield last summer for a 91-year-old woman who had lived there her entire life. The church was packed with generations of family and friends who spoke about her roots and how much she had given back to her community.

“After the service, my husband and I looked at each other and said, ‘We are stronger than this. We can move back home, make less money and still be comfortable. Let’s follow what’s really important to us,’” Kramer says.

Other women have taken a similar plunge—quitting a church, a major, a partnership, a high-stress job—only to discover unforeseen opportunities and satisfaction when they found a new path.

#### ‘THE SMARTEST GIRL YOU EVER MET’

When she transferred to Smith from Skidmore College in her sophomore year, Alexandra Sobhani '11 was so intent on becoming a neurosurgeon that she doubled up on coursework, pursued two majors, met her premed requirements and put herself on track for Latin honors. She kept spreadsheets to manage her grueling schedule. She was, she says now, “a machine.”

“All my life, it’s been A’s—the smartest girl you ever met,” she says. “I had a fantasy that I would be the greatest neurosurgeon who ever graced the face of the earth.”

When she started shadowing real neurosurgeons in the field, she discovered the reality didn’t match her fantasy. “I loved head surgery. I hated spine surgery, which is also part of the neurosurgeon’s domain,” Sobhani says. “That’s when it occurred to me that maybe this wasn’t what I wanted to do.” By the end of junior year, she had completed the requirements

#### ON QUITTING

First, identify your key drivers (what’s important to you) and goals (what do you want, where do you want to be, etc.) and then analyze how what you are thinking of quitting fits into that picture. Hopefully, after doing that, a decision and path forward will be clearer (although maybe not easy).”

—**MARIAN  
KRAMER '04**

I do two things when I am making a decision:  
1) Make a pro/con list, and  
2) Pray.  
Number 2 takes longer to get an answer but works well if one can be patient.”

—**LEE BYRON '67**

for her double major in neuroscience and biological sciences—and was suffering from insomnia, anxiety attacks and “inappropriate public floods of emotion.” As a result, eight years of med school no longer seemed within the realm of her imagination. So she stopped.

Although she could have graduated early, she chose to stay on for senior year. “I took things I had always wanted to take,” such as computer science and economics, with a couple of dance classes thrown in. At the same time, though, “I oscillated between hating myself for despairing my unknown future and trying to cultivate the image that I was fine,” she writes. “I learned that others would be mystified. They would ask you to imagine and reimagine what it would be like for you if you hadn’t quit.”

At 23, Sobhani lives in Hartford, Connecticut, and works as a systems integration analyst with Accenture, where she specializes in databases and coding, which plays to the “hard-core nerd” in her. She loves the supportive work environment. “I feel like I can never ‘burn out,’ which makes me feel safe from the downward spiral I went through in my senior year,” she says. And she’s never looked back from the decision to get off the brain-surgeon track. “The only regret I have is that I didn’t take more dance classes.”

#### AN EDUCATED DECISION

At Commencement in 2010, Ally Einbinder was certain of her next step. She had long admired her professors and imagined herself one day being just like them. When she learned that she had been awarded a prestigious \$25,000 scholarship for graduate studies in sociology, it only affirmed her dream of pursuing a career in academia. “I cried because I was

so happy,” she says. “I thought, ‘This is it!’”

But then Einbinder’s priorities began to change. A talented musician, Einbinder decided to stay in Northampton for a while to continue playing in local punk bands, something she’d enjoyed as a student. Then, to make ends meet, she took a job as a program coordinator with Smith’s Wurtele Center for Work and Life, which teaches students how to navigate life after college. At work every day she couldn’t help absorbing the lessons espoused by faculty and staff, and soon she’d come to a realization. “I began rethinking what grad school meant to me,” she says. “It suddenly wasn’t just a commitment to this romantic vision of continuing my education. It was a commitment to a career that, at 22 years old, I wasn’t ready to make.”

That’s not to say she didn’t agonize over her decision to give up the \$25,000 scholarship and take a different path. “[Sociology] is definitely something that still does make me feel alive,” she says.

It wasn’t long, though, before things started to take off. In 2011, during a Women’s Narratives retreat that Einbinder helped organize, she met up with her friend Phoebe Harris ’11, who was attending, and together they got the idea to start their own punk band, Potty Mouth. With Victoria Mandanas ’13 and Northampton local Abby Weems, they’ve already toured twice, and in January 2012 *The Boston Globe* featured the group as one of “a few local noisemakers to keep

#### ON QUITTING

It’s OK. You’re OK. Getting to decide what goes at the center of your life is a beautiful thing, though not an easy thing. So try to be gentle with whatever happens.”

—JENNY GUTH ’07

What I would advise is to do what feels best, and then to be kind to yourself for taking care of your needs.”

—ANN  
MACGREGOR  
SEWALL ’54

an eye on” in 2013.

This kind of recognition, along with the joy she gets from working with students at the Center for Work and Life, has eased Einbinder’s concern that she’d made the wrong choice. “I feel so much less anxious,” she says. “I feel so much more comfortable in my life.”

#### A NEW VIEW OF CHURCH

“It may well have been the first time in my life (I am 80 years old) that I did not feel shameful or apologetic as a result of a personal decision,” writes Ann MacGregor Sewall ’54 of her decision to leave her United Church of Christ congregation and find a new way to worship.

The trigger was a crisis involving the minister, who was abruptly removed from his post in 2010. In the ensuing 18 months, Sewall says, she became deeply involved in the search for a new leader and in recruiting interim ministers. “There was so much division in the church that it wore me out,” she says. “It was hard for me to maintain my devotion.”

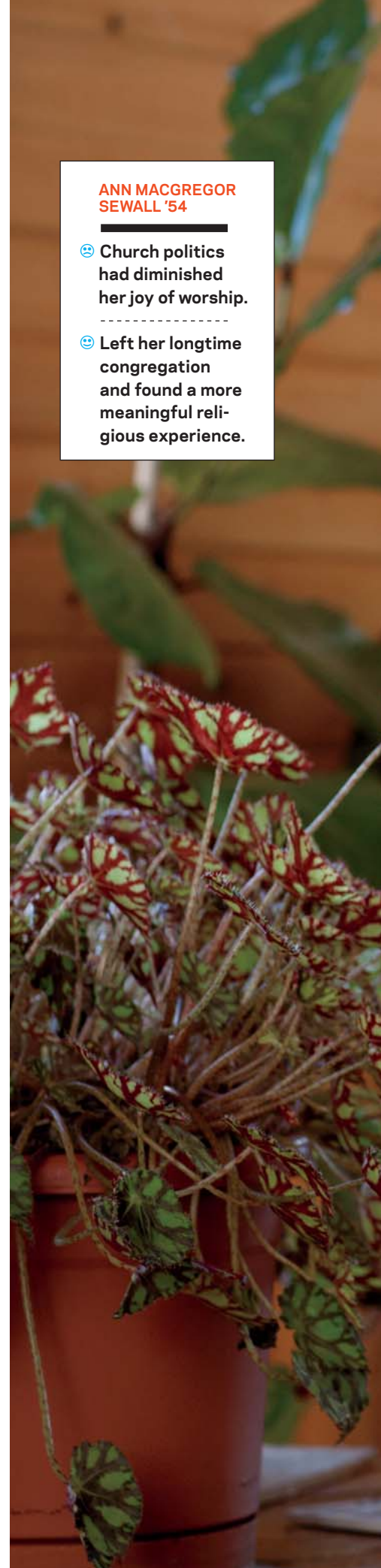
What had been most fulfilling for her during her time with the church was a UCC program for laypeople to learn more about the faith. “It was extremely exciting for me to be with people like myself who just wanted to know more. I came to feel comfortable very quickly,” Sewall says. But that sense disappeared during the battles over organizational issues and leadership. “What I was missing was a sense of nourishment from going to church,” she says.

Although she worried about

ANN MACGREGOR  
SEWALL ’54

- ☹️ Church politics had diminished her joy of worship.
- ☺️ Left her longtime congregation and found a more meaningful religious experience.

**“There was so much division in the church that it wore me out. It was hard for me to maintain my devotion.”**







letting her fellow congregants down, other impulses were stronger: Her lifelong love of classical music created a longing to be part of a church with a heartier musical program and bigger choir; a cancer diagnosis (a second one in as many years) “was the final push in my desire to be free of the conflict situation, and put my own interests first.”

Since leaving, she and her husband now attend a church with a robust music program, and following chemotherapy and surgery, Sewall is currently cancer-free. She’s also started attending informal meetings of a group founded by two women UCC ministers on Maine’s Mount Desert Island, with regular silent-prayer sessions, Bible study and talks by well-known speakers. “What’s become important to me is being with like-minded people as far as sharing our interests in what spirituality means to each of us,” she says. “I’ve gotten a whole lot of inner strength dealing with the unknown—as well as the prospects of death and dying.”

#### **PARTING WAYS—TO STAY MARRIED**

Tom Byron became a fixture at Chapin House when he married Lee Kimball ’67 in her junior year. After she graduated, they were inseparable: through Tom’s tours in the navy that took them around the world; to graduate schools in California, Florida and Alabama during the ’70s; and, with three children in tow, to Sarasota, Florida, once Tom had his veterinary degree. Sharing life’s ventures and adventures was a central tenet of their marriage.

Together, they opened a veterinary clinic. She managed the business while he treated the animals. The business grew steadily over the next dozen years, and eventually one of

#### **ON QUITTING**

Imagine as honestly as you can what you would do if you continued and if you quit—or if you can, do those things! Inundate yourself in situations and if you start to feel exhausted, gleeful, dismal, exhilarated, infuriated, you know what you need to do. Don’t allow the unimportant things to stop you.”

—ALEXANDRA SOBHANI ’11

## **“I had a fantasy that I would be the greatest neurosurgeon who ever graced the face of the earth.”**

their sons started working there, too. “It was a real family effort and wonderful experience,” Lee Byron says, “but I also knew there were cracks in our marriage.”

Eventually, Lee began to reconsider the wisdom of working so closely together. She got a real-estate license, grew more involved with their children and made her way onto the county’s school board.

Eventually, in order “to preserve what was most important—our marriage and our relationship,” she chose to end her professional partnership with her husband. Some years later, when both her husband and her oldest son died within two years of each other, it was having her own professional identity that allowed Lee to carry on.

Since then, she has continued in real estate. She also earned a master’s degree in theology as she sought to heal. “For me, it’s been a solace to have a relationship with God. Real estate is a ministry to me in a lot of ways, helping buyers find a church, a job, connections in the community,” she says. “Things work out the way they’re supposed to.”

#### **BULLIED NO MORE**

The power of a decision to leave a toxic work environment still resonates for Susan Tracy Addiss ’51 nearly 30 years later. Ironically, it was when Addiss was elected president of the American Public Health Association in 1984 that her professional problems began. The title gave her a national

profile beyond the Connecticut state health planning agency that she led—but the new status did not sit well with her boss. “He just couldn’t stand any kind of excellence anywhere around him,” she says. He wouldn’t allow her to fill vacant positions, forced her to assume additional duties and gave her a poor evaluation for failing to adequately carry them out. “I was harassed, intensively and repeatedly,” she recalls. “I had panic attacks, and I even thought about suicide.”

Then she got a call from a recruiter looking for a health director close to where she lived. On paper, it represented a step down, not to mention a 33 percent pay cut. “I can’t do it” was her instinctive answer. “As I thought about it, though, I could picture getting away from my tormenter.”

There were other benefits, too. The new job would enable her to use her state contacts to assist in local health matters; the reduced workload would allow her to participate more in national public health endeavors; she would be living closer to her ailing mother; and above all, she would never have to work with that boss again. She flourished in her new job, ultimately rising to become the Connecticut commissioner of health in 1992. “The hiatus in my career prepared me for the big step forward,” Addiss says, “and I am forever grateful I made the choice I did.”

*Jennifer Maddox Sergent ’91 is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer.*



**ALEXANDRA  
SOBHANI '11**

- ☹️ Pushed herself so hard in school that she suffered insomnia and anxiety attacks.
- ☺️ Dialed back her med-school plans so she could enjoy a more balanced life.