

## Her true calling is finding theirs Counselor helps clients find labors of love

By CHERYL HALL

Think of Helen Harkness as the Fairy Godmother of career reincarnations.

She doesn't sprinkle magic dust or wave a wand. But the septuagenarian takes clients looking for a career change on journeys of the soul to find out what will feed their passions.

Discover that, she says, and enjoy true success. "Many executives have gotten to the top by leaving parts of themselves behind," says Dr. Harkness, principal and president of Career Design Associates Inc. "There's a need for growth that they're not getting from the corporate world."

Since founding her practice in 1978, Dr. Harkness has guided more than 8,000 private clients – and that doesn't include the multitudes who've attended her classes and seminars on what she calls "re-careering."

"I'm not saying money's not important, but there's only so much you can do with it," she says. "I have clients making more money than I'll ever see. They're saying, 'I can't do this anymore. I have squeezed everything from my life, and I don't even know what's inside of me now.'"

But there's no quick fix.

"I tell people, 'We don't leap off tall buildings,'" she says, then explains her four-part process. "The first step looks inward at the real you. The second looks outward at what's going on in the real world. The third puts the first two together to decide where you want to be in a realistic future. The fourth step is, 'OK, here's what I need to do now to build toward that future.'"

She gives clients a battery of personality and proficiency tests and makes them fill 3-inch-thick binders with their innermost thoughts.

But what makes Dr. Harkness so effective, clients say, is her ability to bluntly pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses and push them toward reality-based goals. And there's simplicity in the truth she speaks.

Taking a step back

Perhaps her most famous client-turned-disciple is Todd Wagner, who made his fortune when he and Mark Cuban sold Broadcast.com to Yahoo Inc. in 1999 for nearly \$6 billion. He now devotes much of his time and energy to his charitable foundation.

"It takes some chutzpah to forge a new path," he says. "Dr. Harkness instills that in people. She tells you it's OK to have those dark soul-searching moments of 'Who am I,

and what is the right thing to do?'"

The 43-year-old has worked with her since his early days as a lawyer 13 years ago.

"One of her key messages – and one I fully ascribe to – is that sometimes to move forward, you have to take a step back," Mr. Wagner says. "Most people won't do that. They don't want to take a cut in salary or give up prestige."

Dr. Harkness charges a flat rate of \$3,900 for testing, 40 hours of group sessions and 11 hours of one-on-one mentoring, or \$5,900 for a two-year retainer.

Besides sessions at her home office in Garland, Dr. Harkness also teaches much-cheaper, informal courses at Southern Methodist University's School of Continuing Education and at S'Cool, an adult-education organization that holds classes in the area.

If Dr. Harkness appears grandmotherly at first, that impression quickly dissipates when she opens her mouth. "One of the key things you have to have in today's world is a very sharp crap detector," she says in a way that tells you hers is set on high. "There are too many old rules that simply should not be followed."

That's why she has this thing about telling her age. "If you could show me any 50-year-old who does more than I do, then I'd tell you my chronological age," she says. Then she adds that she was born Feb. 29, 1928, so she's technically still a teenager, since Feb. 29 comes once every four years.

Husband was first client

Born of "headstrong and heart-wise mountaineering stock" in West Virginia, Dr. Harkness has her Ph.D. in higher education from the University of North Texas. But her true vocational education came through her life experiences.

In 1953, the 25-year-old graduate of the University of West Virginia married her brother's roommate at the Naval Academy, "just like a Debbie Reynolds movie."

"Back then, a woman married a man with 'potential' and then you 'activated' his potential. That was your success. What a sham!" she declares. "But anyway, that's what I did. I followed the rules."

Her husband became, in essence, her first client. Life aboard a submarine didn't suit his nature, so she helped him get out of his military obligation. She sent him through medical school on her teacher's salary and had three children during the process.

"He was a first-rate physician but a second-

rate husband," she says. The marriage ended painfully after 18 years.

She went back to school for her doctorate, which took her eight years as she juggled learning, teaching and parenting with only \$300 a month in child support.

Many of her clients today are women whose husbands have abandoned them for trophy wives, she says. "These men hit their midlife crisis, and instead of dealing with themselves, they dump their families," she says. "It gives me great pleasure to help these women find careers. My motto for them is: 'Your success is the best revenge.'"

Dr. Harkness asks new clients to list their success criteria – things that give their lives purpose. Then they evaluate how their jobs live up to these needs.

"This also becomes their prescription for what they're looking for next," she says, calling these imperatives "glass balls."

"We have to distinguish between the glass balls that we're juggling and the rubber ones. If you drop a glass ball, it breaks. You can glue it back, but it will be distorted. Rubber balls you can drop and pick up later.

"Many successful people – both women and men – are saying, 'My children are a big glass ball. I'm going to honor that and step back and go with a lesser need to achieve.'"

Predicting chaos

Defining yourself as a hyperkinetic Type A or an introspective Type B is irrelevant, she says. "We have to be Type CCs, Chaos Catalysts, because we live in a chaotic world. And while you may not be able to predict what chaos lies ahead, you'll be prepared to handle it when it hits."

She doesn't necessarily sell the idea of breaking out of corporate life. Independence isn't for everyone.

And you can be in the right career but wrong job, she says.

She's horrified by the insensitivity of some corporations, offering as evidence an e-mail sent to terminate a senior vice president who'd been at the company 19 years. It begins: "You have been declared surplus."

Too often companies treat employees like machinery instead of human capital.

She has a warning for them: "Your best people are not going to be cogs in anyone's wheels. They have options."

She has an equally pointed caveat for employees who toil in silent misery: "Dissatisfaction with your job will shorten your life."

And she intends to work for 25 more years.