

Changing Ambitions

by Jessica Guynn, Contra Costa Times

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It was -- literally -- a wake-up call for Marcy Scott Lynn.

After suicide hijackers slammed into the World Trade Center, dark images of desolation filled her dreams. Night after night, Lynn struggled to make sense of the enormity of what had happened to her country -- and to the neighborhood where she grew up. Battery Park City, which once prospered in the shadow of the twin towers, now huddled in their smoldering wake. Jolted one morning from a fitful sleep, Lynn had a change of heart that would change her life.

"I woke up thinking, 'I don't want to go to work,' and it hit me: 'Oh my God, how many people who died in the World Trade Center woke up thinking that very same thing,'" she said. "That's when I decided, 'That's not going to be me.'"

Two weeks after the attacks, Lynn, 29, quit her job as corporate communications manager at Levi Strauss & Co. to search for "something socially relevant."

A time of tectonic transformation for the nation has led to personal reflection and shifting ambitions for thousands of American workers now yearning to make a living by helping others. Government and intelligence agencies, nonprofit organizations and police and fire departments across the country report a dramatic surge in interest and applicants as people rethink their priorities and careers.

"The events of Sept. 11 have made people look with a critical eye at their choices in the past," said Sharon Stearns, a Walnut Creek career counselor. "They realize that time is not infinite, that none of us ever knows what life has in store for us. They are feeling the importance of having a life that feels purposeful."

This collective mid-career crisis, coming as the fleeting promises of New Economy fame and Wall Street riches lie in ruin, could have a profound impact on the American workplace. Even before the terrorist attacks, a survey by online jobs site Monster.com found that 29 percent of job seekers believe it is very important for their job to have a social impact.

Now for the first time since the dot-com boom, white-collar workers are thinking about meaning, not money. Overcome by feelings of grief, anger and vulnerability wrought by the terrorist attacks, they are undergoing a major shift in how they think about work. Many are taking a hard and sometimes uncomfortable look at their 60-hour work weeks, drab cubicles and unending flow of projects and deals. More and more say they are asking themselves: Is this all there is?

Some want to get jobs at spy shops, rooting out terrorists instead of profits. Others are ready to scrap their six-figure paychecks and rough it in underdeveloped countries to bridge cultural and economic gaps. Still others are joining the military.

President Bush calls it a "rebirth of citizenship and character and service." First lady Laura Bush calls it an end to "an age of self-absorption and self-indulgence." Nico Taborga, 34, who is quitting his job as a financial analyst with a real estate investment banking firm in San Francisco, calls it "a moment of clarity."

"There were people in those buildings on Sept. 11 just like me, who just got into work or just got a cup of coffee or who were just checking their e-mail," he said. "I wondered if they were really happy doing what they were doing, and I really hoped so."

Taborga found he couldn't just swing back into his old life and job, not after seeing again and again the aching images of firefighters bravely rushing into the burning towers, knowing they had a job to do, whatever the cost. Stirred to his core, Taborga is setting out on a different kind of mission, after years of school and training, to become a firefighter.

"These firefighters were doing what they loved and they were helping people. That's what hit me like a sledgehammer," he said. "Working on spreadsheets has nothing to do with helping people out. I knew I had to do something that would make this world a better place."

That kind of soul searching has kept Joel Garfinkle busy. "September 11 is a life-changing event that has stimulated a greater awareness of ourselves and leads us to ask all kinds of questions: What can I do that gives me passion and energy? What can I do that doesn't drain me? Where can I find meaning and purpose?" said Garfinkle, who runs Dream Job Coaching in San Leandro. "These questions have taken on a greater sense of urgency for people now."

Bryce Eberhart has witnessed that urgency all around him. Eberhart's rugby teammate Mark Bingham was one of the heroes of the doomed United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. His friend's sacrifice and courage only made Eberhart more sure that he was on the right path. His company, San Francisco's PlanetOut Partners, Inc., connects the gay community through the Internet, dispelling feelings of isolation in the United States and abroad, even as far away as war-torn Afghanistan.

"After tragedy, people start to evaluate whether the career choices they've made are a reflection of their core values," Eberhart said. "People like me who work in careers that very much reflect their core values are reinvigorated and are redoubling their commitment to their work."

Gay Pierre, a 39-year-old mother of two in Martinez and a former technology manager for a large video game company in San Francisco, decided to revive a long-ago dream of becoming a paramedic firefighter when she was laid off from her job in August. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks only thickened her resolve to make the grade at Los Medanos College, where she is taking emergency medical training and firefighting courses.

"When I saw what happened to all the firefighters, it was very sad. It really made me wish I already had my certification so I could go out and help right away," she said. "I am really at a place in my life where I want to give something back. I don't want to die someday and think, 'When did I ever do something for anyone else?' If that had been me that day going into those buildings, I know I would have went doing what I loved doing."

Dan Stanley loved what he was doing but lost his job to the terrorist attacks. As the threat of war in nearby Afghanistan intensified, he was evacuated from Turkmenistan and sent home to Walnut Creek, just one year into his assignment with the Peace Corps in Geokdepe, a tiny village enveloped by rugged desert where he helped farmers develop marketing strategies to sell milk and taught English to middle-school children. Now he is looking to land a job in the federal government until he can return to public-interest work, a calling he takes even more seriously after Sept. 11.

"I didn't get a chance to finish what I feel I owe back to the world," Stanley said. "A lot of people don't understand each other or Americans, especially in that area of the world. I feel like the Peace Corps is one of the best things we do to help fix that."

Though the horror of the attacks has triggered a call to civic duty for thousands of Americans, career counselors caution against making rash decisions in times of emotional and economic upheaval. "It's not a great time to change careers," said Linda Artel, a career counselor in Berkeley. "It's really what we call a buyer's market."

A looming recession and ever-tightening job market have made pursuing idealistic dreams tougher than ever. Increased competition for public-interest jobs has further dimmed prospects. The Federal Aviation Administration has gotten more than 100,000 applications for its federal air marshal program. The National Security Agency has received 19,000 resumes, almost six times the number of resumes it got last year. Teach for America, which matches college graduates with teaching jobs in low-income school districts, has gotten more than 3,000 applications, triple what it got last year. The Peace Corps office in San Francisco has gotten 172 applications, nearly double what it got last year, and, in October alone, fielded 920 inquiries.

Taborga knows all too well after a visit last week to a downtown Oakland fire station that, as a rookie, he can't just waltz into firefighting. Even before the winds of public sentiment shifted, the Oakland Fire Department had as many as 15,000 applicants vying for a hundred or so positions. "Don't let the numbers get you down," firefighter Rick Feigel-Perez told him. "If you believe in yourself, you can do it."

Lynn did it. Within weeks of quitting her job at Levi Strauss, she landed a job with a public affairs consulting firm doing what she loves: advising nonprofit organizations. "I was not thrilled with where I was headed before Sept. 11. Everyone was saying, 'Suck it up. The economy sucks. You are so lucky to work for a great company like Levi's,'" Lynn said. "After Sept. 11, I knew I couldn't anymore. I had to be doing something that I felt impacts the world in a positive way."

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