

“Time-Out” Grant Recipient Heads Back to School After 30 Years

by Jake Lazarowitz and Dan Schneider for ICanStillDoThat.org

William (Bill) Elfant is a 1979 graduate of Vassar College, with a Bachelors degree in History. He is also former New York City antiques dealer, and interior designer. Bill is the 2009 recipient of Vassar College’s “Time-Out” Grant. Funded by an anonymous Vassar alumna, the “Time-Out” Grant has been awarded annually for the past 20 years by Vassar to an alumnae/i, 40 years old or over, who makes the most compelling case for the need to take a year “off” from their current path to explore new horizons in their life.



Left: Bill Elfant Right: Jake Lazarowitz

As the current recipient of this prestigious honor, Mr. Elfant is making a major professional and life changing decision to become a registered nurse. Beginning in September 2009, Mr. Elfant will begin a one year accelerated program at Pace University, to earn a Bachelors of Science in Nursing. His intention is to follow this with a Masters degree to become a Nurse Practitioner in Adult Primary Care.

What drew you to nursing?

Taking care of my mother through her last years of illness taught me much about myself. In some ways, I feel that managing that situation was the best work I have ever done. After my mother's death I felt the need to do work, that would give my life more resonance. I no longer felt gratification catering to the material needs of a select few.

So how was the decision made?

The seed of this decision was growing inside of me for a long time. I was always interested in healthcare, and healing from a very young age. The vocation took root while I was volunteering as "friendly visitor for SAGE, an organization which provides support and social service for GLBT seniors in New York. Later while I caring for my mother, I spent a lot of time with her in hospitals, and healthcare facilities. I had many opportunities to observe firsthand the work of nurses and physicians. I found that I interacted well with them, and had great respect for their work; furthermore, I found that I was comfortable in the hospital environment. Shortly after my mother's death, I returned to work at a prestigious antique gallery, and found that life had become untenable. One night, I was talking about my job dissatisfaction with a close friend. What was I going to do? She listened, and then quite simply asked, "Why don't you become a nurse?" Strange as it sounds, then and there, came the moment of enlightenment. It suddenly seemed obvious that this is what I was meant to do.

As a man, do you find the perception of nursing to be difficult?

I believe that, at present, men make up only six percent of the nursing work force. Nursing has traditionally been a female dominated

profession and I do not foresee that will ever change in my lifetime. I suppose it is difficult for some men to contemplate a career where women are in the majority. My closest friends are women, and I have worked closely and reported to women throughout my career. After all, I was in the first generation of men to attend Vassar. My education there taught me to respect the legacy of women's achievements in our society. The nursing profession has changed dramatically in the last decades, offering men and women many exciting professional paths. I have encountered resistance from people who I think hold to a stereotype of nurses as white capped vixens, angels of mercy or Nurse Ratchets. Early on, I told an acquaintance of my intention. She looked at me and said, "Bill, you are going to a place where most antique dealers only go for Halloween." Nevertheless, the response I get when I tell most people of my plan has been only positive and affirming.

How do you personally perceive nursing?

Nursing is a separate profession within the realm of healthcare and medicine. Nursing and medicine are complimentary practices which work together to maintain health, treat illness and injury, however, independently they have different approaches. Physicians are trained on a disease model in which they are taught to recognize symptoms and signs, and prescribe treatment. Nurses take a more holistic approach to a patient. Nurses address the full range of a patient's needs and care. Essentially, doctors are educated to treat disease; nurses are trained to treat people. I believe it was Florence Nightingale who said, "A doctor will cure you, but it is a nurse who will keep you alive." Today Nurse Practitioners are entering the sphere of primary care, doing work, which was traditionally and exclusively the realm of physicians. I am studying to become an NP in Adult

Primary Care. I will receive advanced training to diagnose, order tests and analyze the results, prescribe medication and treatment, independent of a physician. As fewer doctors are choosing primary care as a career, NP's are filling a much-needed place in the healthcare system, with much positive response from their clients. I think this is because, as nurses, they relate to their clients in a more personal and intimate way. I don't think of Nurse Practitioners as quasi physicians, but as nurse's with advance skills and practice.

How do you feel about the expense of the program?

Probably the biggest obstacle towards my decision was how I was going to pay for this education. The cost of my one year accelerated program at Pace University will cost more than my entire four years at Vassar, thirty years ago. I was determined to go ahead with my plan, but I had to ask myself, "Are you willing to go into debt for this? Unlike younger students I don't have 30 years to pay off student loans. I was very blessed and humbled to receive the Time Out Grant, which will offset a large part of my costs. I say humbled, because I know what sacrifices some of my student friends are making to get their degrees and training.

I am attending a private school which is considerably more expensive than a state school. Ironically, it is almost more difficult to get into the state and city nursing programs, as there are a limited number of places and such a large pool of applicants. In the present economy, and with a much reported nursing shortage, more people are considering nursing as a profession where jobs are still plentiful. At the same time there is a drastic shortage of nursing teachers. The institutions cannot service the demand. For me, like many of my student friends, a private education was the only option.

Clearly, without the Time-Out Grant, my circumstances would be entirely different. I think of nursing as a vocation as well as a profession. Once I realized that this was what I wanted to do, I knew I would achieve my goal despite the financial challenges.

Did dealing with these questions put your decision in jeopardy?

Making the decision to become a nurse was the easiest part of this journey. First I had to return to school and earn 24 college credits in sciences, psychology, anatomy and physiology, and statistics. There were many hurdles I had to face, and I came close to giving up more than a few times. My brother told me this summer that he thought at one point I wasn't going to make it. I experienced a lot of self doubt along the way. I just had to keep reminding myself that the goal was more important than the small setbacks and frustrations.

Has going back to school been a difficult process?

Yes and no. Accepting the personal and social sacrifices has really been the most difficult. I have been living a life that is in opposition to that of my peers and friends for nearly two years. I expect to be in school for at least three more years. I've had to turn down countless opportunities to see friends or participate in activities that I enjoy because I had to study or prepare an assignment. I never anticipated that I would spend my 50th birthday in a community college classroom taking a chemistry midterm. Also becoming re-adjusted to the unique mindset that governs academia hasn't always been easy to deal with. The academic world functions in a vacuum, working in ways that are contrary to the norms I accepted in my adult professional life.

The upside to all that is that I feel renewed and exhilarated by having to actively use my brain in new ways. It's wonderful to be learning new and totally unfamiliar material at this stage of my life. At the beginning, I thought my age would be an issue given that most of my classmates are at least 20 years younger. In fact, age was more of an issue for me than for them. I've made new friends who seem to appreciate my mature perspective as much as I've been bolstered by their enthusiasm and youthful outlook.

What kind of support system have you had?

My friends and family have been incredibly supportive. I got an incredible response from my former classmates at our 30th Reunion at Vassar. I found that the greatest support came from those who I thought might be the most resistant.

I am especially lucky to have as a mentor a man who I respect profoundly. Dr. Frederic Herter is a physician of the old school. A retired surgeon, Dr. Herter trained at Harvard and is the former head of the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia. I had expected Fred, who is 89, to chasten me with such words as, "Bill, men become doctors and women become nurses." Yet his approbation and encouragement have been incredible. His letter of recommendation for the Time-Out Grant is something I will always treasure.

What is your mindset now heading into this program?

I'm certainly focused on the goal. I just want to keep moving. I know the road will be tough and the program will take all my energy. However, I have come to realize a few things about success that help to guide me. One is that it is circumstantial. I'm starting on the bottom

again as an adult and I'm back to being part of "the system."
However, I had a job for many years and this does not feel like that anymore. To me, this is a life progression, a vocation that I am fulfilling, not simply a career change. I need this. That's how I know I'll be successful.

We want to thank Bill Elfant for taking the time to discuss this uplifting example of a mid-life career change, even during a recession, in intimate detail. We believe he is the epitome of the *I Can Still do That* spirit and the positive psychology behind it. We wish him luck in getting his degree and hope to catch up with him after graduation.

If you know of any uplifting success stories of people making major career changes in mid-life, please send them to us. We need to all "coach," inspire and support each other in this sometimes-difficult journey.