

They're over 55, retired and working harder than ever. Following, we present three Sacramento businesspeople who weren't ready to stop working after retirement: They opened their own businesses.

SENIOR ENTREPRENEURS

BY SIGRID BATHEN

Carol McNeal

Carol McNeal can barely remember a time when she didn't read. As the youngest of 16 children in her hometown of Portsmouth, Ohio, she turned to reading "so that I could lock people out." Now, at 63, she remains surrounded by books—at home and at Carol's Books and Things, the Sacramento bookstore she has owned for more than a decade.

Originally trained as a registered nurse, McNeal was working in a clinic in Cleveland in 1954 when she met her future husband, Dr. Homer McNeal, on a blind date. They married and moved to Sacramento in 1956, raising six children who now range in age from 25 to 37.

After her children were grown, Carol McNeal considered returning to nursing, and even took a refresher course at the University of California, Davis Medical Center. But a friend who owned a dress shop suggested she open a bookstore instead. "I used to go in there often and buy things I didn't need, and I told her I needed to *do* something. She said, 'Why don't you open a bookstore—you know how you like to read!'"

With a "very small" inheritance from her mother, Carol opened her first store in 1984—the Courtyard on Freeport Boulevard, specializing in books on African-American subjects as well as books on Native American,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KURT FISHBACK



Asian and Jewish history. She closed the store nearly three years later. "The community was just not ready for the type of store that I had," McNeal says, "and I think I spread myself a bit thin in trying to cover everything—African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese and Japanese. I also had Jewish books and a lot of children's books. I was trying to cover the top 10 best sellers. I tried to do the whole gamut."

She honed her focus—African-American subjects—and reopened in 1989 in her present

location in the Lanai shopping center on Freeport Boulevard near Fruitridge Road. "For as long as I can remember, I've always been interested in African-American history. I didn't get much of that in Portsmouth, Ohio."

While McNeal maintains a large selection of books focusing on African Americans as well as other ethnic groups and cultures—plus children's books, art objects, greeting cards and other items—McNeal says she functions "more as a teacher than a book-seller." Many schools and teachers—from Del Paso Heights and Oak Park to Elk Grove, Stockton and the California Youth Authority—come to McNeal for specialized books and other educational materials about the history of minority groups and cultures. Students in teacher-training programs regularly tour her store as part of their curriculum, and the store is often the site of readings and book signings by prominent authors.

"I began working with the community, primarily African Americans, and people would stop in from the restaurant across the street [Wong's Islander]," she says. "Then I began to work with principals and school teachers, especially those in

Oak Park, where there are a number of Hmong students. I began to search for books."

She subscribes to several specialty services and catalogues, but much of her knowledge of available books was developed, literally, book by book. "I was just a real, true novice. I'd get a book and get an address out of the book and write to the company for catalogues. I began from there."

Most of her customers come to her by word of mouth. "I probably spend more on business cards than anybody in town. People pass out my cards on buses, in department stores."

She contemplates involving her children more in the business (her eldest daughter, Melba McNeal Whitaker, already works with her) so she can spend more time with her husband, now retired. And she advises other potential senior entrepreneurs that "if you have something gnawing at the back of your mind that you would like to do, that you have a real, true love for, then investigate it and pursue it."

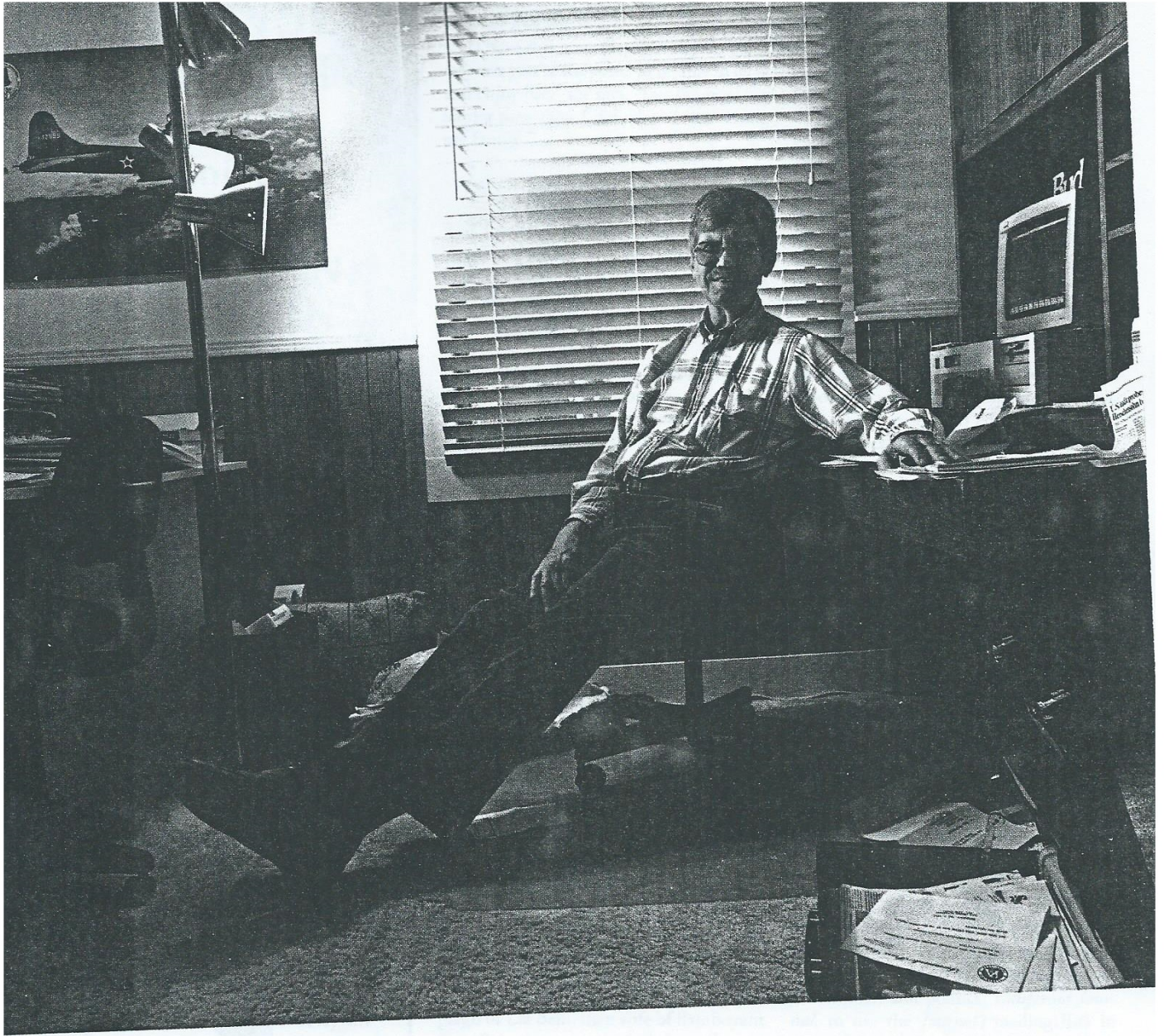


Carolyn Negrete, a registered nurse, now runs

the Capitol Cafe, which feeds as many as

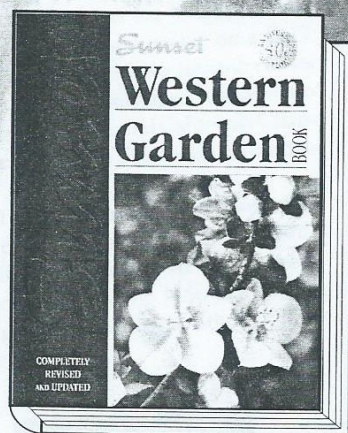
1,200 people every day.

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Bud Lembke publishes "Political Pulse: Bud Lembke's Newsletter of California Politics and Government," a newsletter that prides itself on scooping the establishment press. Lembke, 62, says he does not think he will ever, "until I am totally incapacitated, sit on the porch and feed the squirrels."

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Seniors

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"I have this mentality that in your golden years you're supposed to be able to relax and enjoy life," she says, "but I'm working harder now than I did when I was raising my family."

Bud Lembke

Bud Lembke was a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* for 21 years, serving as San Francisco bureau chief for 13 years. His first love was political reporting, and he'd always had a hankering to have his own paper.

"I'd always been totally nuts about politics," he recalls. "I'd wanted to do more at the *Times* on politics—I wanted to be a national political writer—and was never allowed to do so, perhaps because of my age. You hit a barrier when you're 50."

In 1980, at 58, he left the *Times* to realize at least part of that dream. "It was a newspaper person's dream, to start a paper," Lembke recalls of his ill-timed entry into newspaper publishing as owner of *The Beacon* in Dana Point, Orange County. "My timing was terrible. I ran into the 1981 recession. All of the real estate ads dried up, and that was a big part of it in South Orange County." After a year and a half, Lembke and his wife, Mary, a special education teacher ("my wife and I had a saying—she brought home the bacon and I brought home *The Beacon*") decided against taking out a second mortgage on their home and sold *The Beacon*. Lembke says he lost \$100,000 on the venture.

The Lembkes moved to Sacramento, and he worked for 14 months as press secretary to then-Senate President Pro Tempore David Roberti, then handled press relations for the ill-fated state Senate campaign of Lia Belli, then wife of flamboyant San Francisco criminal defense lawyer Melvin Belli. "She lied about her résumé," Lembke recalls, "which was disastrous for the poor devil who was her press secretary. I did a press release on her background, and half of it was wrong."

Undaunted—and still enamored with politics despite its pitfalls—the 62-year-old Lembke in 1985 launched *Political Pulse: Bud Lembke's Newsletter of California Politics and Government*. Irreverent, feisty and packed with political insider tips and stories, *Pulse* is described by one lobbyist subscriber, with some hyperbole, as "the only political publication geared to people who can think."

Despite his experience in Dana Point, Lembke was optimistic about *Pulse* from the start. "A lot of people talk about starting a business, but when it comes right down to it they have a hard time doing it," he says. "There was some of that with me, but I was enthusiastic about it, and I had confidence that I could produce a good newsletter." Starting on a shoestring—\$6,000 from Lembke and \$4,000 from partner Matt Kuzins, a direct-mail expert who handled the marketing and business side—the twice-monthly newsletter has grown in 10 years to 600-plus subscribers while increasing its price from \$75 to \$255 annually.

Four years ago, Lembke and Larry Lynch, a former *Long Beach Press-Telegram* Capitol reporter, launched *Education Beat*, a twice-monthly newsletter on educational issues, and two years ago, Lynch became co-publisher of two newsletters. Then, in January, they launched *California Corridors*, a monthly newsletter on transportation issues. Yearly subscriptions are \$110 for *Beat*, which has 400 subscribers, and \$125 for *Corridors*, with more than 100 subscribers. Lembke and Lynch also offer various "package deals" on subscriptions, as well as lower introductory subscription rates. There is no advertising.

The newsletters are part of a growing community of "targeted niche" newsletters, which target specific professional and/or interest groups, charge high subscription rates, and provide information unavailable, at least in theory, elsewhere. They are produced almost entirely by Lembke and Lynch in an office at 926 J St. in downtown Sacramento.

Lembke credits his success to both tenacity and luck. Early on, he worked out an agreement with Tom Hoeber, publisher of the Sacramento-based magazine on state government and politics, *California Journal*, to use the *Journal's* mailing lists in return for publicizing and mailing its companion publication, *Newsfile*, with a special subscription price offered for both *Pulse* and *Newsfile*.

"There is an old newsletter axiom that you anticipate a lot more subscriptions than you're going to get, and you don't charge as much as you should." The number of subscriptions to *Pulse* has gone as high as 700, and Lembke says marketing the product is a constant requirement of the business. "There are a lot of regulars who pay it faithfully," he says. "And there is always erosion."

Pulse prides itself on "scooping" the establishment press. "It is generally recog-

nized that we have a quality newsletter that has information you can't get anywhere else. My motto is to totally avoid being a carbon copy of the newspapers. We use the newspapers as tip sheets, but we always develop our own stories. We've had a lot of scoops over the years." Lembke says he broke the story that Gov. Pete Wilson planned to run for president during the 1994 gubernatorial race. "It was still a race between Wilson and [Kathleen] Brown at that time, so it was news." And he has reported the bad news first. "When [then-state Treasurer] Jesse Unruh was ill, I learned it was terminal, and I reported it."

Although Lembke has sold 60 percent of the business to Lynch, he has no plans to retire. In addition to the newsletters, he is writing a book about his World War II experiences as a radio operator on a B-17 bomber in Europe, is taking Spanish classes at California State University, Sacramento and is active in the Central California Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

"I feel fortunate because I'm doing what I like to do. I don't think I will ever, until I am totally incapacitated, sit on the porch and feed the squirrels. Not that I have anything against squirrels—though they are rodents."

Carolyn Negrete

When Carolyn Negrete bid on the contract to run the Capitol Cafe in the sixth-floor office annex of the state Capitol in 1989, she was competing with, among others, two large franchise operations—one of which offered her a job. She turned it down. And she won the contract.

Negrete, 61, had considerable experience in state cafeterias over the years, having helped her ex-husband, Henry Negrete, run the cafeteria in the Employment Development Department for nearly two decades. Henry Negrete, who is legally blind, ran the EDD cafeteria as part of the Business Enterprise Program of the state Department of Rehabilitation.

A registered nurse, Negrete worked briefly in hospitals after her marriage. "Then I got busy raising kids and assisting Henry with his business." One son, Roberto, 33, is mentally retarded and is one of several developmentally disabled employees in the Capitol Cafe. "Roberto has always worked with me. He does my banking for me, he goes and picks things up for me. He knows the names of 300 or 400 people in the Capitol. He is almost a touchpoint for

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are far behind me..."*

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And while you're list'ning to me,
I suddenly see them come true..."*

AUGUST 7 - 13

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The Pirates of Penzance

*"Oh, here is love,
and here is truth
And here is food
for joyous laughter..."*

AUGUST 14 - 20

*"Yesterday she loathed me – Bah!
Now today she likes me – Hah!
And tomorrow, tomorrow – Ahhhhhhh..."*

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AUGUST 21 - 27

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someone to say hello and be nice to them. It's really been fascinating watching him function in a way where the things that he *can't* do aren't really terribly important."

Negrete employs 14 people in the cafe, and her older son, Reynaldo, a real estate appraiser, provides technical support—keeping the computers running—for his mother's business.

In addition to feeding as many as 1,200 people a day, Negrete provides catering for special events, including weddings and retirement parties. During the state Democratic convention in Sacramento in April, she catered a reception for 2,000 in the Capitol Rotunda.

Negrete provides a decidedly non-institutional atmosphere in the cafe, insisting on fresh flowers on the tables and decorating the walls with original works by prominent painters and photographers. "Most of the state cafeterias don't have fresh flowers," she says. "I do. I like fresh flowers in my work space. I guess I've always wished that I was an artist, and someplace I discovered that I wasn't. We have wonderful walls here." She has exhibited the work of Robert Else, Barbara Ellison, Molly Low and many others. (Watercolors by Bernadette Grimes are on display through June 3, followed by the paintings of Karen Calden Falk through Aug. 22.)

Because of the partisan nature of the Capitol, she avoids displays with any hint of propaganda. "I try to stay away from shows that have a message, because I feel the people in this building have been inundated with messages."

She also takes the unusual requirements of "the building" into account in food preparation. "So many of the people who work here are away from home. They need a place that is more like their own refrigerator. We have a salad bar, so they can do various combinations and amounts. Every day we cook a turkey breast without salt, though we have other things full of fat and all the things that are bad. We figure that we're giving them choices that they might not get someplace else."

Negrete's work has not gone unnoticed. She was recently recognized as an "Unsung Hero" at the "People Helping People" awards ceremony sponsored by the Community Services Planning Council. "I love what I'm doing," she says. "The art shows, having my family involved in the business, being able to integrate my concerns about the developmentally disabled with my work. After you've worked for yourself for a long time, you know you can't work for anyone else." □