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Seniors returning from retirement

O.K. CARTER
In My Opinion

After 43 years in the retail clothing business, mostly as a manager or buyer, Vinita Weaver, at 78, figured, why not retire? She did exactly that two years ago.

First she caught up with all those little chores she'd been meaning to do. That consumed two or three months. Then she sat. And fidgeted. And got bored. And as to the cash flow from sitting, there wasn't much. Weaver not only enjoys selling and meeting new people, she also likes the constant learning so necessary in today's competitive world.

That's why Weaver, now 80, decided a few months ago that she wasn't through competing or working just yet.

"I've always been particularly fascinated by my daughter's business," Weaver said.

Weaver's daughter is Cherri Huddleston, an Arlington broker and real estate agent who specializes in selling farms, ranches and recreational estates, many carrying multimillion-dollar prices. Weaver found herself often accompanying her daughter on sales calls or to look over a new listing. Then Weaver started giving her daughter sales advice. After all, she sold a few million bucks' worth of goods in the rags trade.

Huddleston found the advice entertaining and finally offered her mother a suggestion.

"If you're all that interested, why not get yourself a real estate license?" I told her," Huddleston said.

That's how Weaver, for the first time in her life, ended up enrolled in college -- the continuing education sequence at the University of Texas at Arlington that leads to a Realtor certification. She passed the test on the first try -- the program's oldest graduate ever.

"So far I've run into a few 60-something active real estate agents and considerably fewer 70-somethings but no 80-year-olds, though I'm sure there are some," she said.

Weaver is an anecdotal example of a developing national trend -- temporarily retired seniors who return to work.

The phenomenon isn't particularly evident in Arlington because the 65-and-over set is relatively small by national standards -- only about 6 percent of the city's population, according to the census. That's considerably less than in most other large cities. But the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the number of older U.S. workers will leap by 11 million over the next eight years alone, from 23 million to 34 million. In 1984 there were only 15 million such workers.

The bureau also says 36 percent of those over 55 are still working, the most since 1972.

Though that trend is hardly noticeable in Arlington because of the low percentage of senior citizens, the 19 percent of the population between ages 45 and 64 is closing in on its golden years.

The good news is that employers are increasingly looking more favorably at older employees. The job-posting Internet site Execunet, for instance, cites increasing listings for executive jobs in defense, information technology, healthcare and business services. The staffing firm Manpower reports that many companies are now looking hard at an older work force as they have trouble filling jobs in management, accounting, sales, engineering, nursing and healthcare and as machinists, drivers and call-center operators.

Weaver now believes that retirement -- full retirement, anyway -- is highly overrated. She refuses to set a date to call it quits.

"If I'm 90 and still working, so what?" she asked with a laugh. "I don't want to be a coach potato. I'm not going to retire again so long as I can keep moving. If we don't keep moving, we stop moving."

O.K. Carter's column appears Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays. Carter also co-hosts P3: People, Politics and Possibilities at 9:30 nightly on Time Warner cable Channel 95. 817-548-5428, okc@star-telegram.com