

CONTINUING EDUCATION

## Second Acts: Stage to Social Work



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

Patricia Ben Peterson works at the Lillian Booth Actors' Home.

By [ROBERTA HERSHENSON](#)  
Published: July 29, 2007

### Correction Appended

Patricia Ben Peterson has the stage-filling charisma of a Broadway veteran. For two decades, she flirted with marquee ingenue roles, starring as Sarah Brown in the 1992 revival of "Guys and Dolls" and as Cinderella in the original "Into the Woods." She has worked with Bob Fosse and Hal Prince.



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Top, Patricia Ben Peterson in "Company" (1995) on Broadway and in "Shenandoah" (1989) at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey.

But these days, at 48, her role is to brighten the lives of the elderly.

Not that there isn't theatrical flair at the Lillian Booth Actors' Home, an assisted living and nursing-care facility in Englewood, N.J., for entertainment professionals and their families. The home is poignantly redolent of show business. The walls are lined with portraits of movie stars, posters of plays whose last curtain calls took place decades ago and voices that still resonate with the sonorous projection of trained thespians.

Ms. Peterson gave up acting nearly four years ago to go back to school for a master's in social work, and now she fills her days straightening out medical bills, changing batteries in cassette recorders so residents can listen to Books on Tape and easing the loneliness of those like 104-year-old Betty Lord, an actor's widow who has outlived her friends.

The stage began losing its allure while she was still in demand as an actress and concert singer. "I was sitting in my dressing room one day in a show everybody wanted to be in, and I wasn't happy. I was bored," she says, sitting in her office an hour — and a life's span — away from Broadway. "I thought, 'What's wrong with this picture?'"

At an open house at [Fordham University](#), she heard about the field of geriatric social work, and "something clicked." She remembered her close relationship with her grandmother and her visits to a great-aunt at a nursing home, where she was appalled by the lot of the residents. "They had no one," she says. "They lay in their beds and got bed sores. I was so upset and angered by those vulnerable, sweet people who had no advocates."

Ms. Peterson, with a B.A. from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash., was accepted at both graduate schools she applied to. She chose [New York University](#) but deferred enrollment for a year to go on tour with "Urinetown."

"I went back to see all the cities I loved, and I kissed all those cities goodbye," she says. "It was total closure. I was so done with show business."

Many actors — most, in fact — eventually end up in other fields, especially as they age out of their roles. But the search for greater fulfillment in a second career is not restricted to show business types. An increasing number of adults exchange lucrative, glamorous jobs for the helping professions, notably social work and the nonprofit sector.

In “U-Turn: What if You Woke Up One Morning and Realized You Were Living the Wrong Life?” published by Bloomsbury in April, Bruce Grierson writes about “seismic shifts” within the psyche that lead people to abandon their usual pursuits in hopes of finding deeper meaning. “A good number of the secular epiphanies of the folks I profile involve turns away from rampant consumerism in some manner,” he says. “That may be because it’s the biggest identity issue we Westerners face at the moment.”

[GradSchools.com](http://GradSchools.com), an online source of graduate school information, confirms the trend. “Over the years we’ve watched searches for altruistic fields grow while watching M.B.A.’s and electrical engineering fall,” says Clara Pitts, vice president for product management. Applications for graduate programs in public administration, which includes social work, rose 7 percent from 2004 to 2005, according to the latest survey by the Council of Graduate Schools and the Graduate Examinations Board.

Students coming from other careers account for a significant part of enrollment in social work programs — 50 percent at Fordham, 25 percent at N.Y.U. and the University of Denver, 20 percent at the University of Texas at Austin. [Washington University](http://Washington University) in St. Louis actively recruits older adults for its program. The dean, Edward F. Lawlor, appreciates their motivation. “They know why they’re here, because they made an active choice to change careers,” he says. People are entering the field later anyway — at an average age of 34 (from 2000 to 2004), compared with 26 (before 1960), says Tracy Whitaker, director of the Center for Workforce Studies of the National Association of Social Work.

While licensing requirements vary by state, a master’s in social work and two to three years of clinical experience is typical. There are currently 320,000 licensed social workers and more than twice that many who identify themselves as professionals. But more are needed to offset the coming retirement of the generation that joined the field in the idealistic 1960s, says Ms. Whitaker. Moreover, demand is expected to grow as the number of elderly Americans increases.

The center is promoting the field to retiring boomers with time for a two-year master’s program. Five new bachelor’s programs and three new master’s programs have started since January.

Job prospects — at hospitals, schools, group homes, correctional facilities, social work agencies — may be good. Money, not so. Licensed clinical social workers can earn handsome incomes in private psychotherapy practices, but social work pay is still low, from \$34,000 a year with a bachelor’s degree to \$58,000 with a doctorate.

Ms. Peterson had made “piles of money” as an actress (alternating with lean times), and her savings allowed her to study full time for two years.

The master’s curriculum provides a foundation in social welfare policy and its historical context. In internships, students learn to cope with the mundane paperwork that is the reality of social work, as well as the emotional impact of handling knotty and heartbreaking problems. Ms. Peterson

was placed with the Actors' Fund of America, whose social services arm offers crisis intervention, housing assistance and health workshops. It also runs the Booth home.

She was not quite prepared for the rigors of academics. "I was 45 years old and I'd never written a term paper in my life," she says. Nevertheless, she graduated with a 3.98 grade point average, and her internship became a job. Her long-term goal is to promote the rights of the elderly on a policy level.

AS a child actress growing up in Oregon, Ms. Peterson followed the urging of her grandmother, who had been a burlesque dancer. "When I was in the womb, she chose me to carry the torch forward," she says. "My grandmother would be turning over in her grave right now."

Ms. Peterson trained at the classically oriented Circle in the Square Professional School in New York, and began singing professionally after her acting teacher discovered her soprano voice.

Her office at the Booth home is decorated with pictures of theater luminaries. She doesn't sing publicly anymore, but in the middle of an interview, she suddenly belts out a few bars of [Sondheim](#). Then, just as suddenly, she stops and straightens up at her desk. It is time to meet with Lawrence Vincent, a former marine at Iwo Jima for whom she has secured veteran's benefits. "Hi," she says, as the former actor rolls his wheelchair into her office. "How's your sleep been?"

**Correction: July 29, 2007**

*A credit for a drawing by Al Hirschfeld of the actress Patricia Ben Peterson with an article in the special Education Life section today about second careers in social work omits the copyright symbol and the name of his representative. It is Margo Feiden Galleries, New York.*