As a lifelong entrepreneur, an investor, and founder of Grow America, I love the fact that successful entrepreneurs come in fairly well every age, gender, nationality and chapter of life. However, Forbes’ current online poll on the ideal age to start a company tells an interesting tale: as of this writing, 33% of readers say age doesn’t matter, as long as the entrepreneur has run at least one successful venture before. 33% cast their vote for young founders paired with older partners or mentors.

But I was stunned to see the very lowest score was for older executives: Only 14% of readers believe an entrepreneur age 40+ is aligned to succeed, despite their greater network of contacts and level of financial resources than younger founders would typically have.

Yet data from the Kauffman Foundation shows that of 5,000 organizations started in 2004, a full 64% of the companies still in operation 5 years later were started by entrepreneurs age 45 and above. In fact, older entrepreneurs are the fastest growing entrepreneurial segment in the U.S., Kauffman says. We should do our best to support them.

Why are older executives starting new ventures at age 50, 60 or even 70 and above? Forbes Contributor Susan Adams noted in her recent column that it’s increasingly difficult for people over 50 to find a new job.

The most interesting respondent I’ve encountered in the older/younger executive debate to date, by far, is William K. (Bill) Zinke, age 85. He reached out in response to the Forbes poll and my recent articles and we had a delightful visit last week. A longtime head of an HR management consulting firm, Zinke shared with me his vision of productive longevity and why it’s possible to start a business at age 55+.
company, Bill was a central participant in the general adoption of the term “human resources.” He’s been an activist on the issues of aging for quite some time, is quoted frequently in the media, and is a regular contributor to Huffington Post.

Most interesting of all is Bill’s foundation, the Center For Productive Longevity (CPL) in Boulder, Co. CPL is a 501(c)(3) organization he founded in 2006 (at age 79) that works closely with the AARP, the SBA and other notable sources to stimulate entrepreneurship among the fastest growing segment of our population – the “Baby Boomer” citizens of age 55 and up.

CPL is running four Spotlight on Entrepreneurship meetings in 2012. Two have already taken place; however the next is Oct. 11 in Chicago, followed by a Nov. 15 event in Denver, CO. I will be joining and participating in both, as well as in the Global Conference planned for March of 2013. If there’s a chance you would like to join the Oct. or Nov. events, you can find the agenda and details here.

Now back to Bill Zinke. When I asked him why so many 55+ individuals are turning to entrepreneurship, he gave me the following list of great reasons:

1. After years of working for others, acting in accordance with established policies and procedures, creating their own business can enable them to “march to their own drummer”.
2. Many people 55+ are attracted by the opportunity to create a business that is responsive to their own unique needs, interests, and desires.
3. According to an AARP survey conducted in 2011, almost 80% of people 55+ want to continue working, more than half in part-time work; the motivation: they need or want additional income, have a desire to continue in productive activities, or for a variety of other reasons including a recognition that they may be living for 30 more years or longer.
4. People 55+ have many years of experience, expertise, seasoned judgment, and proven performance to support creating a new business.
5. People 55+ may have developed excellent contacts in the business world that can facilitate their new-business venture.
6. People 55+ may have accumulated funds to support a new business, may have contacts in the financial world that can provide some financing assistance, and can in any event start small in their own home.
7. People 55+ who have continued in productive activities live longer, enjoy better health, and report greater satisfaction with life than those who don’t.

Bill makes a compelling case. Through CPL, he shared some additional news with me as well: Today, Oct. 1, is the announcement of CPL’s first-ever Later-Life Story Contest. From June 1 through Aug. 31, CPL solicited entries and today is issuing two $1,000 Awards, the first for the most successful Entrepreneurial Story and the second for the most Inspirational Life Story, both for people 50 and older.

Today I am pleased to share the news of these two winners, Lynn Brooks, founder of Big Apple Greeter at age 59 (her organization is celebrating its 20th Anniversary), and Barbara Traynor, who at age 65 found a new lease
Lynn Brooks founded Big Apple Greeter 20 years ago at age 59. On her later life through the adventure of long-term volunteering, and has authored the book *Second Career Volunteer*. To Lynn and Barbara – congratulations. I dedicate the rest of today’s column to your inspirational stories:

**Lynn Brooks, Big Apple Greeter – Entrepreneurial Success**

Lynn founded Big Apple Greeter in 1992 as the first “Welcome Visitor” program of its kind in the country. It is a non-profit organization that pairs visitors to NYC with volunteer “Greeters” who explore the city with them, free of charge.

Before Big Apple Greeter, Lynn left an eight-year job she wasn’t enjoying. People thought she was foolish and worried that at age 59 she’d never be hired again. It took over 6 months, but Lynn finally found a new job, but was then let go in six weeks due to cutbacks. So she decided to start a venture.

Over the course of a year, Lynn wrote letter after letter to the “Movers and Shakers” in New York, she recalls. She told them about her idea and then asked for advice. “People will usually see you if you don’t ask for a job or money,” she says. So she met with everyone from the Mayor on down, and they said: “Lynn, it’s a great idea, but it won’t work. My advice to you is don’t do it.”

Eventually she found her way to Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messenger, who loved the idea. She couldn’t pay a salary, but she gave Lynn a desk and office services along with a computer, which Lynn learned to use with the help of a friend. Then the real obstacles began—everyone in the tourism industry felt threatened by Lynn’s idea. Other workers in the Borough’s office felt a little threatened as well.

So against this backdrop, Lynn now had to find funding. Even with the backing of the Borough President’s office, she continued to be declined. Then hope arrived—the publisher of Newsday expressed interest in funding Big Apple Greeter for six weeks, but only if the program could be launched in six weeks, to coincide with their conference event. Funding would end when the conference was over.

With the strength of her conviction, Lynn persuaded two people to accept short-term jobs, believing they’d find the funding to continue after the project was through. They did, thanks to help that arrived from the program’s first Board Chair, Joel Epstein, EVP of Chase Manhattan Bank.

Lynn’s desire to start Big Apple Greeter began in the 1980s, when she realized that NYC had a terrible image problem—people generally considered the city to be uncleanly and dangerous. She wanted the world to know and understand her city as she did: a great big “small town” with a huge variety of neighborhoods, mom-and-pop stores, fun places to dine, and friendly
residents who were warm and welcoming to out-of-town visitors.

She had a hunch that many New Yorkers were passionate enough about their city to jump at the chance to “give back.” She launched her program on May 3, 1992, Then the New York Times printed a notice asking for volunteer “Greeters” to help visitors feel more welcome. Within hours the phones were flooded with hundreds of calls.

Today Lynn has amassed a team of more than 300 Greeters. Most are over 55. More than 50% also do other work. Many are multi-lingual. Some are blind or use wheelchairs. They are ready, rain or shine, to spend two to four hours with visitors, showing them New York’s people, culture and diversity, as well as how to use the subways so they can get around easily. They share their loving visions of the city as only native New Yorkers can, from buildings steeped in history to museums that are modern masterpieces; from the sparkling Diamond District to the Whispering Bench in Central Park.

In the program’s 20-year history, it has supported more than 120,000 visitors. The organization has generated more than two billion positive, worldwide media impressions about New York City. 95% of visitors give the organization “extraordinary” reviews. It’s been called the most cost-effective public relations arm in the city. Perhaps the greatest measure of Big Apple Greeter’s success is in terms of the human connection, Lynn says.

On September 11th, 2001, just nine years after it’s inception, the program’s office was overwhelmed with emails and faxes from visitors all over the world expressing concern for the safety of their Greeter friends in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. For these caring people, Big Apple Greeter will always be the heart of New York City.

Barbara Traynor, Inspirational Later-Life Story: “She’s Got Verve!”

As she approached her 65th birthday, Barbara Traynor, of the Albany, NY region, mentally took stock of her six-odd decades. Married at nineteen, with three children by twenty-seven, she had moved eighteen times with a grass-is-greener spouse, and then became divorced after seventeen years.

Barbara’s work as an administrative assistant for forty-five years and as a single mother raising three children had generated an abundant desire for freedom and travel, but little savings and no pension.

Then an unexpected email message from Alaska changed everything. How about becoming a long-distance, long-term volunteer? Barbara discovered that some organizations supplement their staff with volunteers, offering free room and board in exchange for workplace skills. The thought of spending her “over 65” years this way began to inspire her imagination. She began to rethink retirement.

Alaska! Free room and board in return for a forty-hour work week. Barbara
sold her condo, downsized her possessions, and put the equity from her sale in the bank as a security cushion. Preparation for her new retirement life took eight months. As an afterthought, she queried local newspapers which suggested she submit a travel journal via email. She found an editor who agreed. Now writing, previously dismissed as a hobby, would generate an income as well.

With Barbara’s new lifestyle came a change of attitude. There were no expectations. She was welcomed into a multi-generational, multi-cultural community of like-minded colleagues, with the basic necessities of housing and food provided. Her volunteer position as administrative assistant in the business office of a small college mandated working forty hours per week, but evenings and weekends were free for hiking and kayaking, reading, writing, and sewing Tlingit moccasins.

All too soon her first volunteering experience was over. By visiting family, friends, and accepting invitations from her volunteer network, Barbara paid for only one hostel and one hotel stay during her leisurely seven-week journey back to the Northeast. Upon arrival, those she spoke with were amazed at her newfound independence and courage.

Back home with family and friends, Barbara moved into an in-law arrangement with her son, in a one-bedroom apartment with a separate entrance. Many asked, “How can I do what you do?” So she wrote a book, The Second Career Volunteer. Her labor of passion took three years of writing, interviewing and editing.

Agents were impressed, but no publishing contract transpired. Anxious to share her lifestyle, Barbara used a portion of her savings to self-publish the book. Today, as she presents and promotes her book, she has discovered that her lifestyle appeals not only to retirees but also to Boomers, to individuals displaced by financial unrest, and to college graduates seeking jobs.

By selling her books, initiating a business plan and consulting SCORE for mentorship and guidance, Barbara has managed to match her current expenses to her income, and she is confident her future income will increase. Meanwhile, she is having the time of her life being interviewed on NPR and local TV, participating in forums, and providing workshops on writing. Next, in 2013, Barbara will volunteer at the YMCA of the Rockies, a conference center near Boulder, CO.

A friend has said that taking a chance on an unknown lifestyle took verve. “I looked it up,” Barbara said. “Verve means possessing a special ability to pull something off with panache and wild, chaotic, unpredictable passion in the reckless pursuit of pleasure, no matter how outrageous. Everyone should experience verve!”

Readers can reach Barbara at www.secondcareervolunteer.com. For more information about CPL, you can visit www.ctrpl.org. Have you got a question or a story for me? You can reach me through this column, at @AskAlanEHall, or at my personal website, www.AlanEHall.com.

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