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## A Coach For Life

### *Boomers look for guidance in the fog of modern life*

By LINELL SMITH  
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**Mary Funke, 54, is the executive director of N Street Village, an organization that works with homeless women in Washington, D.C.**

In the old days, people who wanted advice about big decisions managed to make do with talking to parents, friends, ministers and maybe a shrink or two.

Not so the baby boomers.

They've discovered the value of mentors, job counselors, therapists of every ilk, nutritionists, personal trainers, party consultants, retirement planners, and now, life coaches. A life coach focuses on the future, rather than the past, helping clients find the best way to improve the quality of their work and lives by using the skills, character and creativity they already possess.

"There are only two things that people want," explains life coach Sandy Vilas, owner of Coach U training programs in Colorado. "One is more of something, like money, time, energy, love, opportunity. And the other is less of something, like frustration.

"If someone's life isn't working or their business isn't producing the results they want, it's usually about who that person is being or is not being."

Which is where the coach comes in. He or she will pose those insightful questions that can help clients realize what adjustments are necessary, and then support, nudge and push them.

"We often need something to help us create that shift," Vilas says. "And a coach can see things that clients can't see about themselves."

Over the past decade, a lot of people have entered the life-coaching business. Although there are no overall statistics yet, the International Coach Federation, the field's professional association, says the growth is dramatic. Since 1999, its membership has grown from 2,000 to 10,800 coaches with credentials working in 80 countries. Most coaches charge \$200 to \$500 a month for weekly 30-minute sessions.

In the United States, most life coaching takes place over the phone — at work, at home, in the car or wherever folks are floundering in the murky stew of modern times. Long-distance relationships are the norm.

Jenness Hall, a Baltimore life coach with a doctorate in higher education administration, works with local clients, as well as people who live in California, Vermont, Washington and North Carolina. Like many of her peers, she came to the profession through a midlife career change.

When Hall was "reorganized" out of a job a few years back, a friend recommended that she engage a life coach to help devise her next move.

"I said, 'That is way too Granola-y for me,' " the 48-year-old Hall recalls. "I told her, 'I bet they're based in California.' Which, of course, they were."

Three months later, however, she hadn't gotten any further along in her job search. She decided to try a free consultation with the coach her friend had mentioned.

"Twenty minutes into the conversation, I said 'OK. I understand this now!' I called my husband and said 'I think this process will really help me sort out what I want to do.' "

As she worked with her coach in weekly sessions, Hall realized she was not ready to use her skills to invest in real estate, direct a nonprofit or write the book that "I know is in me." Instead, as the mother of two preschoolers, she required "flexibility, fun and funds."

That's when she determined the world of coaching might be a good match. She took a basic coaching course administered by the Coaches Training Institute and began working with several clients, pro bono, to develop and refine her skills. Three became paying customers.

One of her clients is Mary Funke, 54, the executive director of N Street Village, an organization that works with homeless women in Washington, D.C.

Two years ago, Funke's husband died unexpectedly from a pulmonary embolism and derailed the comfortable suburban life that the couple had created in Columbia, Md., with

their 14-year-old son.

Devastated, Funke sought help from a grief therapist.

"After a certain point there are only so many times you can say 'I miss my husband' and that she can say 'That's normal,' " she says. "I was a working mom, an older mom, who had suddenly lost my husband and my whole life. Nothing was the same in any direction. Although I knew I had to give myself time to grieve and adjust, I didn't want to become a professional widow. I needed someone to help me process a new context for my life and move forward."

For the past year, Funke has consulted regularly with Hall. The telephone coaching appointments usually take place while the executive director is at work.

"Before my husband died, I was basically working 60 hours a week and commuting to Washington. One of my issues has been 'How do I maintain the level of productivity as a professional and also respect the fact that my son needs more of me?' We've spent a lot of time talking about achieving that kind of balance."

Did Funke consider more traditional forms of counseling?

"I talked to my pastor for the spiritual dimension of this," she says. "And since I was not having a psychological episode, I didn't need a therapist to provide medication. This coaching works great for me. I'm a very action-oriented, outcome-oriented person — very bottom line."

Although life coaches attract a high number of male clients, professionals say, the life coach profession is predominantly female. Seventy percent of ICF members are women. Sandy Vilas says many come from "helping professions."

Bonnie Hill, a coach in Potomac, Md., was trained in social work.

"My job as a social worker was to help clients heal the wounds of the past," she says. "As a coach, I look into the future and say 'What are you doing now and where are you headed?' If someone is also healed along the way, that's great, but that's not what I'm doing. I'm taking you into the future to have a life of more meaning."

Many coaches specialize in special-interest categories such as stay-at-home mothers who are returning to the work force or people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who need help with organization and priorities.

Hill has helped Ph.D. candidates finish their dissertations. She has helped a group, who call themselves "The Wonder Women," re-enter the work force after time at home with their children. These middle-aged women live in Michigan, Virginia, Maryland and the United Kingdom and meet for coaching through Skype, an Internet phone service.

One is a landscape architect, another is an urban planner and one is a biblio-researcher.

The fourth has become a life coach.

"People get ignited by coaching and ignite others," says Phillip Sandahl, a faculty member for the Coaches Training Institute. "This isn't some brilliant marketing idea. It's simply that people want to have more fulfilling lives. At the end of the day, everyone wants to be able to say 'I was well used.'"

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