Bay Area stories of the job exodus

Pandemic pushes residents to make major life change

By Carolyn Said

The numbers are startling. Millennials of Americans have quit their jobs during the pandemic, an unprecedented mass exodus being called the Great Resignation as the pandemic jolted people coast to coast into making sweeping career and lifestyle changes.

The months of enforced confinement, the fear of looming mortality, the experience of working at home and the pressures of supervising kids not in school, among other factors, compelled people to reset on their lives, evaluate their priorities and decide to carpe diem.

Entrepreneurs struck out in new directions to follow their bliss. Parents sought more time with their kids. Baby Boomers retired at record rates. Lower-wage workers realized they could hold out for better pay and working conditions. Office workers decided they would only take jobs that let them work from home.

Month after month this year, about 4 million Americans have bid farewell to their jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Many employees had itchy feet," said Nicholas Bloom, an economics professor at Stanford University. "They wanted to move but were waiting for the right time when the economy had reshaped.

Shafia Nisa, owner of Hakuna Matata Vibes, an eco-friendly, bird-themed greeting card company, and her conure, Milo.

Shafia Nisa: Pursuing a passion for wildlife

In the fourth grade, Shafia Nisa learned about wildlife going extinct in the Amazon rain forest.

"I remember telling myself, even as a little girl, that one day I'd do something about it," said Nisa, 31.

Instead, she got a degree in health education and did nonprofit work for several years, then became a cannabis delivery driver at the pandemic's outset.

A year ago, she was rear-ended while making a delivery. The staffing agency that hired her, which did not carry workers' compensation insurance, let her go. She got a lawyer and eventually received a settlement for her personal injury and damage to her car.

She used that as seed money to start her own business (as well as getting her car fixed). She took weeks of online classes at the Renaissance Entrepreneurship Center to prepare.

In June she decided to launch an eco-friendly greeting card business with bird themes that would also raise awareness about parrot conservation.

She'd grown up with chickens and parakeets, and has a close relationship with Milo, her pineapple green cheek conure, who flaunts feathers in orange, yellow, blue and green. "He's very sassy and wants things his way, when he wants it," she said.

Her cards and envelopes are made from hemp and recycled paper. Her packaging is plastic made from plants. Her sticker labels are made from sugar cane.

The company, named Hakuna Matata Vibes in celebration of Milo's spirit, is already getting traction, with placement in some local shops, an Etsy store and approval for free rent to take over an old newspaper kiosk in downtown San Francisco to sell its wares. The kiosk program is a joint venture between the San Francisco Arts Commission and JCDecaux, which owns the kiosks.

While the car accident was one catalyst for her entrepreneurship, the pandemic was even more important in giving her perspective. After seeing relatives suffer from COVID-19 and a friend die, she realized, "I really need to figure out what I actually want to be doing, what I'm passionate about and stop wasting my time doing things I'm not 100% about."

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