

Kaiser manager took early retirement to lock in changing benefits and look for new job

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John Edmiston knows what itâ??s like to look for work and be rejected. At 66, heâ??s savvy enough to know that seeking â??someone with less experienceâ?• was a way of saying he was too old. But that experience has proven valuable in the job he eventually found.

Heâ??s now a job placement specialist for SF ReServe, an employment program for those 65 and older run by the San Francisco Community Living Campaign, a nonprofit advocate for seniors and people with disabilities.

Edmiston took early retirement from Kaiser Permanente in 2016 to lock in health benefits that were being phased out. Having spent 20 years as a manager in the Community Benefits Department at Kaiser Permanente, he was confident his experience and wide network would lead to a good position.


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John Edmiston in his SF ReServe office. (Photo by Judy Goddess)

But what seemed effortless in his 20s, 30s, and 40s â?? when he held jobs as varied as barista and waiter on private yachts to hair stylist to marketing manager at an environmental science firm â?? wasnâ??t working for him in his 60s.

â??Iâ??d pass the phone interviews, and then Iâ??d walk in for the interview and could almost see it on their face: â??Heâ??s old.â?? Of course, they never said that. They just told me they wanted to hire someone with less experience.â?•

Edmiston started as an administrative assistant at Kaiser and was eventually named national manager of employee engagement, responsible for developing strategies to encourage employees to volunteer in the community. Hurricane Katrina escalated his work. From 2007, when Kaiserâ??s first team of volunteers went to New Orleans, to 2014, when the last team completed its service, Edmiston ran what he said was â??the largest volunteer engagement program in Kaiserâ??s history.â?•

A â??life-changing experienceâ??

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The Kaiser Gold Coast Recovery Project was Edmistonâ??s brainchild; he organized it from the ground up.

â??For the first two years, the team de-molded houses. Later, we worked with local organizations rebuilding community centers, parks, and schools,â?• he said. The team didnâ??t offer medical care â?? New Orleans already had a medical system in place â?? but taught local volunteers how to use tools. â??There was one woman, a petite physician, who had never handled tools and wanted to learn. By the end of the tour, she was handling a drop saw.â?•

While Kaiser paid all expenses, volunteers were expected to contribute their time. Staff was skeptical when Edmiston started the project. They were sure no one would give up 40 hours of vacation to slog through mold, he said. â??But by the third year into the project, we received 1,000 applications for 60 slots. I had total support from my boss and everyone on up the ladder. It was a life-changing experience for everyone.â?•

In 2015, Kaiser announced that as of January 2017, it would be reducing its retiree medical benefits. Because Edmiston has a chronic condition that requires expensive medications, he knew he had to retire to lock-in his benefit package. He hated to leave, but, â??I had a lot of contacts in the field and was known for doing exceptional work. I thought Iâ??d spend 2016 networking and would find a new job before I had to leave.â?• Then cancer and a six-month medical leave side-lined him.

From high hopes to low

Eventually, he resumed the job hunt. After a year of â??looking really hardâ?• and being â??very surprised that I didnâ??t get offered something,â?• he cut back. Experience, reputation, references â?? nothing made a difference. He didnâ??t want to drive for Uber or take a job he didnâ??t like, but nothing was coming his way. So, like many disheartened job seekers, he fell into depression.

â??I stayed home and started dipping into my pension,â?• Edmiston said. â??I made myself busy taking care of my two dogs, my 100 plus-year-old house, and gardening.â?•

He began to explore his Cayuga Terrace neighborhood. Noticing a Litquake program â?? writing workshops for older people â??was starting up, he decided it was time to write his autobiography. Growing up on the edge of the Everglades in South Florida gave him some unique material. And, he had a degree in film and communication from the University of Miami.

Giving up, then a chance encounter

The Litquake program was invited to his neighborhood by Patti Spaniak, who works for CLC in its community connector program in Cayuga and elsewhere. She told him about the job opening at SF ReServe.

Today, heâ??s there 30 hours a week helping older people and those with disabilities find employment.

â??I empathize with older people with decades of experience who find themselves shut out of the workforce for no other reason than they are older adults, deemed â??past their primeâ?• by hiring managers half their age. It can be very depressing, demoralizing, and devaluing,â?• he said.

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Though the salary is much lower than what he was earning, heâ??s grateful for the job. And heâ??s happy.

â??I found a job where I love what Iâ??m doing and what ReServe does,â?• he said. â??They do good work with all different kinds of people.â?•

EXCERPT FROM EDMISTONâ??S AUTOBIOGRAPHY:

The bulldozers arrived in 1968. They headed into the foliage almost directly in front of our house on Sheridan Street and cleared a path straight into the woods, leaving a scar that was like ripping our own skin off.

It was essentially a scalping, and being just a few feet above sea level, the dark blood of the earth welled up in spots where the solid oak trees once harboring tiny silvery bromeliads and cradling the nests of red-winged blackbirds were knocked over and the roots pulled out, far more easily than we would have thought possible, had we ever even imagined such a scenario of carnage.

Over the course of only a few weeks, from our porch we could look out at what had been our refuge turned into a desecrated landscape of blackened earth strewn with the flotsam of the pillaged vegetation that had once taken us in and hid us from sight. And then came the sand.

As if to hide what they had done, men driving truckloads of white sand, dredged from the canal and piled into a silicon ribbon thirty feet high along its course, emptied their loads in symmetrical piles, like giant anthills on a desert, stretching to the horizon. The bulldozers returned, leveling the piles and spreading white sand evenly across the landscape. What had been wild was tamed through utter destruction, fertility covered over with smothering empty whiteness. And then they left.

We couldnâ??t bring ourselves to walk very far into the wasteland at first. It was all the same. We couldnâ??t tell where our forts and trails had been; no landmark remained.

Walking into the whiteness was disorienting. It was our first experience of desolation, both of the natural world and our interior harmony with it. We felt as raw and defiled as the land, betrayed by unknown forces that cared not at all for what had been a tiny sliver of rough paradise. Even the sky above us was empty of the hawks that used to hover on the thermals, and the silenced birdsong was an emptiness we could feel.

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