Growing need for senior models opens unexpected new career for retired executive assistant

Description

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The linoleum on the floor of the attic bedroom in Seattle, where Alice Arikawa grew up, was embedded with the image of a prince looking longingly at the blond, blue-eyed, long-legged young woman. She would stare at it for hours**.**

â??I wasnâ??t anything like the blond girl â?? being short, stout, and Japanese, but I still dreamed that one day I would be gazed upon in that way,â?• she said.

Alice Arikawa poses during a two-hour shoot at Peninsula Del Rey retirement community in Daly City last year. (All photos courtesy of Alice Arrikawa)

That day came in 2003 when she was 66. She took her two grandchildren, six and four, to a modeling appointment at Models Inc. in San Francisco. She was surprised but thrilled when the owner, Sherrie Neves, asked if sheâ??d be interested in modeling.

â??Of course, I jumped at the chance to make money at my age doing something fun and different,â?• said Arikawa. She had once entertained the notion because she liked clothes and fashion but thought you had to be really tall. She is just shy of five feet.

This shot was for an ad for a Napa senior residential community built last year.

Of the approximate 60 jobs Arikawa has gotten over the last 10 years, most involved posing in senior residential communities â?? sharing wine and cheese with friends, strolling with her (acting) husband through a luxurious lobby, or doing yoga stretches in the outdoor areas. â??A little bit of acting is always necessary,â?• she said.

In recent years, the modeling industry has been more inclusive, hiring people of all sizes, backgrounds â?? and ages. Marketers are acutely aware of the senior demographicâ??s buying power. Americans over 50 years old control more than 70 percent of the countryâ??s wealth, according to a report by the American Association of Retired Persons.

â??We receive multiple projects requesting senior talent,â?• said Neves. And the work pervades all industries, from housing to healthcare and fashion to finances.

Looking upbeat

Casting companies seeking older models are looking for people who look like actual residents and can play a role. The call for one job read like this:

â??We are casting 2 women and 2 men to authentically portray residents at a luxury retirement community in Los Gatos. We are casting Asian, Latinx and African American talent of all genders and sizes between the ages of 70-85. They should look healthy and vibrant, confident and upbeat. They should have a natural smile and look happy, friendly, approachable. They may have gray for graying hair but thatâ??s not a requirement for the booking. Most importantly, they should look like actual residentsâ?•

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Posing for an ad in the dining room of a senior residential facility in Los Gatos.

Neves, of Models Inc., said, â??We look first for personality in models, and Alice had that.â?•

Even though Arikawa had worked in front-line positions such as receptionist and executive assistant, where exuding cheer and positivity was key, being in front of a camera was intimidating at first. â??Stand on this spot, say your name, tell us about yourself, turn this way and that,â?• she described being directed on one audition.

â??It took me a while to feel more natural, especially being in competition with the other grammy models who wanted to be actors and loved the camera,â?• she said. â??Once I land a job and Iâ??m on the set, I can relax along with the other models,â?• she said. â??We joke around, enjoy the free food and each otherâ??s company for the time weâ??re working.â?•

But not all the works involve wine-sipping or exercise. Sheâ??s also had roles as a patient, a manicurist, a grandmother, and even a doctor for various companies, including Wells Fargo, AARP, John Muir Hospital, Orchard Supply, CVS, Verizon, Stanford, West Elm, and Healthnet.

Arthritic fingers

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This photo in Food & Wine Magazine, an ad for Coterie, which has luxury senior housing in San Francisco and New York, also appeared in company ads in the San Francisco Chronicle, New York Times and Wall Street Journal.

Arthritic fingers have gotten Arikawa a few jobs for companies wanting to demonstrate their pain-reducing or mobility-enhancing products. â??Grandma Moses, move over!â?• she joked. In her one national TV commercial in 2014, for Symbicort, she played the friend of a man using one of its asthma inhalers and got six months of residual payments.

A national commercial is the â??dream of every model,â?• she said. And so is being recognized in commercials. Her brother once called to say he saw her photo in an ad for Murano glass in Italy.

Paid travel is another perk of modeling since clients set up production in areas of their choosing. Various jobs took her to New York, Portland, and Pasadena. A limited amount of travel came with previous jobs, for product training at a high-end furniture wholesaler, and for a prominent Bay Area investor.

Both careers landed her in environments far from her early one.

When she was 13, her mother signed her up to pick berries for 75 cents a flat, which she did for three summers. â??I learned when I was an older teen that our parents had been interned during WWII, had started life again with nothing, and so everyone had to pitch in,â?• Arikawa said.

She also worked while attending the University of Washington in its Office of Correspondence. â??This was the first time people were nice to me, and this little family of kind workers became my support system away from home.â?• Still, she dropped out after her junior year â??lost, directionless.â?•

Mad-cap ad world

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When newly married at 21, at home with a baby on her lap, she made money typing for a penny a line. â??I got my typing speed up to 120 words per minute with no mistakes,â?• she said.

Her wedding to Eddie in 1968.

Once her children were in elementary school, she got a job as a receptionist in Herman Millerâ??s San Francisco furniture showroom. She learned about new products and design by attending sales training meetings four times a year in Michigan. â??I wanted to be a salesperson because that was where the real money was,â?• Arikawa said, â??but the manager indicated in a diplomatic way that a Japanese woman salesperson would be in conflict with the publicâ??s perception.â?•

Eight years later, she got a job as assistant to the president and CEO of Foote, Cone & Belding, an upper-level, high-energy advertising agency. â??I had impressed them with my organizational skills and references from Herman Miller,â?• she said. â??It was there I really came into my own. I felt confident and seen.â?• It was a mad-cap atmosphere where champagne flowed at frequent parties, but after 10 years the company downsized, and Arikawa had to move on.

Her next job, with the Bay Area investor, only lasted a few months, though she wanted to stay. When her mother became ill, she quit and began commuting back and forth from San Francisco to Seattle to care for her. â??His lifestyle was amazing â?? two jets â?? him always in the air; later, I was not in a good head space to work.â?•

Arikawa with her husband, Eddie, and their grandchildren on her 77th birthday in August.

Arikawa floundered at a couple of companies until her son called her in 2005 and asked her if she wanted to take care of his two children while he and his wife worked. â??Gramma,â?• she said, â?• the

job I was meant to do!â?•

At 77, still ready to work

Today, Arikawa, 77, and Eddie, her husband of 55 years, still live in the home they purchased in the outer Sunset in 1979. â??That was the year I started working, taking the brand new â??Lâ?• car to work until I retired in 2005,â?• she said.

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Posing for a CVS ad.

The couple enjoys family life with their two children and four grandchildren. and play 18 holes of golf every week. She lunches with friends and performs Taiko drumming with a group at the Stonestown YMCA.

She now has a portfolio and extensive resume on Models Inc.â??s online database for commercials and lifestyle print work. Even after living with the side effects of pacemaker surgery last year, which saps her energy, she said, â??I have never turned down a job because theyâ??ll just go down the list, and even though 2022 was a bumper crop year, Iâ??ve only had three jobs so far this year.â?•

But sheâ??s ready for more and knows that a model needs to be prepared for contingencies. In August 2022, she was required to come to the set dressed in pajamas. â??Good thing I brought a change of clothes because the wardrobe person thought my pjâ??s were so cute, she wanted to purchase them for her collection.â?•

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Date Created
03/10/2023
Author
jrobbins

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