

your year TO BE BOLD

MEET FOUR WOMEN who prove there's a first time for anything—
at any age. You know that little voice in your head urging you to shake things up?
These women listened to it, summoned their strength and took their dreams for a spin.

by SAM GIBBS and JENNIFER PINKERTON ■ photography PETER BREW-BEVAN

JILL FLEMING, 61

*“After a career and a family,
I travel at my own pace.”*

WHEN JILL FLEMING retired from her Canberra public-service career, she had no idea what she'd do with her new life—only that it would be something she'd never dreamed of. “I'd been locked into and committed to things for as long as I could remember,” she says, “so when I retired, I decided to have some space in my life—space to let something new

come in.” It came on two wheels.

“Friends I skied with were always asking me to join them on their motorbike trips,” Fleming says, “so I became a pillion [passenger]. It was wonderful because it was the one place in my life I didn't have to do anything—I just sat back and relaxed!” Revelling in the social networks of biking, Fleming

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: KATE GOERLACH AT LIZARD MANAGEMENT; STYLING LARA LUPISI (AT LOOK PRODUCTION); BOOTS AND SILK SCARF, COACH;
COAT, DAVID LAWRENCE; HELMET AND GLOVES, CLOSE MOTORCYCLES; BANGLE AND NECKLACE, DINOSAUR DESIGNS





Tax-free bonus: Benardis scrapped accounting for ancient Greece

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CAROLYN TRAVAGLIA; STYLING: LOUISE OWENS AT NETWORK AGENCY; EARRINGS AND NECKLACE: DINOSAUR DESIGNS, (02) 9698 3500

found herself breaking out of Canberra, up into the mountains, down the South Coast and across state lines for Ulysses motorbike-club meets (motto: ‘grow old disgracefully’). It was at a Ulysses muster in 2007 that she caught whispers of a trip around Australia.

“When I first heard about it, being still on L plates, I wasn’t even game to say I was interested,” she says. “But I was dying to go.”

Having braved four tests to attain her Ls, Fleming persisted through six attempts to finally get her Ps. “I was committed 100 per cent,” she says. “I think I must have done more practice

than anyone else has ever done!” Six months later, Fleming found herself riding through Coober Pedy, Uluru, Broome, Esperance and across the Nullarbor, stacking 17,000 km on her speedo. “The outback’s blue sky, red earth, gumleaf-green scrub, and the freedom—it was pretty special,” she reminisces. “Initially, I did feel under pressure to keep up with the more experienced riders—I think a lot of people do; modern life’s like that—but I realised I had to unlearn the stress, change my attitudes and be kind to myself. Now I’m more confident and ride at my own pace. And I love the bike I have now—I feel I’ve arrived.”

MARIA BENARDIS, 41

“I explored Greece, knocking on doors to learn the art of cooking.”

FIVE YEARS AGO, Maria Benardis arrived at Athens airport with a suitcase full of uneasy feelings. It was her first trip back to Greece since childhood; in the intervening years, she’d become estranged from her Greek-born father and spent two decades as a tax accountant. “I wasn’t 100 per cent happy. My soul was telling me there was something else out there,” she says.

“I was walking down a street in Mykonos, and something drew me to a particular church. I went in, lit a candle and started crying. It was this huge release, as if I were letting go of the past. Luckily, no one was around; they would have thought I was crazy!” Next came an epiphany (from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning *revelation*): Benardis would change her life and devote it to capturing the culture of Greece, its recipes and philosophies. “Straightaway, I began writing a cookbook.”

“If you wander the laneways [of Greece], the beautiful thing is that you see little old ladies shelling beans on their doorstep. I’d walk up and ask them what they were cooking.” With each encounter, Benardis mastered a local dish—from fennel-and-pork sausages to caramelised-onion pie—and people often referred her to someone or some place with locally renowned foods skills: a neighbour, the butcher, or, on one occasion, a monastery famous for its extra-virgin olive oil. “I was so enamoured with the food and with myself! I had never felt so much love; I was in love with what I →



Parris pursues greener pastures

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CAROLYN TRAVAGLIA; STYLING: STAV HORTIS AT NETWORK AGENCY; PANTS: SPORTSCHAF, 1800 002 477

was doing. My heart was free, and nothing could upset me. It was effortless—every door I knocked on opened. Everyone I met had positive energy. They told me their secrets; they were all trusting me.” When she got home, Benardis scored a job at Neil Perry’s XO restaurant to learn kitchen mechanics and spent her annual holidays digging up more research on Greek-island cooking.

In 2007, she flung open the doors to her Sydney cooking school Greekalicious, and by 2009, Penguin Books had published *My Greek Family Table* (\$59.95; Lantern). Benardis still exudes exhilaration for what lies ahead. “It’s like I’m 9 years old again. Every day I open myself up to something new. We’re here for such a short time; we have to do what makes us happy.”

LYNDALL PARRIS, 60

“I am building my dream: an eco-village.”

LIKE MANY SYDNEYSIDERS,

Lyndall Parris watches her water use, saves her kitchen scraps for backyard composting and dutifully wheels her recycling bin onto the street. She meets up with friends when she has time, laments the lack of community inherent in urban life and has long desired a simpler way of being. But unlike many others, Parris is daring to make her desires a reality.

“There was no original seed,” she says of her dream, “just a slow welling up of interest and enthusiasm. I started with a vision, a mission statement and a few rough drawings of an easier, more sustainable way to live.” As Parris’s ideas resonated with groups and individuals, word spread, and the Sydney Coastal Ecovillage project (www.scev.org) blossomed. She took off around the world to research other alternative-community models, grafting ideas onto her own.

A mother of three, an ex-teacher and an accountant, Parris isn’t an environmental revolutionary or baby boomer looking to live out the mung-bean ideals of the 1960s. “I don’t even like getting dirt under my nails!” she exclaims. “I want something stylish; something that offers a healthy lifestyle, a community of like-minded people and an economically sustainable opportunity to be gentle on our earth.” Parris’s vision is attracting a wide pool of supporters: from artists and horticulturalists to musicians and engineers.

“You won’t have to do Sustainability 101 to live in the village,” she adds. “The processes will just happen: the grey water will be recycled, the produce will be fresh, the homes will face north.”

The endeavour has certainly thrown Parris her share of emotional and logistical curveballs. When her development partner had to dip →

out due to the ravages of the GFC, she was “knocked for six” but learned some valuable lessons: “Everything I’d known until now was fairly predictable,” she says. “This journey is totally *unpredictable*. So I’m learning to relinquish control, relax, breathe and let day-to-day synchronistic happenings be my guide. I follow opportunities through uncharted and

unexpected waters! It may be a small project in the scheme of things—a drop in the global bucket—but, with luck, one that’s rippling with possibilities. Sometimes I wake during the night, hoping it’s morning so I can get up to do what’s required for the eco-village. This project is the one my heart has been working towards my whole life.”

JULIE STREADER, 47

“I raised three kids and then went back to uni.”

JULIE STREADER always dreamed of filling her days with school bells, kids and armfuls of books, but it wasn’t until her mid-40s that she returned to uni. “There’s a time in your life when you’re ready for study and prepared to do it to the best of your ability. It doesn’t matter when that time comes.”

“I started an education degree 22 years ago, but because of personal circumstances, I dropped out. I married a surfer, had three beautiful children and found a job in conveyancing.”

When her eldest daughter Brianna was 16, the two sat down together and thumbed through university handbooks, pondering possibilities. Streader knew she was ready to explore them herself. “I’d worked around my husband and his surfing, and now it was time for my family to work around me.”

“A lot of people said, ‘You’re 42; you’ll be 46 when you finish. How long do you want to do this for, anyway?’ In the end, I thought, ‘I’m going to be 46 in four years regardless. Either I’ll be 46 and still trudging off to a job I don’t love, or I’ll be 46 and have a new career—one I can do for another 20 years.’”

Streader treated her time at university like a gift; she worked hard and clocked up a string of high distinctions. “There were times I thought I’d bitten off more than I could chew; my lecturer just encouraged me, saying, ‘Chew harder!’”

Four years later, Streader graduated with first-class honours, the university medal and a casual teaching position at Ballina Public School in New South Wales.

“I do wake up in my 40s and say, ‘I’m really happy with myself’. I know my imperfections, and I know what I’m strong at. Even though I had fears, I’m really glad I was bold enough to take a big leap.”

“Teaching meets my criteria of joy in a job: it’s creative, and you’re able to have an impact on people. Each day needs to have joy—otherwise it’s wasted.” **P**



Streader:
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the bell

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