

# From corporate slave to dream job

For creative types, being laid off opens doors to following their muse

BY MIRIAM KREININ SOUCCAR

WHEN DAN NAINAN, a senior engineer for Intel, took a comedy class to help overcome his fear of speaking in front of large audiences, he had no idea it would lead to a new career. But soon the self-described nerd had his colleagues in hysterics, especially with his impressions of Intel founder Andy Grove.

So when Mr. Nainan was laid off nearly two years ago from his last Intel position as strategic relations manager in Manhattan, he decided to turn his nascent talent into his day job.

"I never would have had the guts to leave on my own," he says. "But once I was laid off, I didn't even send out a résumé. I felt I had been given a chance to try a career in comedy."

Mr. Nainan bombed his first night at a comedy club. But he kept trying, developing an act geared for the Indian community—his dad is Indian, and his mom is Japanese—with plenty of ethnic jokes and spot-on presidential impressions.

Since then, he's appeared in an Apple commercial and has performed with top comedians like Jerry Seinfeld. A YouTube video of one of his shows has over 600,000 hits. Even better, he's doubled the salary he was earning at Intel.

"I have to pinch myself every morning," says Mr. Nainan, who recently appeared in India at the TED Conference, a prestigious seminar for the world's top technology businessmen and academics. "This is the happiest I've ever been."

Not everyone is so lucky. But scores of victims from the recession are sitting on the chance to follow their dreams of succeeding in creative fields. The newly laid-off and those whose businesses have suffered are taking a risk and becoming artists, novelists or designers.

Though data on how many New Yorkers are pursuing new careers in the arts is unavailable, the Freelancers Union says membership grew 40% from October 2008 to April 2009.

Following are stories from the ranks of budding artists. They all have different financial circumstances and are pursuing different creative passions. But they have

one thing in common: They say the economic crisis was the best thing that ever happened to them.

## A novel idea

CHARLOTTE BOWEN

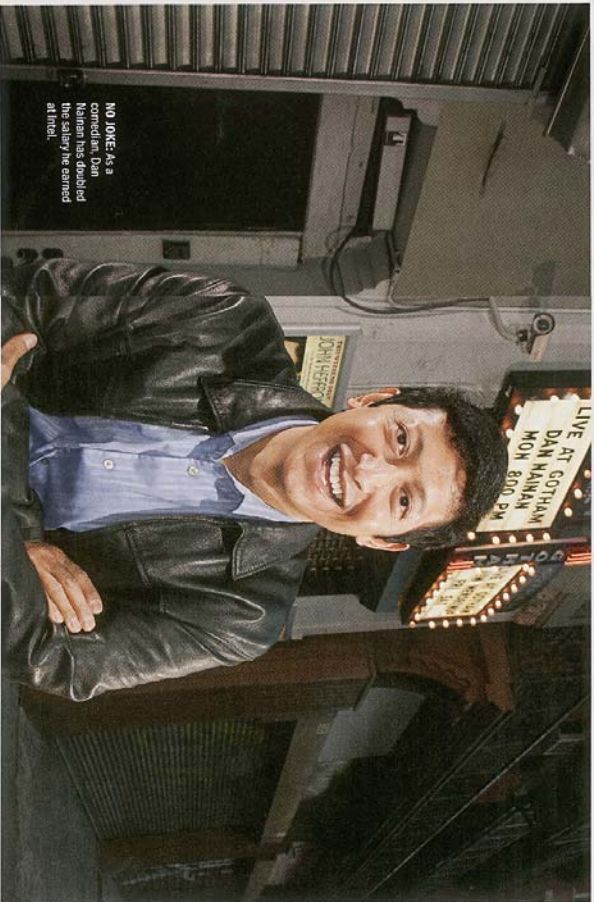


She was living the life. She had a job with one of the biggest hedge funds in the world and a luxury apartment near the firm in Connecticut. A computer specialist, Ms. Bowen was responsible for 1,800 servers, waking up a few times a night to troubleshoot when the systems went down.

So, it came as quite a shock when she learned on Sept. 25 that she had lost her job. After "trekking out" for a couple days, she began to realize she actually hated her profession.

"The computers were fine," she says. "The people—not fine. All they talked about was how big their new yachts were. I didn't want to turn into the people I was working with."

Resurrecting a passion for literature she had harbored since age 12, Ms. Bowen decided to write a book. She traded in her granite countertops and Viking stove for a small room in a three-bedroom share in Harlem. Though she's helping people



NO JOKE: As a comedian, Dan Nainan has doubled the salary he earned at Intel.

build Web sites or set up their computers for income, her main activity is writing a novel set in Istanbul at the beginning of the Ottoman Empire.

"I feel like instead of going down a tunnel, I've been deposited in some sort of green field," Ms. Bowen says. "The only thing I miss is the security of income. But that doesn't really exist anymore anyway, does it?"

## Pot therapy

TELLING HER teenage kids she lost her job was the hardest part. She Downes worked in various technology positions on Wall



Street for more than 20 years when she was laid off nearly two years ago from a hedge fund. The single mom's salary was in the six figures. Now, Ms. Downes has cut expenses to the bare minimum and is thinking about selling her house up in Peekskill to make ends meet.

But the hardship has led Ms. Downes to a long-dormant dream. An art major in college, she recently started making pottery to help her cope with the stress of unemployment.

Though she continues to hunt for jobs and consults for local technology firms, Ms. Downes hopes to sell her pottery and become a full-time artist. She is setting up a studio at her home and buying a kiln.

"If this takes off, I will stop consulting in a heartbeat," she says. "Maybe this was just a way to force me to do what I always wanted to do." Ms. Downes has also started taking photographs that she plans to sell on Etsy, an-

line arts marketplace, and is writing a book on her transition from Wall Street.

"On Wall Street I was going so fast all the time that I wasn't paying attention to my emotional welfare," she says. "Once I lost my job, I realized in retrospect that it wasn't the worst thing. This is a sign I can do something I've always wanted."

## Full-time hobby

DAK FETTINGER graduated from J-school just as the recession was beginning. Though he landed a job as an editor for *Business Traveler* magazine, he was eventually laid off. He lost his most recent job, as an editor at a menswear trade magazine, last February.

Tired of sending out resumes and fearing that journalism had become a dead end, Mr. Fettinger plunged into a longtime hobby—working with metal. "I felt that this is the

chance I've been waiting for; it just didn't happen on my own terms," he says.

Now Mr. Fettinger—who is fixing off his savings and unemployment—creates sculpture, lighting, furniture and jewelry out of a variety of metals. A trendy new store in Manhattan selling maternity clothes saw his jewelry on the Facebook page and asked Mr. Fettinger to design a line.

"This started out as a kind of therapy," he says. "Then I realized it might have some career potential. It's a matter of doing what you can right now with what you have."

## Writing on the wall

FRESIA RODRIGUEZ lost her job as an editor at *MARP* magazine in March, but she had already seen the writing on the wall.

A combination of her husband's second tour of duty in Iraq and the deteriorating economy started Ms. Rodriguez thinking about whether journalism offered enough stability.

Months before she was laid off, Ms. Rodriguez enrolled in a fashion school online, and took steps to start her own plus-size label called Kingler & Posh. By the time her job ended, Ms. Rodriguez already had commitments from stores to carry her label.

Now Ms. Rodriguez has a showroom in New York City, and her clothes are carried in more than 20 stores nationwide and also sold online.

"My husband serving overseas inspired me to pick myself up by my bootstraps," Ms. Rodriguez observes. "Leaving journalism was a blessing. I wasn't feeling fulfilled, and I didn't feel that all my skills were being engaged."

## Picking up lost passion

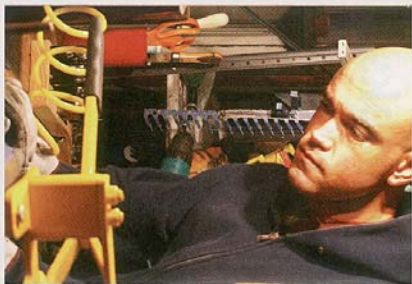
MOST PEOPLE would be on a 20% drop in their firm's revenue, but for Michael Zarech it was a gift.

A longtime New York architect with a successful practice specializing in zoning issues, Mr. Zarech was working in zoning until the real-estate slump hit. The sudden death of business gave him the time to pick up a lost passion.

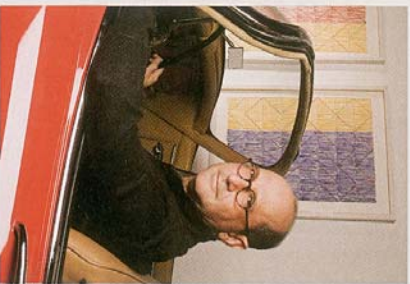
Two years ago, Mr. Zarech, who had tried to make a living as an artist in the seventies, started painting again. He turned out 40 pieces and now has his first show at Cooper Classics Collection, a gallery and art showroom on Perry Street.

Another forgotten hobby of his, photography, is getting his attention, too. He recently printed a number of photographs he took in 1980 of the Merritt Parkway, and they are being displayed at a local architecture firm.

"I think the recession," he says. "The world was on fire for 10 years; it was just too much. I don't mind this little hiatus from the insanity." ■



FORGING AHEAD: Alex Feltham creates metal art.



IN DRIVER'S SEAT: Michael Zarech has his first show.