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[Main Index](#)
[Careers](#)
- [Find a Job](#)
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[Money & Life](#)
[Real Estate](#)
- [Find a Home](#)

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[Forums](#)
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- [Latest Deals](#)
- [Model Reports](#)
[Joyrides](#)

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[Business](#)
[Money & Life](#)
[Careers](#)
- [Find a Job](#)
[Real Estate](#)
- [Find a Home](#)

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[Oakland](#)
[Macomb](#)
[Livingston](#)
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[Obituaries](#)
- [Death Notices](#)
[Schools](#)
[Editorials](#)
[Columnists](#)
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[Nation/World](#)
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[Politics/Gov](#)
[Health](#)
[Religion](#)
[Technology](#)

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[Lions/NFL](#)
[Pistons/NBA](#)
[Red Wings/NHL](#)
[Tigers/MLB](#)
[Shock/WNBA](#)
[MSU](#)



Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

Since getting laid off from his job in the auto industry and turning his focus to a career as a musician, Mark Martin has landed more than 100 shows. He released a CD of original songs in October.

Career Makeover

Designer drafts new life with a career in music

Overseas travel triggers Royal Oak man's switch from job as automobile draftsman to musician.

Brian J. O'Connor / The Detroit News

You know those old geezers at work who, in between gassing about the good old days and carping about how "this place" is irrevocably sliding down the tubes, offer all kinds of advice?

Advice like the pros and cons of studded snow tires, the shotgun offense and what a young guy should really do with his money?

You might want to start listening.

Mark Martin did. After 25 years as a contract draftsman in the auto industry, the 47-year-old Royal Oak man found work drying up. But thanks to sage advice from some industry old-timers, a spark of insight from TV's Dr. Phil and his own nascent talent as a

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Work tips

The lessons from Mark Martin's story apply to anyone and demonstrate that you really can have "joy in work," says career coach Prudence Cole of Grosse Pointe, who runs the Web site www.beingatwork.com and is the author of "Finding Power, Passion and Joy Being At Work." She offers these coaching points:

Look for the gift in adversity: Being laid off, getting fired, not receiving the promotion you sought or any other career mishap is painful. As your feelings intensify, you can become angry, frustrated and bitter. This is when you move into the valley of despair. The struggle to climb up that slope can be helped by looking for the lessons you can learn from

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singer and guitar player, Martin has drawn himself a new career as a musician.

"I worked with these very old guys in drafting who would just take their paychecks home and throw them in a drawer, and the accounting department would get very upset with them," Martin recalls. "I asked how they did that, and they said, 'You're a contract designer, you're not going to get a pension from anybody.'"

"They told me, don't buy a big car or a fancy house, buy a small house and try not to spend a lot of money. I took their advice, so I was able to put away quite a bit of money in 25 years of doing that drafting thing."

Martin started "that drafting thing" in 1978. Born in Highland Park, he graduated from Royal Oak Kimball High School in 1976, then started drafting classes at Oakland Community College. His first job involved making detail drawings of automotive components, such as floor pan reinforcements and bumper brackets.

"At the time, there were very many jobs available," he recalls. "There probably were three full pages of classified ads for draftsmen and designers. You could hop job to job just like you were a plumber. You could work for a place for six months then go to another place and get a raise of another dollar an hour easily."

After about 10 years of various design gigs, Martin received training on computerized drafting applications, a skill that allowed him to take jobs overseas. Traveling with his wife, he took on drafting assignments in Australia for three years, as well as Istanbul, Turkey, and Torino, Italy.

"My wife was working at a credit union, and she gave up her job to come travel with me. So for five years, she didn't work but she got to see the world and we did have a good time," he said.

The couple, married in 1984, had paid off their small Royal Oak home in 10 years, and the lengthy overseas assignments provided some big tax advantages, as well as reducing expenses. Besides his wife, Martin took along his guitar on his foreign tour, often playing in pubs and other gathering places that hosted open-mic sessions.

"When I was overseas, I would go to open-mic nights and play for an hour or even two hours a night. People would say, 'You should do this for a living,' and I thought, right, with all the money I make being a draftsman I should be a musician."

By the time he returned to Michigan in 2001, though, that equation had started to change.

"When I came back, there were very few jobs around town. The technology is a double-edged sword. With the quick turnaround time for design now, you don't need as many people, and you can do it with younger, faster, college-educated people. So I found myself getting laid off about 2003.

"I was really unhappy because the last job I had, I didn't do much work. We just sat and waited for things that never showed up."

At his wife's suggestion, he decided to retire early, since the couple's low household expenses meant they could get by on the income from her job with the city of Birmingham. One day, while watching "Dr. Phil," he drew inspiration from the self-help guru.

"He said that if you're going to do something in your life, you should do something that you really want to do and that you have the talent to do."

your situation. Like Martin's story, this could be your opportunity to choose work you really love or work in an environment that is more supportive of you and your values.

Recognize your priorities: What is most important to you versus how you spend your time? Consider these life facets: work/career; personal relationships; health/fitness; personal growth; spiritual pursuits; economic matters; citizenship/community; and play. Rank them in order of importance, then rank them according to how you spend your time. Is your time in alignment with your priorities? What changes could you make to do what is important to you?

Find your life purpose: One of the comments Martin made was that he had a new attitude about why he is here. When you know your life's purpose, you will find work that fulfills you. You will spend your precious time on things that matter, and work difficulties will be less annoying and may even show up as opportunities. You will be living your life "on purpose."

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Soon, Martin was out, guitar in hand, knocking on tavern doors. He'd offer to play for free and, if he was received well, would work out something with the owner.

Since then, he's landed more than 100 shows, and plays graduation parties and other events. The work gives him some income and financed a CD of original songs that he released in October. The album is on sale at his Web site, www.gringodujour.com, and some of his songs are broadcast on Internet sites, he said, including Radio GoldenFlash out of Belgium.

So far, he's sold about half of the 200 discs he needs to move to make back his investment. In the meantime, the income from tavern gigs and a small tax preparation sideline give him enough to make early retirement a viable option. But the biggest reason is that over the years, Martin and his wife kept their expenses and lifestyle under control.

"I had always thought about retiring early," said Martin, noting that his father died two years after retiring.

"Everyone would say, 'Why don't you sell your house, it's such a little place.' And I would say, 'It's paid for, why would I move?' I think people lose focus on what they really want. When you're making good money, chances are you're spending good money, too."

For anyone considering a new direction, Martin gives this advice: "If you've got a hobby, see if you can find a way to make money doing that. If you're a good mechanic or artist, there's always ways to make money."

Besides money, though, the biggest change is in the quality of his life, Martin said. The worst part of his workday was commuting and never having enough time with his wife and friends.

"I don't spend \$350 a month on gasoline anymore; I have found the key to happiness is to simplify my life and spend quality time with friends and family," he said. "There's no stress, and I have a new attitude about why I am really here."

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