

Back to school

We all know education is wasted on the young, so if Winter nights drawing in are giving you that back-to-school feeling (in a good way), take inspiration from these five women



‘Be brave and have confidence’

Sowing the seeds: Esra found a new outlet for her creative talent

‘I retrained and grew myself a new career’

Building on her creative skills, Esra Parr decided to pursue her love of plants – and studying garden design has led to an amazing success

When my children were little, I wanted to be around to support them. But as they grew older and seemed to need me less, I looked for other things to do. I wanted to retrain for something exciting that would harness my existing skills.

I’m creative, and had worked as a graphic designer and image consultant when they were younger. I also enjoyed photography, especially exploring the shapes and colours of plants. I realised I wanted to know more about them – like their names, for a start! So I signed up for a one-year horticulture course, based at Capel Manor in London’s Regent’s Park.

I found it such a buzz to be studying again. I loved the discipline and focus of the work, and found ideas flowed naturally. I learnt a huge amount – not just all the Latin names for plants, but how to blend them effectively to create a beautiful garden. I also knuckled down to the nitty-gritty of understanding the landscaping that goes with any successful garden design.

My interest grew with every week. At the end of the first year, I had a huge confidence boost when it was announced that I’d won a competition to redesign one of the college’s show gardens. At that moment, I began to believe: this is something I can really do...

By the end of the course, I had built up enough confidence to launch myself as a professional garden designer.

To kick-start my career I entered a design called Spirit Of The Aegean for the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show last Summer. I’m Turkish, so I called on childhood memories of holidays in Bodrum as I planned pink bougainvillea, white oleander and lavender as the key plants. To my delight, my design was accepted, and I even managed to get a cruise company to sponsor me. When I heard I’d won a Gold Medal, it was one of the most special moments ever.

I feel like my life has been transformed. I love what I am doing now, it feels practical and creative. I’ve also made so many new friends – the horticultural world is highly competitive but hugely supportive – and there are lots of women in the industry. My new career feels absolutely right.

ESRA WEARS: JUMPER AND SHOES: LK BENNETT; SKIRT: HOUSE OF FRASER; ARABELLA WEARS: JACKET, PHASE EIGHT; TOP: WALLIS; JEANS: MARKS & SPENCER

Life lesson: Arabella has never regretted returning to the classroom



‘It was tough, but I never doubted my decision’

‘I went back to school to help others every day’

It was a soul-searching holiday that inspired Arabella Northey to leave her job in finance for a more rewarding future

After I graduated from university, my priority was to work in the City and make some money. I got a job with a major commercial property company. It was high octane – dealing with auditors, banks and demanding bosses, writing lengthy presentations and running publicity events. Everything had to be perfect. I worked long days, only having time to see friends for a quick drink in the evening. It took me hours to wind down when I walked away from the office.

A sailing holiday to Turkey with my flatmate and his friends sparked a change of direction. There were 10 of us, and we took turns steering the yacht, climbed over rocky beaches to find restaurants and slept on the deck under the stars. By



[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] the second week, our conversations had reached a new level. Some of them were

questioning the next stage in their lives, and talking with them inspired me to reflect on my own. I had studied theology as part of my degree, and I wanted to be able to use that in some way. Most of all, I wanted to do something where I could help people find new ways to think about the world.

By the time I got back home, I'd already decided to leave my job, go back to college and study to become a teacher. I applied for training positions, but it was very competitive and I only had a few replies from the 30-odd secondary schools I contacted. Finally, one of the schools offered me a position as an RE teacher and enrolled me on the graduate teaching programme at Brunel University.

I remember my first day so clearly – sitting in the school assembly listening to 600 pupils singing was a truly profound moment. For the most part I learnt my new skills on the job, building a folder of evidence to prove I could meet the standards I needed to qualify. I faced some tough classes, but I think my work experience made it easier to manage and persuade the kids to accept my authority.

I've never doubted my decision. Teaching has its stressful moments, and I still work very long hours sometimes, but it's so rewarding seeing pupils come out with amazing results they didn't think they could achieve. Now I feel I'm playing to my strengths, and helping people every day. Going back to school was the best decision for me.

'I've learnt to understand what I'm singing about'

The beauty of the Italian language as well as its links to classical music made Fenella Fairbairn determined to speak it fluently

Exploring the streets of Bologna, I felt inspired by the beauty of the Italian city. I was there as part of a choir singing Renaissance music. Everyone around me seemed so vibrant and lively, and the lyrical flow of the language sounded wonderful.

After a couple of hours sightseeing in the heat, I was longing for a coffee and a cold glass of water. But sitting down in a café, I realised I had no idea how to ask for what I wanted. After resorting to a mixture of sign language and finding the words in my phrase book, I resolved there and then to learn Italian when I returned home.

I work as a supply teacher, but music has always been my great love. I sing soprano with choirs and occasionally as a soloist. Lots of the most beautiful operas, songs and choral music are sung in Italian, so that was an even more compelling reason to learn the language. After all, music is all about emotion, and it's far easier to get the right feel for a song if you understand what you're singing about. I wanted to be able to translate the words for myself – and to pronounce the language properly.

So earlier this year I signed up for an Italian course at my local adult education centre. Although my memory isn't as sharp as it was in my teens, I still find it easier to learn now than when I was young. I'm better at storing what I'm learning and retrieving information – plus I always do my homework! We learn in a fairly varied way but we work in pairs, which makes it more entertaining. My grammar has come on in leaps and bounds, and my musical ear means I've picked up the pronunciation easily.

Italian is a showy language, so I exaggerate the accent and throw my voice out – though self-consciousness can creep in! I can read quite well now and, though I'm not fluent, I can at least structure a sentence in my mind before saying it aloud.

Recently, I was singing an Italian aria and felt much more able to express myself through the song because I understood every word. Learning another language has been much more than just an interest for me – it's taken me to another level with my music, too, which has been so satisfying.



Inspired: a passion for music led Fenella to Italian classes

'It's easier to study now – and I always do my homework!'

FENELLA WEARS TOP: GREAT PLAINS; JEANS: WALLIS; SHOES: MARKS & SPENCER; BRACELETS, ACCESSORIZE. CLAIRE WEARS JUMPER: LK BENNETT; SKIRT: PHASE EIGHT; SHOES: MARKS & SPENCER; EARRINGS: ACCESSORIZE

'I was terrified of writing essays, but I stuck with it'



Digging for treasure: Claire's happiest while on a dig

'Studying the past has opened up my future'

A degree in history and archaeology has taken Claire Taylor around the world to ancient burial sites and Roman treasure

I loved history as a child, but it never occurred to anyone – least of all me – that I might be able to continue studying after leaving school. Instead I was steered into clerical work. But my fascination with the past, especially the Romans and Ancient Greeks, never left me.

When my sons were growing up I enjoyed helping them with their history homework, and I ended up working as a learning support assistant in a school. Then, when they were a bit older, I spotted an online advert for an archaeological dig at a Roman site near my home in Kent. I applied and got a place.

Joining that dig was a revelation. I was so inspired by the thrill of finding objects that people had used centuries ago that I signed up for a week-long archaeology course to learn the skills I needed on a dig. Completely hooked and determined to build my knowledge, I took further courses on how to analyse bones and then how to draw artefacts accurately.

Eventually, I committed to starting a distance-learning degree in ancient history and archaeology at the University of Leicester. At first it was challenging to keep up with the reading lists, especially as I hadn't studied seriously for nearly 25 years. I was terrified about writing essays and almost gave up in the first term, but with support from family and friends I stuck it out and was thrilled to get good feedback from the tutors.

I'm now in my second year of a BA. When you love what you're studying, it's easy to get so obsessed with work that you neglect friends and family, so I make sure I'm well organised to make time for everyone.

While I enjoy my academic studies, I also love the practical side of being involved in archaeological digs. Over the past few years I've been to digs near Pompeii, Tel Aviv and around England. My best finds include an intricate Roman military brooch and a 3,500-year-old Bronze-Age skeleton.

These days, my favourite outfit is a high-viz waistcoat and a bright yellow hard hat, because that means I'm all set to dig for fascinating finds from the past. Studying for a degree in a subject I'm so passionate about has enriched my life hugely. I feel I'm following my dream.

'The course is hard work but it has enriched my life'

'I sold my house to pay my college fees'

It took a huge leap of faith, but Deborah Lawrence followed her heart to learn behind-the-scenes skills for the theatrical world

My grandmother was a tailor, and I inherited her interest in needles, threads and clothing. While I made lots of outfits for myself and my friends, it was only ever a hobby and I never considered it as a career. Instead, I worked for 25 years in a shipping office and as a part-time chiropodist. But I kept up my interest in clothes by helping out with costumes and props for local theatre productions, as I've had a passion for performance ever since seeing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a teenager.

A few years ago, after being heaped with compliments about the costumes I'd created for a particularly spectacular show, I realised this was something I'd like to take more seriously. I'm single, so there was no reason not to follow my instinct. I researched training courses, and found the three-year technical theatre and stage management course at RADA in London. It looked perfect, with involvement in student productions and loads of opportunities to work within the industry during the training.

I applied, and got a place after taking in some samples of my costumes and convincing the Academy of my commitment and enthusiasm. My biggest hurdle was paying the fees. But I knew this was a



Curtain up: now Deborah's skills are taking centre stage

course that would enrich my life – so I made the huge decision to sell my house to raise the money. I'd hoped to move to London but it was too expensive, so I rented in the same area in Suffolk.

I've had no regrets – the course is intense and very hard work, but I've absolutely loved using all my tailoring and creative skills. I've had the chance to work at the National Theatre and the Royal Opera

House, and for my final show last Summer, I made full-on glamorous costumes with a Showboat theme – think Mississippi Delta, with gorgeous women and dashing men.

I've always believed you shouldn't allow yourself to be bored. It is so easy to plod off to work and feel isolated and dull. Although it's scary to think about being a freelancer at my age, I am finally doing something I am passionate about. □

FEATURE: JANE KEMP; NATASHA LAVENDER; PORTRAITS OF FENELLA AND CLARE: NEIL COOPER; MAKE-UP: LINDSEY POOLE; HAIR: JULIE READ AT CAROL HAYES AND PETROS MAIROUDHOUS AT TREVOR SORBY; DEBORAH WEARS TOP: NEW LOOK; TROUSERS: HOUSE OF FRASER; NECKLACE: WALLIS