

Beauty is its own reward for high-flyers

Many people are switching from big careers to raising funds for Britain's arts and heritage

by Diane Hofkins

AS Fiona McWilliams walks to her office she looks around in wonder. The ground is blanketed in crocuses and daffodils. She is responsible for special projects at Kew Gardens in west London and is bursting with enthusiasm for her job and for the work of the Kew Foundation.

She has no regrets about having taken a hefty drop in salary and giving up the glamour of running a PR agency for television-production companies and broadcasters.

"It was great fun," she said of her days working with clients such as the Jim Henson Company and Tiger Aspect Productions. "I looked after Kermit the Frog in Cannes and Hercules in New Orleans."

But one day she realised she wanted more depth. She saw that her interest in the arts, conservation, landscape and heritage outweighed the appeal of the jet-setting lifestyle she had been accustomed to. It is probably no coincidence that, aged 39, it was not long afterwards that she married and became pregnant.

It was time for a more meaningful lifestyle, and today she is excited to be working with scientists and architects. McWilliams, now in her early forties, is sure she did the right thing: "Kew is a world of heavenly beauty."

She is one of a small but growing number giving up high-powered jobs to work as fundraisers for not-for-profit organisations. They have reached a stage in their lives and careers where they want to give something back, said Moyra Doyle, founder of Richmond Associates, a recruitment agency that specialises in finding fundraisers for the arts and education sectors. She said that although most take a substantial cut in earnings at first, they can build their salaries back up.

Over eight years she has placed several hundred people and reckons they have raised a total of £100m. Only about a quarter had worked in fundraising before, but many business skills are more transferable than people realise.

Aude Thibaut, 31, is now major donor development manager with the Royal Opera House. After completing her MBA at Columbia University in New York, she worked in international finance in Moscow, New York and London. She said Richmond Associates helped her translate the investment-banking jargon on her CV into language an arts organisation could understand.

Moving to the opera meant a drop in salary of more than 50%, but for someone who adores music and singing, this was more than made up for by the thrill of working in a job that "completely revolves round music" and with others who are passionate about opera and ballet. Loudspeakers in every office broadcast the day's rehearsals. "Music pours out of the walls here," said Belgian-born Thibaut. "It's a wonderful environment." On top of that, the job has "lifestyle hours".

David Rider is also delighted that he switched from banking to a career as a university fundraiser at Robert Gordon in Aberdeen. The move from Scottish Widows and Lloyds TSB meant a 12% cut in pay and benefits for the married father of one, but he has no regrets. "I go home at night and say 'how did I get here? How lucky am I!'" Rider, 43, finds great satisfaction in seeing students benefit directly from his work. For example, he has built relationships with local businesses that will help them get jobs, raised cash for scholarships and generated £12m to build a sports centre.

Fundraising for arts and education bodies is a growing field. The introduction of the national lottery has meant that organisations such as the Royal Opera House and the Tate Gallery have had to find more money themselves. And universities need more funds than they get from the government to attract top academics.

Rider discovered his vocation on a night out with a friend who was a university development director and instantly knew this was what he wanted to do. He prepared for the switch for two years, making financial plans for his family and taking on a voluntary fundraising role at the National Gallery of Scotland. He also talked to as many people as he could, and was impressed by how open and welcoming people in the public sector could be.

McWilliams's route is perhaps the scariest. A careers adviser referred her to Doyle, who suggested she do an apprenticeship – in other words, working unpaid to see how you fit into an organisation.

This was because she was making a double move, from PR to fundraising and from private to not-for-profit, she said. "It was

quite scary, but I felt it was a risk worth taking. Doing a training course would cost money. Working hands-on would give me a deeper picture.” It worked out. Now she is involved in a range of exciting projects, including the renovation of a Victorian gallery, securing brand sponsors for events and festivals and a big new project to seek a technical partner for Kew.

The kind of change that McWilliams, Thibaut and Rider have made is not for everyone. Their advice is to follow your passion – so if your passion is to make loads of money, keep your job in the City.

“Really think about what you want to get out of life,” said McWilliams. “Then go for it. Take a risk. Don’t just think about the pounds, shillings and pence. Weigh up all the other things that will change.”

If you don’t know exactly what you want, “talk to people you admire in different fields and get a feeling of what motivates them”. Making the decision itself was the hardest part, she said.

Thibaut warns those who might be looking for an easier life not to underestimate the not-for-profit sector. Its standards are at least as high as those in the private arena, she said. It is also important to choose an organisation whose values you share.

When taking a very big pay cut, “you really need to be in love with the organisation. This is even more true of fundraising. The most effective way to fundraise is to share your passion. You can’t fake that”.

Doyle has an ABC for those thinking of switching. First look at your Ability – what are you good at? Then look for a Break. And, finally, have Courage.

Business psychologist Ros Taylor is encouraged by this trend. “It shows that the pursuit of money is not the be-all and end-all of our lives.”

She urges business leaders in the City to integrate charitable pursuits into their companies’ work. “They should realise that ultimately people want something more,” she said.