A number of alumni who made somewhat dramatic career changes mentioned wanting to help others. For example, Russell Graves M’83 had his position as an investment officer at a bank eliminated in a 1997 merger. He became the executive director of a nonprofit credit counseling agency called Consumer Credit and Budget Counseling. In his new capacity Graves oversees programs that help families save their homes from foreclosure and teach money management to low-income and unemployed individuals.

“I wanted to take off the suit and tie and essentially give back to those that needed help,” says Graves. “I was very fortunate that the separation package, including stock options and the employee stock ownership plan, [allowed me] to join with members of my family to start a nonprofit agency.”

Others, like Julie Averill ’01 and Gene Heady ’81, found a way to use the knowledge and skills they acquired at the University in new ways. Averill, a professional freelance flutist in New York City for three years, performed with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic, among others. A double major in performance and instrumental music education, she recently went full time at her early-childhood business, Kids at Work. Located in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, Kids at Work provides classes for mothers and their very young children in art, music, and creative play. Averill transitioned from performing to teaching flute at a small music school, where she also taught toddlers through age 4. She then moved to a preschool, where she became a lead teacher, before founding her business in 2007.
Gene Heady worked in his father’s electrical contracting business before, during, and after earning his bachelor’s degree in engineering in 1981 from what is now the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture. He worked in the industry for nearly 13 years as a project engineer, project manager, and business owner before applying to law school. The idea of becoming an attorney was actually first planted at UofH.

“I took a business law class there. The professor told me that I had missed my calling and suggested that I transfer from engineering to pre-law. I never forgot my professor’s advice.”

Heady graduated from Texas Tech University School of Law in 1996 with honors. Since 2003, he has been a partner in the Atlanta, Ga., office of the national construction litigation firm, Smith, Currie & Hancock, LLP. Heady has parlayed his experience in the construction industry and his engineering degree into a successful construction law practice. He is a member of the state bars of Georgia, Texas, Florida, and Colorado.

Some alumni ended up in careers that surprised even them. David Markowitz ’98 majored in communication with an emphasis on broadcasting. His first job was at ESPN in the television production department, where he worked on Sportscenter and NBA2Nite. After two years at what he thought would be a dream job, Markowitz moved to World Wrestling Entertainment for a year before realizing he was burned out on television. Today, Markowitz is a regional director of client relations for New England and New York State at Great-West Retirement Services.

“I never thought back in college, working for STN Channel 2 News, that I would be working on 401(k) plans, let alone enjoying it,” says Markowitz. “But I love my job and feel that I was made for this role. I also enjoy the nights and weekends off that I didn’t have before to spend with my wife [Jessica Nowasacki ’98] and daughter, Rory.”

And then there are those who never really settle on a particular career path. Bob DePietro ’66, M’73, falls into that category by his own admission. A former editor of The Informer (then called The Callboard) while on campus, DePietro describes his work experience as follows: “farmer; insurance claims adjustor and supervisor; HR manager; middle-school teacher as well as ESL and GED instructor; consultant in priority and time management; adjunct university professor teaching insurance, organizational behavior, and employment law; management training instructor; federal government administrative officer—you name it, chances are I did it.” Now retired, DePietro most recently worked for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in a variety of supervisory functions.

Looking back on his checkerboard career, DePietro says, “I attribute my broad range of abilities and successes to the respect, support, and friendship of the very capable teachers I had during my University of Hartford years.” It’s a sentiment echoed by many others.
For the past seven years, Lee Bieber, who received a BFA in illustration in 1992, has been known as Officer Bieber to his colleagues in the Plantation Police Department in South Florida. Assigned to road patrol, Bieber spends his days helping stranded motorists, issuing traffic citations, arresting criminals, and testifying in court, among other duties. He also answers a wide variety of calls for assistance and citizen complaints from members of the community, which is about 30 miles north of Miami.

Between his 1992 graduation and the end of 2001, Bieber worked in the graphic design field, developing corporate identity packages, creating website designs, and doing prepress design and production for print materials at several agencies. Then, two months after 9/11, Bieber left his job and sat down with his wife to talk about the future.

“My wife, Jill, and I discussed whether I should start my own business, work for another design agency, or pursue other options. My father-in-law suggested law enforcement as a possibility. He was a police officer in New York City for more than 30 years and said it was the best decision he had ever made. After much more discussion with my wife, I could see that police work would be a great career opportunity for me.”

In addition to his father-in-law’s suggestion, Bieber recalls that his own father had often wished that he had pursued a career as a state trooper. Community service was an important issue in his family—both of his parents were volunteer paramedics in Spring Valley, N.Y.

Although he made his decision shortly after 9/11, Bieber says the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were contributing factors but not deciding ones for him.

“I think the driving motivation for me was the fact that I wanted to be a better person, feel pride in the work I was doing, and have opportunities to help people.”

“I think the driving motivation for me was the fact that I wanted to be a better person, feel pride in the work I was doing, and have opportunities to help people. I also like that I’m not stuck behind a desk and that, every day, my environment and the people I meet change. The job offers great stability, benefits, and opportunities for growth. I enjoy making a difference in the community that I serve and having a positive effect on other people’s lives. My goal is to move up the chain of command.”

Bieber says that although police work can sometimes be a thankless job, there are those rare occasions when he gets to see, hear, or read about the results of his actions. He adds that being recognized by his department as a person who can contribute to its development, efficiency, and overall productivity is another big plus.

Some of that recognition comes from skills he acquired at the Hartford Art School and used in his previous profession. Bieber’s department has made use of his design and project management skills on several in-house projects that included electronic ticketing systems, a computer-aided dispatch system, and the department’s records management system.

“I handled these and other projects from concept to completion,” says Bieber. “Since their successful implementation, I am now considered the liaison between the police department and the city’s IT [information technology] staff.”

Almost nine years since he decided to join law enforcement, Bieber is still enthusiastic about the change he made. “To this day, I am so happy that I made this career change. It has had a positive effect on so many aspects of my life. I only wish I had done it sooner.”
Julie Karass Clawson graduated cum laude from the then Hartt School of Music in 1987 with a Bachelor of Music in Opera Performance. At 20, she says, "I was driven and worked very hard to be a great singer." After graduation, she toured with Opera New England and gave numerous recitals.

While her husband, Michael Clawson ’91, was in graduate school at the University of Connecticut, Clawson sang with CONCORA and the Woodland Scholars, both professional choral groups in Connecticut, and was a soloist/section leader at Immanuel Church in Hartford, Conn. She also worked full time as a medical secretary.

After the birth of their two daughters and the completion of his PhD, Clawson’s husband received a job offer in south-central Nebraska at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The two East-Coasters were about to become Midwesterners.

“In true pioneering spirit, we packed up our two babies, two cockatiels, and a dog, and headed west in 2002,” says Clawson. Their destination: Hastings, Neb.; population, 24,000.

Despite her admitted culture shock, Clawson soon discovered the town was home to Hastings College, a small liberal arts school. She sought out the chair of the music department at the college. Within a year of her arrival, Clawson had performed with the college and had brought the Woodland Scholars to Hastings for a concert. For the next five years, she continued to sing at the college and with the Hastings Symphony and several churches in the area.

While enjoying her status as the self-titled “Queen Diva of the Prairie,” Clawson found herself looking for something new once her children started school.

“I tried teaching but discovered that was not for me. So, in December 2006, I decided to return to school and become a nurse.

There was a nursing shortage, and I discovered that Creighton University School of Nursing in Omaha, Neb., had a satellite campus just six blocks from my home.”

Because her opera curriculum at Hartt had not included courses in chemistry, anatomy, physiology, and a few other areas of science, Clawson spent a year and a half fulfilling the prerequisites for Creighton’s accelerated 12-month nursing degree. With the support of her family, she graduated from the program with honors in August 2009 and passed the Registered Nurse Licensure Exam shortly thereafter.

Today, the former Queen Diva can be found working the night shift as a trauma nurse in the emergency room at Mary Lanning Memorial Hospital in Hastings.

“In some ways these two careers are similar in that they both provide opportunities to connect with people,” says Clawson.

“Richard Mercier, my vocal coach at Hartt, taught me that I could do anything and be anyone I wanted. He also reminded me that music is nothing if it doesn’t touch someone in some way. This remains with me to this day as a nurse. How a person is treated plays a major role in their recovery.”

As for singing, Clawson admits that she hasn’t completely closed the door on her previous profession. “I have been heard singing the score of The Lion King to a sick or hurt child in the emergency room!”

EDITOR’S NOTE: We added a photo to Julie’s monitor of her, far right holding Cassius, the poodle; Heather Tessmer, far left; and Susan Mello, center, from a 1986 Hartt production of the opera Manon.
Many Americans are living longer, and many of their adult children are struggling with how to make sure their parents are in safe and comfortable environments.

Freelance financial writer Marcie Lain LaBelle M’83 has been there. In the midst of looking for resources to make life easier and more secure for her mother, now 94, and her husband’s parents, she made some discoveries.

“I saw a very broad range of adaptations, products, and technologies that could be helpful and also discovered that remodelers, technology companies, interior designers, and others were getting very serious about serving the physically challenged older adult.”

With LaBelle’s discoveries came the realization that her family could have taken advantage of these resources much sooner if only they had known what was available and whom to turn to for advice. Thus was born the concept for her new business, Accommodating Homes.

Through a network of occupational therapists experienced in home adaptations, LaBelle gives older homeowners guidance on environmental modifications, products, design solutions, and technologies that support safe, comfortable, and independent living in their own homes. She also offers an idea of the costs involved in modifying their home environments.

“We make it easier for clients to age in place,” says LaBelle. “We also help homeowners who are struggling with the stay-or-go decision.”

LaBelle received a BFA in theatre education from Boston University and taught briefly before her marriage and move to Connecticut. She then worked in television production and public relations for WFSB, Channel 3, for a few years before going into corporate communications at CIGNA for almost 10 years. She received her MBA from the University during this period. After the birth of her two sons, she decided to go freelance and for the past 20 years has been self-employed as a financial writer.

“I really value my UofH graduate education,” says LaBelle. “I did a concentration in marketing, and I couldn’t have picked a better specialty area. With my new business, the importance of marketing can’t be overstated.”
The birth of a first child has a way of rearranging priorities, and that was certainly true for Melanie Hache Downey ’95. The director of public relations and B2B marketing at Monster.com, she was instrumental in the growth and success of the company, which is one of the largest online employment websites in the world.

Downey’s life changed when she learned that her daughter, Ava, and later her son, William, have severe allergies that began right after their births.

“Both of my children have severe allergies to foods, environmental contaminants, and various household and cosmetic chemicals. Symptoms range from hives to severe eczema, and we have endured anaphylaxis [a severe allergic reaction that can be fatal] too often,” says Downey.

She began heavily researching allergies, skin disorders, and related illnesses. Downey discovered that a lot of the chemicals and additives in our food, cosmetics, and even baby lotions are banned in other countries as known or suspected carcinogens, hormone disruptors, or skin irritants.

Unlike most of us, Downey decided to solve the problem herself by creating homemade soaps, lotions, sunscreens, and other products for the family’s use. Word spread through relatives and neighbors, and soon she was getting orders from more and more people.

“Over the course of several years, I began my business specializing in handmade, natural soaps and lotions. The company, Wilava, is named after my children. I still make all my products myself in a dedicated room in my house, and production overflows into my kitchen,” explains Downey. “Ninety-five percent of my business is currently via my website at wilava.com.”

In addition to brushing up on her chemistry and spending many hours doing research, Downey says her degree in communication with an emphasis on journalism has helped her business be successful.

“Those skills translate very well to any type of business venture because you always need to know how to write well, look at things objectively, and promote yourself or your business.”
The Barney School of Business’s Paris MBA program began in 1985 and lasted for 10 years. Philippe Alexandre graduated in 1988 and for 20-some years has worked in sales and marketing, most recently for a company originally belonging to Johnson Worldwide Associates, makers of the Johnson fishing reel and many other outdoor recreation products.

After the second managed buyout—backed up with pension funds—in four years, Alexandre began to feel uncomfortable in his job. In 2002, at the age of 40, he divorced and left the company.

“I then started to really question myself on what I should do with my life. I began a personal development program that has led me to the more spiritual side of life,” says Alexandre.

After working for a time as an independent sales representative, Alexandre decided he wanted to do something to help people, not just make money. Luckily for him, the day he quit his job, another opportunity came along asking him to manage a nonprofit organization that tries to improve computer literacy. According to Alexandre only 50 percent of households in France have Internet access.

“The project means refurbishing old computers, then redistributing them, and providing free computer training for people on a multiregional basis. The government has acknowledged that getting familiar with computers and the Internet is a major way for people with low incomes to improve their lives, especially in terms of employment,” says Alexandre.

The new project follows several years of building infrastructure to enable Internet access throughout France—from providing access in rural areas to making fiber-optic connections available to businesses and universities. Alexandre’s organization is called Defris, or Challenges in English, and is located in Lorient, Brittany, in the western part of France near the coastline.

“Why the change? At 47, I am looking to give purpose to my life. I feel more and more the need to be helpful to others and to put human beings at the center of my actions,” says Alexandre.
Melisa Bezanson had planned since high school to work in the insurance industry. She received a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in 1998, with a double major in actuarial science and mathematics. Bezanson later earned an MBA from Southern New Hampshire University in 2006.

After more than a decade in the insurance industry, Bezanson found herself working in California in the largest healthcare company in the United States. She felt frustrated by the amount of red tape and what she perceived as the difficulty of making an impact.

Looking for something new, Bezanson considered working at the community college level, hoping to motivate students to continue on from a two-year program to a full bachelor’s degree. She applied to a few places and then had a life-changing experience.

On a 14-day trip to Ireland with her mother, Bezanson fell in love with the people, the culture, and the history. She spent a lot of time talking with the local people, especially Stephen McPhilemy, co-owner of a youth hostel named Paddy’s Palace in Derry, a historic city in Northern Ireland.

“I returned to Ireland only a few months later to see what Derry really had to offer. I spent time in the hostel and saw so much potential,” says Bezanson. She made up her mind to move to Derry this past March and become the general manager of Paddy’s Palace.

Asked about her plans for the hostel, Bezanson is full of ideas to improve efficiencies, staff training, and delegation of duties, as well as make some cosmetic updates. “Steve is looking to improve our level of service to the customers and turn the hostel into the number-one hostel in Derry, with the hopes of winning us an award at the 2011 Hoscars from HostelWorld.com,” explains Bezanson. The website compiles comments from travelers and posts ratings of the hostels, thereby driving business to the highest rated.

If you find yourself in Derry, stop in and say hello.
Hartford-born Peter C. Bjarkman received bachelor’s (1963) and master’s (1970) degrees in education from the University of Hartford. A high school English teacher in Connecticut and Florida at first, he then worked as an international, U.S.-dependent school administrator in Colombia and Ecuador.

After receiving a second master’s from Trinity College (1972) and a PhD from the University of Florida (1976), Bjarkman became a university professor of linguistics at Purdue University, the University of Colorado, and several other schools. All in all, he devoted almost 25 years to teaching.

Then things changed. “After a second marriage in 1985, I decided to leave academe and pursue a freelance writing career in sports history, especially baseball,” explains Bjarkman. It turns out that baseball is an old love: Bjarkman was a member of the Hawks baseball team in 1960–61.

Since 1987, Bjarkman has published more than 40 books on sports, eight of which have won sports-writing awards.

It has been a fruitful second career. Since 1987, Bjarkman has published more than 40 books on sports, eight of which have won sports-writing awards. In 1994 he published his first book on Cuban baseball, *Baseball with a Latin Beat: A History of the Latin American Game* (McFarland). In 1996 he and photo researcher Mark Rucker followed the Cuban national team to the Atlanta Olympics; their project was later published as *Smoke: The Romance and Lore of Cuban Baseball* (1999).

Bjarkman was hooked. Since his first trip to Havana in 1997, he has returned more than 50 times. He travels legally as a researcher, with Treasury Department license, making most of his trips on charter flights from Miami.

“My status as a Cuban baseball authority has provided the rare opportunity [for an American] to spend extensive time on the Communist island. I have also traveled extensively with the Cuban national team to international tournaments in Latin American, Canada, and Europe,” he adds.

In addition to his books, Bjarkman maintains a popular website on Cuban League baseball (www.BaseballdeCuba.com) and is a baseball commentator on other websites in the United States, Europe, and Cuba. He has appeared in numerous television baseball documentaries and international tournament game broadcasts. He also was the first American interviewed extensively about baseball on postrevolution Cuban national television.

“The differences [between Cuban and American baseball] are major,” Bjarkman says, “and boil down to both organizational structure and physical appearance. Cuban League games are mostly played in small stadiums of 15,000–20,000 capacity, on natural grass, and with no video screens or other intrusive electronics. The experience is very much akin to attending a minor league game in the States back in the 1940s.

“The Cuban League is owned by the government sports ministry. Players play for their native provinces’ teams and are never traded or sold. The focus in Cuba is on preparing the best possible teams for world competitions such as the Olympics or the World Cup.”

Asked what he would miss most about Cuba if he never returned, Bjarkman had this to say: “I would most miss the Cuban people and the island’s vibrant rhythms. Cubans are among the most hospitable people I have ever known, . . . and I am enchanted by the music that seems to fill every corner of the island.”

**¡Viva el Béisbol!**

**FROM PROFESSOR OF LINGUISTICS TO CUBAN BASEBALL EXPERT**
Donald Osborne, who graduated from what was then the Hartt School of Music in 1977 with a bachelor's degree in opera performance, obviously has a well-trained ear. But today he may be listening to the hum of an exotic Italian sports car like an Alfa Romeo or a Ferrari instead of an Italian opera.

Osborne is the founder of Automotive Valuation Services, an appraisal service for car collectors. His love affair with well-designed cars goes back to his high school years in New York City. As an art major, he intended to study industrial design and become a car stylist. But music stepped into the picture. After winning a New York Daily News/All-City High School Chorus scholarship contest, Osborne decided instead to go to college and study voice. He auditioned at The Juilliard School, The Hartt School, and the Manhattan School of Music, but because he was only 16 years old when he graduated from high school, only Hartt would admit him to its opera program.

Like many Hartt graduates, Osborne found a close and supportive community there and has stayed in touch with fellow alumni. “My voice teacher for the past 15 years has been Noel Hart [’77], who was a piano major at Hartt when I was studying there. I also put together a concert with another fellow Hartt grad, tenor Robert Brubaker [’77], which we hope to do as a benefit for Hartt next year.

“All the teachers I had at Hartt are now gone, many passed away. One who stands out was Brenda Lewis. A very well known operatic soprano of the late fifties and sixties, she taught acting and interpretation classes. She sent me the most wonderful note when I made my Met Opera debut, saying that she knew when we worked together at Hartt that I would make it.”

Osborne made his debut as a baritone at the Metropolitan Opera in 1985, singing the role of Robbins in Porgy and Bess, a role he held for two seasons. At the same time, he was singing roles with other opera companies. He then decided to leave his opera career behind, saying it was the business of music that didn’t click for him.

“I am a very goals-oriented person who likes to think that my return will be commensurate with my efforts. The music business is terribly subjective. Having a good engagement doesn’t necessarily translate into more work with a company. I found that ultimately frustrating.”

Osborne, who has also owned a successful antiques business since 1974, became an executive at Macy’s department store, where he created a department of marketing communications for Macy’s private brands. Tapping into his performance background, Osborne developed informational and promotional videos that he wrote, directed, and edited.

From that experience he started his own agency and worked with various marketing and advertising firms in video and Web design before starting his current car appraisal business in 2004. In 1993 he also began writing for Sports Car Market magazine. His writing on collector cars has also appeared in The New York Times, Business Week Online, and Road & Track.

Coming full musical circle, Osborne is now chair of Hartt’s board of trustees. He says he really didn’t have any choice. “I met the remarkable Grace Ellsworth [Hon. ’77], a Hartt honorary trustee and [University] life regent. Grace found out I was a Hartt opera alumnus and there and then declared that I must join the board. And as she is a force of nature, I complied.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Osborne was photographed with two of his own treasured cars—a 1967 Lancia Fulvia sport, left, and a 1952 Lancia Ardea.