

By G. Andrew Mickley

## Completing a career

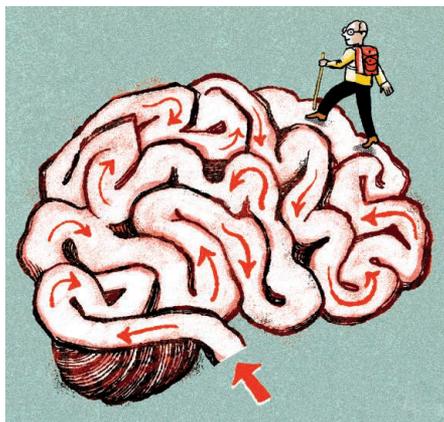
**W**hen I considered retiring from a rewarding career in neuroscience, first as a U.S. Air Force officer and then as a university professor, I knew I would be relieved to no longer spend evenings and weekends writing grant proposals or dueling with journal referees. But when I turned over the keys to my laboratory a few years ago, I was surprised to feel a flood of melancholy and anxiety. Free time, once a luxury, was suddenly all too plentiful. My lab and my students, so important to my identity, were gone. I did not want retirement to represent a lesser life. I had to find a way to continue contributing to science.

I could have found new outlets through my professional contacts in the university town where I had lived and worked for the last 20 years. But instead, my wife and I decided to move closer to our daughter, a neuroscientist and psychologist who had just started an assistant professor job in another state. Disrupting my life, first with retirement and then a move to a new part of the country, was simultaneously chaotic and freeing. It allowed me to explore new opportunities and reinvent myself as a scientist.

Shortly before I retired, I had helped start a national honor society for neuroscience students, Nu Rho Psi. I was excited to use my retirement to develop it further. Applying for tax-exempt status was not fun. But I appreciate that working on behalf of the society, which now has thousands of members, allows me to have a broad impact. I love seeing smart young neuroscientists develop as they receive our grants to conduct research, travel to conferences to present their findings, and reach out to the community to educate the public about the brain.

I also joined several mentoring networks sponsored by my alma maters and professional societies that pair me with undergraduate neuroscience students across the country whose research interests are similar to mine. My mentees call on me when they have questions about their careers or are struggling with their research, and I try to be an encouraging sounding board and provide an experienced perspective. It's not the same as working alongside students in the lab, but it's nonetheless satisfying to hear from my mentees that our conversations are helpful as they plan their own careers.

Yet, I still found myself missing direct in-person contact with students and experiencing their enthusiasm and spontaneous curiosity firsthand. So, when one of my daughter's



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colleagues asked whether I wanted to team-teach a weekly neuroscience seminar, I jumped at the opportunity. I enjoyed being back in the classroom, and I also found that I had something a little different to contribute than I had at my home university. As a visiting faculty member, I think the students consider me somewhat of an outsider. As a result, they ask surprisingly candid questions, not only about the science, but also about the life of a scientist. Those who are considering nontraditional careers, such as the one I pursued as a scientist and educator in the military, seem to appreciate hearing about my path. I’ve also started teaching an occasional neuroscience course for older adults, which helps keep me actively reading and up-to-date

in my field and gives me the opportunity to promote science education in my community.

I have to admit that I miss the occasional eureka moments I used to experience when my lab made new discoveries. But I’m grateful that my retired life allows me to spend time on new pursuits—including helping take care of my first grandson, who is almost 2 years old. And I’ve learned that finding the right balance between my scientific activities and the other things I want to do—traveling, hiking, learning to fly fish, to name a few—requires creativity and flexibility. I plan to keep exploring and adapting as opportunities come and go, blurring the lines between working and leisure to find satisfaction as my career in science continues to evolve. ■

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# Science

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