

Reinventing yourself in retirement

Speaker at Thrive Expo will talk about her 'second act' in acting, writing

By R'BECCA GROFF
For The Gazette

A variety of phrases exist to define the years after one stops working: the golden years, the twilight years, retirement years, one's second childhood, the autumn of life — even the winter of life.

But none of these fit the post-retirement lifestyle of actress, author, speaker and blogger Lee Gale Gruen, 76, quite as well as the words "second act" do.

Lee Gale Gruen lives in the San Francisco area and will be the keynote speaker for The Gazette's Thrive Expo at The Hotel at Kirkwood Center on Sunday, Sept. 9. She will share her unique story of trying something completely different in her second act.

For 37 years Gruen, a UCLA graduate in sociology, worked as a probation officer in Los Angeles County, supervising criminal defendants, and writing their status reports for the courts. Gruen will talk about how she went from writing court reports to taking acting lessons, getting an agent, working in television and film and eventually writing one-scene plays she and her father have performed together.

"I didn't always want to be an actress," she said in a recent interview. "I stumbled into a senior acting class by mistake. I

was looking for things to do after I retired, and I saw this class called Scene Study."

Despite her stage fright and feelings of intimidation, she gave a reading someone handed her that day.

"It was the first scene from 'Death of a Salesman,'" she recalled.

"I began the reading with another fellow, and within a few moments I became so engrossed in my character I forgot that I was in a room full of people staring at me."

Gruen said they read for 10 minutes and afterward everyone clapped, shaking her out of her trance. "I was so high from that experience and wondered where this had been all of my life," she laughed, "and I knew I wanted more of this."

A short time later her mother died, and her father was trying to cope with the loss. Gruen said she talked him into joining her

acting nonstop."

She said there wasn't much material around that suited an 85-year old man so she began writing scenes for the two of them to read.

"I'd never done any creative writing, but I'd written so many reports as a probation officer, I figured I had to give it a try," she said.

Their father-daughter scenes were performed on stage in front of live audiences twice a year in the acting class showcase, where the duo became a crowd favorite. Gruen said all six scenes are in her new memoir, "Adventures with Dad: A Father and Daughter's Journey Through a Senior Acting Class."

Gruen said she is a completely different person in retirement, and it's all because of acting. Gone is the stage fright. Gone is the emptiness and melancholy that she was feeling after she retired from her job, and it is

this reinvented journey she speaks about to audiences all over the country today.

"What do we do with the last third of our lives?" she said. "I've been there, done that.

"Everybody wants to get

people ready financially for the retirement years, but nobody is helping people prepare for the "downtime side" of things — the emotional side of it all," she added.

"I was floundering, scared and intimidated, and I couldn't find



After retiring from her job as a probation officer, Lee Gale Gruen is embracing life in a whole new way. She will speak about her experience at the Gazette's Thrive Expo on Sept. 9.

anybody who was worried about talking about this stuff.

"I began to realize that when you retire you do get depressed. They do start feeling worthless. They do start feeling invisible," she explained. "These are the things I talk about in my talks."

"What pulled me out of my case, was a total friend."

"The acting motivated me. I wanted to get up out of bed, get dressed, get out of the house and embrace life, so that's the message I want to pass on. I want to talk to people about how they can discover something that really gets them excited. I want to figure out what their lives are and how to find meaning in them."

"I also have a compulsion for volunteering, and a compulsion for all the activities that are out there," she said. "I want somebody listening to me. I might hear something that rings a bell for them, and then I realize, yes, I always wanted to do that, but I never did it before."

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— Lee Gale Gruen

in her senior acting classes, and he was hooked after the first session.

"We attended that class together for three years, and I think we bonded more in that time than we ever did before. We talked