CHAPTER 1

Lights, Camera, Action

Mike Kravinsky, Nextnik Films, LLC
Courtesy of Sali Dimond.

When Mike Kravinsky went to work as a video editor at ABC News in 1981, he figured he would spend a year there and then head out to Los Angeles to become a filmmaker.

Well, it didn't quite work out that way. Over the course of 29 years, he worked as an editor and technical director for news broadcasts like *World News Tonight* and *Good Morning America,* and news magazine shows like *20/20* and *Primetime Live.*

"ABC turned out to be a great place to work," Kravinsky says. "They gave me great opportunities and experiences and one thing led to another." But then the day came when the jig was up. He accepted a buyout. "I was ready," he says. "It had become routine."

After retiring in 2010, the 65-year-old is now following his dream to be a filmmaker once again, although he's not in Hollywood, but Arlington, Virginia. His independent film company: Nextnik Films, LLC.

From the start of his transition, Kravinsky had his wife, Liza, a composer, urging him to "do what makes you happy." And the couple, who have no children, has a knack for living frugally. "We're not living on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but we do drive a 12-year old car, and we don't buy expensive clothes and furniture. It's just our lifestyle," he says.

Nonetheless, one of his first moves was to tap an adviser at a no-load mutual fund company for some guidance. He wanted to be sure he was making good choices with the funds he had accumulated in his former employer's retirement plan, and, of course, to sort out how to manage his buyout monies.

And since he was not exactly certain of his new direction initially, Kravinsky spent time working on his website, which was focused on articles about change and transition, that he had launched before he took the buyout. "I had wanted an outlet to do some writing and videos, and talk to people who had taken professional leaps of faith," he recalls.

Once on his own, and with the website up and running, he started a blog. Kravinsky soon realized, however, that he was doing the same thing he had always done. His magazine-style video and online stories about career changers were all newsy.

"I should get out of my comfort zone here," he told himself. "Why don't I create a character, based on what I am experiencing, as well as what those people who I had done stories about had gone through. So that's where the first film was born," he says.

It began in stages. First, a 30-minute Web series. Then Kravinsky got the urge to push beyond. He spent two months adding and rewriting scenes, and went back and filmed to build his series into the 77-minute feature film.

That film, *The Nextnik*, is the story of a worker who has been downsized after 25 years without warning and must reinvent himself. It sounds a tad autobiographical, and, of course, it is in a way. The story revolves around him searching for something new and experimenting with different careers.

Kravinsky has now completed three feature films and is writing his fourth. His films, *The Nextnik* (2013), *Geographically Desirable* (2015), and *Nothing to Do* (2017), have won accolades at independent film festivals across the country and are steadily sending income his way through streaming fees when viewed on Amazon Prime.

The first film cost $25,000 to make, "which is like nothing," says Kravinsky. Those funds were mostly earmarked for actors and crew salaries. "These films are at the low-end of ultra-low budgets," he says with a laugh.

The financing for the first two films came from an inheritance of $90,000. The last one, *Nothing To Do,* was financed by a combination of savings and money earned from *Geographically Desirable.* His second and third films are both available on Amazon. "Amazon is now doing for small independent filmmakers what they originally did for authors who self-publish," Kravinsky says. "It's treated as any other film on their platform. The goal, like books, is to develop an audience for your work."

Does he make money? "Yes," he says. Will he profit from his films? "I don't know," he says. "I get thousands of daily watched minutes on Amazon Prime with *Geo Desire,* and it's making a decent return. *Nothing To Do* is gaining traction."

Building a successful film business takes passion and a smattering of pixie dust. "Filmmaking is art," Kravinsky says. "Like music, books, paintings, photography, et cetera. I hope to pay off the investment and get into the black, but it's art. It's speculative. If I make a lot of money, excellent. If I don't, that's the business. That's where I'm at."

Kravinsky is realistic. "I have a set amount of money to spend. If I spend it and don't get enough of a return, I hope the experience will get me jobs on the creative work of others in the future. I don't jeopardize my retirement saving," he says.

One cost-saving advantage he has is that he is willing to tap his own sweat equity for his films. He auditions and hires actors. He hires technical people – a director of photography and a makeup artist – but the rest he does himself: the writing, producing, directing, and postproduction. He secures the locations to shoot in the Washington, D.C. area: Arlington, Fairfax, and Leesburg in Virginia, and Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. "I'm the one directing people and ordering food at the same time," Kravinsky laughs.

As for his Hollywood dream? "Of course, it would be great to be nominated for an Academy Award down the road, but you know what, if I can just make movies and make a little money doing it, I am going to be really happy," he says. That's rich.

Making It Work

I asked Mike to look back and share his thoughts on his shift to starting his own independent film company.

Kerry: What did starting your own business mean to you personally?

Mike: Freedom. There's something nice about routine, but routine can really start wearing on you when there's really nothing left to accomplish. I now have the freedom to take on projects and execute them in my own vision – essentially being my own boss in a creative venture. Each film that I do is like starting a new business. It is like a new crew, new actors, new locations. I really enjoyed my career in TV news, but it was time. For me, making my own fictional films seemed like the right thing.

Were you confident that you were doing the right thing? Any second-guessing?

I was absolutely confident that I was doing the right thing. Not necessarily the website and blog, but I knew I was doing the right thing by moving on. It really felt good when I was initially doing the blog after I left ABC. But there was something gnawing that I wasn't accomplishing everything that I wanted to do. Basically I have been living something that I thought I would do in my 20s – move out to L.A. and become a filmmaker. This was the time to take a chance and the technology was such I could afford it.

I didn't have any doubts about leaving ABC. It was time. But I did have a lot of second thoughts about how I should approach my next act. I knew I wanted to continue to make media, but the question was should I make documentaries, narratives, shorts, feature length? A video blog? I needed to find what got me up in the morning. Financially, I thought if it all came crashing down, I could go back to the news business as a freelance editor because the gig economy is pretty big right now. I felt it could be a fallback.

Anything you would have done differently?

The little misdirection I might have taken really brought me to where I am. I would have had to do the blog to realize I was doing the same thing that I did at ABC and remind myself … wait a minute, I can make movies now. That process gave me the idea to do the movie.

The biggest mistake I made was rushing. In search of what I wanted to try next. I didn't have a real plan before I left ABC, which is exactly what you say you should not do.

When I decided to try my hand at filmmaking I wanted to make my first film fast. I should have slowed down some and enjoyed the journey more.

It would have been better for me if I had started off on small films. I enjoyed doing them. But I would have concentrated on short films first if I had to do it over again. And the writing is always challenging.

How do you measure your success?

I would measure my success by making a little bit of money. It's really nice to get people happy about your product and want to discuss it. I'm not looking to become wealthy, but I am looking to make a product and be able to sell it.

Importantly, success for me is touching people emotionally. Of course, I want to make money. Filmmaking is a business. I have learned if you are true to yourself in your writing and directing people and enjoy your work, hopefully the money will come.

How big a role did financial rewards play in your decision to make a transition?

Financial rewards did not play a huge role. I was fortunate enough to be with an organization, Disney ABC, that provided us with a comfortable retirement plan, 401(k) and all that stuff.

For most, the arts aren't big moneymakers, particularly if you are creating something fresh. I knew that going in, and I was just ready. My feeling was if I got into any kind of trouble financially, I knew that I could go back and do some freelance. As long as we don't go crazy and buy a Tesla everything will work out.

I have been able to keep costs down because I do pretty much everything that I can do. I write it, edit it, direct it. My wife is the composer. Even my dog plays a role.

One way I can make money today on my films today is through Amazon Prime per-view streaming fees. My hope is to make enough money to continue to make films.

How did your preparation help you succeed?

The preparation was working behind the camera on the blog videos and then the Web series. Working in TV prepared me to be very exacting in my preparation of a production. But what was missing from my years in television was an understanding of emotion.

Although much of what I learned creatively, technically and running on deadlines on shows like *Good Morning America*, *Primetime Live*, and *20/20* [was] movable to narrative films, there was still a significant learning curve to go from reality to fiction, and I honestly continue to learn with each production.

My career, a couple of things helped. One is the technical. I worked with the top video professionals at ABC; as a result I have a solid understanding of the technical and creative side of news editing. Transferring that to fictional films took some work. The way a fictional film is paced. How the story unfolds is much different than news, so there was and is a big learning curve there. The other thing is dealing with people.

At ABC, I was a technical director, where I was crew chief for as many as 25 people on a television show. Now I am dealing with personalities and creative people.

What do you tell people who ask you for advice on starting a business?

You can't just do it. Everybody's situation is different. There are financial issues. There are family issues. What if you have a sick parent or kids in school? Some people just financially cannot do it. If you're in a position that you are able to do it, and you have some savings, then you can give it a shot. You should have a year of savings backlogged, so you are able to go back to school to learn something new if you have to, or work part time in a particular industry.

The biggest preparation is you have to feel financially comfortable in whatever it is you're going to start to do. Do the downsizing and whatever you need to do to be able to take on something new. Then hopefully your new work will start paying some kind of salary. It might not be much to start, but enough to pay the bills. That's really the bottom line.

Look at the end product. Enjoy the journey. Don't stress. I know that is very simplistic advice particularly if it is your own money.

Finally, don't rush. Enjoy the ride. Write about things you know about and are passionate about. Don't write things that include specific locations and things you need to get. Look around your house, look at your friends and things you have free access to. Then write a story with all of those things. That is the reason our dog Charlie is in every one of my films. She does it for the little hunks of cheese.

What books did you find helpful?

Your book, *What's Next? Follow Your Passion and Find Your Dream Job,* and Marc Freedman's *The Big Shift.* He's something of a pragmatist. You have to be very pragmatic.

A big source for me for what I do is YouTube interviews with writers and editors about their craft. I like TED Talks.

Any unexpected surprises?

I didn't think about the business of filmmaking. You have to sell your product – to get people's attention. That's all new for me. They're not going to be beating down your doors. You have to get buzz.

What are some of the unexpected rewards and surprises?

The most unexpected surprise about the last film at all of the festivals was how it touched people. We all ended up getting into some very personal discussions with festival goers about how they dealt with an aging parent and how dealing with the end of a mother or father's life and how it affected them. It was beautiful and amazing to have a total stranger want to discuss a personal time in their lives. That is what art is all about. Moving people, touching people emotionally.

What was the biggest challenge?

Writing was the biggest challenge. It is hard to create a world that seems real, but is fiction.

10 TIPS FOR MID-CAREER ENTREPRENEURS

I asked my friend and one of the best career coaches I know, Beverly Jones, author of *Think Like an Entrepreneur, Act Like a CEO* for her tips for budding entrepreneurs. Jones has a great perspective on this topic since she has lived it herself.

In 1999, after more than two decades as a top corporate lawyer and lobbyist, she took a golden parachute retirement package from her position as vice president of external affairs and policy at Consolidated Natural Gas. She was 53.

Jones had an inkling of what path she'd like to follow. She had always enjoyed mentoring others and had done so throughout her entire career. So it was a natural shift to find a way to take this innate ability and redirect it to create a business where she could help people navigate their work lives and get paid for it.

She was fortunate to have a modest pension, which gave her some flexibility about how fast she needed to ramp up her venture. To stay engaged and make some income, she initially did some legal work for a law firm in Washington, D.C., as well as some lobbying for a nonprofit.

Then to add the credentials she needed to enter the new field, she went back to school to obtain a Leadership Coaching Certificate from Georgetown University. But she didn't stop there. She attended coaching workshops, hired her own career coach, and read extensively about the field and related areas such as self-help, spirituality, and fitness. "In time, I began to find my own voice as a coach and felt confident I was doing what I was meant to do," Jones says.

Among her coaching clients at her Clearways Consulting (clearwaysconsulting.com), based in Washington, D.C., are attorneys, business owners, and high-level government workers (and the occasional friend pro bono) – many of them mid-life looking for their "what's next."

Here are Jones's top tips for those looking to launch their own business.

1. **Be clear about your goals**. You probably have more than one reason for starting a business. Sure, you want to earn some money. But are you also aching for more variety? Do you dream of a career that allows a more flexible lifestyle? Or do you want to take the next step with a hobby you already love? Write down what you hope to achieve, frame specific goals, and remember that your bottom line is just one way to measure your progress.
2. **Start early to prepare**. If launching your own business is something you want to do "some day," it is never too soon to start laying groundwork. If running your business will require a new set of skills, you might build expertise through local or online college courses. Or perhaps you could start a small side gig, to test your business idea and get some experience. At the same time, do what it takes to get your life in order. This could mean paying off debt and building a nest egg, committing to a fitness program so that you're in good shape to work, or creating habits that will help you be more organized.
3. **Learn business basics**. From choosing a legal structure to paying your taxes, you must comply with laws. The rules that apply will depend on the state where you live, the nature of your activities, and the kind of entity you create. And, even when you have a small-business accountant, it is vital that you know how to measure your costs, keep track of expenses, and decide what to charge. You can take courses, work for a spell in a small business, or apply to a business incubator, as you learn what it takes to run a company.
4. **Build your network**. As you grow as an entrepreneur, your network will be a critical asset. You can visualize it as a complex pattern of human relationships, spreading out around you in concentric circles. While the innermost ring may include close friends and family, further out are

(*Continued*)

10 TIPS FOR MID-CAREER ENTREPRENEURS (*Cont'd*)

people you know only slightly, like alumni of your college, members of your clubs, and folks who live nearby. Everyone matters. Even your most casual contacts can support your success. Throughout your expanding network are potential mentors, collaborators, customers, and fans.

5. **Surround yourself with positive people**. As entrepreneurs, you must deal with discouraging moments. False starts, rejected proposals, and disinterested audiences are part of the game. Because emotions are contagious, one way to protect yourself from some of that negativity is to stay in touch with upbeat people. Try to reach out to the optimists in your circle, and avoid the complainers who leave you feeling down. And find other ways to surround yourself with positive voices, like reading uplifting books or finding community events that leave you feeling good.
6. **Offer and seek help**. Even though you know that connectivity is the lifeblood of small business, building a supportive community can be a challenge. A starting point is to look for opportunities to be helpful. Reach out to old friends and new acquaintances, listen to their problems, and look for small ways to offer assistance. Introduce folks with good reasons to meet each other. Support other small businesses. And give authentic praise. The more comfortable you feel as a helper, the easier it will be to ask for the support and encouragement you need.
7. **Create a social media strategy**. Even if you avoid Facebook and other apps in your personal life, don't ignore the power that social media can bring to your business. A smart mix of channels can help you check out the competition, understand your potential customers, keep up with industry news, and show off your products. It takes a while to get a feel for tools like Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest, so practice using them as you expand your network.
8. **Define and promote your brand**. Your brand sets you apart from the competition. As an entrepreneur, you will need to identify your special value, and have a plan for spreading the word. To get comfortable with projecting your unique strengths, a useful exercise is to write a brief statement summarizing your *personal* brand. Be honest with yourself about how you want others to see you. And your current brand can help pave the way for your future business. For example, if you dream of opening a doggie day care facility, your brand might include your skill as a dog trainer. You can raise your brand profile by connecting with dog lovers, whether that means posting on Twitter or volunteering with service organizations.
9. **Listen to your customers**. Turning yourself into an entrepreneur may require a shift in your mindset. When you start your business, your customers will ultimately determine whether you succeed. So now, wherever

you are in your career, cultivate the habit of listening intently to the people who are impacted by your work, including your boss and your colleagues. Make it your job to understand what your "customers" need, what they want, and what they think. And keep looking for new projects and products that might help your "customers" meet their goals.

10. **Learn to be motivated**. You may have heard that "entrepreneurs are passionate about their work." But what if you're not sure you can maintain that kind of passion? The reality is that motivation is something you *can* acquire and manage. Now, in your current job, you can develop the skill of triggering your own drive and enthusiasm. One way to build motivation is by setting small goals, taking action, and experiencing moments of success. If you have put off tackling an important project, schedule an hour to focus on it exclusively. Quickly create a list of small subtasks and power through them for the 60 minutes. By actually getting some things done, you will motivate yourself to do even more on the project tomorrow.

HANNON'S THREE-PART FITNESS PROGRAM

Become financially fit. Find ways to get lean and mean. If you're financially fit, possibilities open for you to try new things and shift into new areas of work. Debt is a dream killer. The biggest stumbling block for many midlife entrepreneurs is money. Do a budget. Where can you trim expenses? Adjust your spending to a stricter budget. Pay down debts. Downsize your home, perhaps. This can take time, but it's critical. You may not be able to take a salary from your new venture initially, so savings socked away to tap and an emergency fund are essential ingredients to your eventual success.

Become physically fit. I don't mean running fast miles or bench-pressing, but walk a mile or two regularly, swim a few times a week perhaps. Eat nutritiously. When you're fit, you bring positivity to your work and your life. It gives you the stamina and energy you will need to face new challenges. You'll be mentally sharper, feel good, and a can-do attitude emerges. People will want to be around you and work with you.

Become spiritually fit. I don't mean a religious practice per se. Starting your own business is demanding. Find a place to center yourself, and de-stress. You will draw strength from having a ballast, a core of calmness, as you head down this path. You might practice yoga, tai chi, or meditation, or walk your dog along quiet pathways, as I do.

Shape Your Network

I can't overemphasize the importance of networking to help your business get off the ground and grow. As I like to say, networking is one letter away from *not* working. And it rings true. Your network, your tribe, your believers are the ones who are going to propel you forward to success.

Shift slowly. Prepare for a change. Look where you want to shift. Network with people doing those jobs. Ask how they got there, how they do their jobs, what they love about it. People love to talk about themselves and their work.

Connect with a mentor. Who do you know to chaperone you along your new path? Arrange to meet with your mentor, either in person or online, to help you learn the ropes. If you are in the exploring stage, you might start your exploration with a virtual mentor. Your local Rotary Club or chamber of commerce can be a wonderful source of mentors and advisers.

One of my favorite sources is PivotPlanet (PivotPlanet.com), a service that connects people with expert advisers working in hundreds of professions for affordable one-on-one, one-hour videoconference, phone, or in-person sessions. Most one-hour sessions range from $40 to $125. You might also reach out to a start-up coach, such as Jeff Williams at Bizstarters.com, who works with "aspiring business owners" over age 50. You can tap into podcasts and videos on his website aimed at newbies.

Be specific about what help you need. When you do identify someone you want to reach out to, be specific about your goals for the connection. Write them down in your journal to help you focus on what you hope to achieve. You might have a certain business task at hand, something as simple as wanting to give you advice on how to spruce up your image, such as proper attire. It could be someone who can guide you on the best way to price your product or service. Or perhaps you're looking for someone who can introduce you to some of the players in the market. Don't rule out a mentor younger than you, who can offer more experience and direction when it comes to areas like technology or social media where you might not feel quite as confident.

Comb your circle of friends, family, and business colleagues. Tap into LinkedIn and Facebook contacts who are running their own businesses for direction on how they got started and more.

Invest in additional education and training. Add skills and certificates. It doesn't have to be a full-blown degree program. Start with one or two classes. Invest in additional education and training. Research the skills, diplomas, or even degrees required for your new business. Add the essential expertise before you make the leap, and if you can, do it part time while you're still employed in career number one. Startupinstitute.com, for example, offers courses on upping your sales expertise and digital marketing.

Cruise the web. Check out StartupNation.com, a site dedicated to small-business group and community forums. Tap into entrepreneurship resources at EIX.org. If you're seeking an encore venture focused on social impact, visit Encore.org (encore.org/for-encore-seekers) for resources to help you get started.

Be a bookworm. Pick up copies of my books, *What's Next?* or *Great Jobs for Everyone 50+*. (I couldn't resist a plug.) Encore.org's vice president Marci Alboher's *The Encore Career Handbook,* Chris Farrell's *Purpose and a Paycheck: Finding Meaning, Money, and Happiness in the Second Half of Life,* John Tarnoff's *Boomer Reinvention: How to Create Your Dream Career Over 50,* and Nancy Collamer's *Second-Act Careers: 50+ Ways to Profit from Your Passions During Semi-retirement* are must-reads for great ideas and inspiration.

Volunteer. I also recommend doubling down your networking efforts in any associations or organizations devoted to your passion or hobby. Get involved and volunteer. Attend meetings. You never know who you might meet who can give you invaluable assistance while you research starting your own hobby-based business. Meantime, keep in mind, these may be the people who in time are your ultimate customers. This is your clan.

Reach out to your alumni network. You never know who can bring you clients or help you build your business via an alumni association at your college or university, or even an alumni group at one of your former employers. Your alma mater's career service center very well may have resources devoted to mid-life entrepreneurs such as an incubator on campus, or continuing education classes geared toward career changers and entrepreneurs that are offered online, or via weekend workshops. You might even be able to make a connection to access current students who can lend a hand.

Don't ignore the big players in the small-business help arena. Your local Rotary Club or chamber of commerce can be a wonderful source of mentors and advisers. Find a local chapter of SCORE (score.org), a nonprofit association devoted to teaching entrepreneurs the ins and outs of getting underway. SCORE is a resource partner with the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). The organization, founded in 1954, is headquartered in Herndon, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., and has around 300 chapters throughout the United States and its territories, with more than 10,000 volunteer mentors nationwide. Both working and retired executives and business owners donate time and expertise as business counselors. SCORE mentors will advise you for free, in person or online. Seek out a local Small Business Development Center (americassbdc.org).

Be prepared for setbacks. Starting a new business takes time and can feel like a bit of a roller coaster, even when it's an area you know well from years of being a customer or a participant. It might take off zooming, but chances are there will be blips along the way in the early days. It's easy to be discouraged, but that's when a solid mentor by your side comes in handy.

Chapter Recap

In this chapter, we learned that patience is a key to letting your business plan unfold. We reviewed the importance of being fit financially, physically, and spiritually as a core blueprint for success. Sometimes the path to starting your own enterprise only emerges over a period of time. You need to allow yourself the space for discovery, and you must be willing to set limits on just how much of your own capital you are willing to commit to your venture. There's a line between starting a vanity business and truly engaging in an entrepreneurial venture that has the potential to have both personal *and* financial rewards. Last, you must be pragmatic in order not to blow through your savings and risk your future financial security.

YOUR TO-DO LIST

- Begin a journal in a notebook or computer file for your "Be My Own Boss" program.
- In your journal, write your professional and personal goals for your own potential business.
- Do some brainstorming and create a list of the types of businesses that might be possible for you to launch that revolve in the orbit of your passion or hobby. Hint: For me, with my equine preoccupation, it might be to open a tack shop

that sells equipment, clothing, and supplies; start a riding lesson business; write books and expert columns and newsletters; or even launch a start-up equestrian magazine in my niche.

- Make a list of people you know who have started businesses from their passion or hobby, and then reach out and ask them what their challenges were, how they handled setbacks, and for advice.
- Write down in your journal your goals for working with a mentor to help you focus on what you hope to achieve.
- Start Kerry's fitness program. Set up a routine exercise program. Do a budget. Take a class in mindfulness or meditation.