DROP OUTS

FORTY-SOME YEARS AGO, THREE SIXTIES TYPES DROPPED OUT. WE DROP IN ON THEM.

Harvard may have the lowest dropout rate of any college. Though years off are common, currently around 98 percent of those who matriculate at Harvard College receive their bachelor's degrees within six years, according to the Registrar's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

Several celebrated Harvard dropouts have done quite nicely sans diploma. These include R. Buckminster Fuller '17, Robert Lowell '37, Bonnie Raitt '72, Bill Gates '77, and Matt Damon '92 in the last century alone. But what of those who do not become famous? What becomes of those who leave Harvard voluntarily and, despite multiple invitations, never return? (The College routinely contacts those who have left to ask if they wish to complete their degrees.)

We chose an era known for its radical sensibility and tracked down three members of a College class (1969) that might represent its high-water mark, to catch up with them and see if they had any regrets about the path not taken. Here are their stories.

BY CRAIG LAMBERT

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JOANNE RICCA

JOANNE RICCA
ADVENTUROUS CAREGIVER

When JOANNE RICCA was a high-school junior in Glastonbury, Connecticut, the American Field Service chose her as an exchange student to live in a Swedish town the following school year (1964-65). Students at her high school circulated a petition protesting Ricca's selection. "They thought I was un-American," she explains. "I was a beatnik, a rebel, very outspoken—I liked to stir things up. My entire junior year I wore the same thing to high school every day—a green corduroy jumper, with a black turtleneck under it in winter—because I thought people made too much of clothes. For me it was sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. I was a bad girl."

The student petition failed, and Ricca, the daughter of a neurologist father and social-worker mother, spent her senior year in Halmstad, Sweden. Out of the country at graduation, she never received her high-school diploma. But the As on her transcript, her SATs, her acting skill in school plays, her writing talent—she won a national creative-writing prize—and her personal force ("I was very accustomed to people wanting to hear what I thought") propelled her into Radcliffe College anyway.

"The reason I went to Radcliffe was mostly that I thought Cambridge was a cool place to be in the '60s," she says. "It was not the academic program that interested me. In fact, the teaching style—big lecture courses—was one I didn't prefer." Ricca stayed two years at Radcliffe, concentrating in Scandinavian languages and literature, a field with only three undergraduate concentrators. "I thought I'd get more attention," she says. (For a course on Icelandic sagas, she attended only the first class meeting, and later showed up for the exam "only to find that it was in a language I had neglected to learn to speak! A classic nightmare. But I knew enough Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian to figure out the exam—and I passed it!") Now she calls it "a silly choice. I almost wish my parents had said, 'What do you plan to *do* with that when you graduate?' It has been pretty useless."

Nonetheless, "I had a lot of fun at Harvard," she recalls. "There were a lot of men in my life, just as I had wished. I was involved with people doing alternative things off-campus—radical politics, stuff like SDS [Students for a Democratic Society, a left-wing student group], though I was never deeply involved with SDS. I've always had a lot of interests and always been a hedonist."

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She moved off-campus as a sophomore and had a great time "hanging out, smoking dope, and having sex with a lot of different guys." Her wardrobe changed from jumpers to black Levis, motorcycle boots, and, for dress-up, a shiny black vinyl mini-dress with a big zipper up the front, with black fishnet stockings.

"The reason I dropped out was that it seemed silly for my parents to be paying a whole lot of money for me to do things I could do for free," she explains. "It wasn't *Harvard* that made me leave Harvard, it was *me*. I wanted to be young, alive, and free. Free to hitchhike around the country, check out California, try living in a commune. And I did all that. I have a number of friends who feel they missed out on the '60s. I didn't."

Ricca left Harvard and hitchhiked across the country to San Francisco during the celebrated Summer of Love in 1967. She re-

members sleeping in a cornfield in Iowa, where "a bear came and snuffled me." She ended up in a crash pad in the Haight-Ashbury district: "If you were an attractive young woman, it was not too much trouble finding a place," she explains. She later stayed for a while in a commune in Northern California, helped build People's Park in Berkeley, and worked with the Diggers, who salvaged food from Dumpsters behind grocery stores to feed street people. She avoided deep commitments. "I like to skim off the top of things and then move on," she says.

She kept life simple: three pieces of clothing and "everything I owned fit in one small bag." This allowed a lot of mobility. She hitched across the country several times. "You'd be hanging around and somebody'd say, 'Oh, so-and-so is driving to Colorado tomorrow,' and you'd say, 'I've never been to Colorado,' and off you'd go."

Her supportive parents, who had raised their two daughters with "a strong belief in personal freedom for their children—they were not into a lot of discipline," nonetheless "were not happy when I said I was going to leave Harvard and live in the Haight-Ashbury," she says. "They never helped me again financially in my life, until they died and I inherited their money. And at times I was pretty darn poor. For a few years there, they didn't hear a whole lot from us. As you can see, this was a pretty self-centered existence."

She married her first husband, Jim Ostergard, at age 21. He became captain of the *Clearwater,* the Hudson River environmental flagship launched by Harvard dropout Pete Seeger '40. They started an alternative Summerhill-style school in Puerto Rico. Later, Jim became a commercial fisherman on Cape Cod while she became a registered nurse in 1976. Three years later, she earned her nurse practitioner's certificate from a Planned Parenthood program at the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark.

The N.P. degree took some long-distance commuting, because in the mid 1970s she and Jim became, Ricca says, "back-to-the-land hippies." They found that $15,000 would buy only three acres on Martha's Vineyard, whereas in Maine they could acquire 150 acres. So in backwoods Maine they carried water in from a spring and did without electricity; children from other families had niceties

Ricca (above) at her lakeside home in rural Maine with husband Martin Bartlett, and walking with him on the frozen lake.

Photographs by Fred Field

their kids lacked. But there was a huge garden and a cow, sheep, chickens, goats, and a pig. "You could plop my kids down anywhere in the world and they'd survive," she says. "They know how to start fires, milk a goat, make cheese."

She has made her career in nursing and reproductive health, starting out in labor and delivery nursing and then, as a lay midwife, getting involved in the home-birth movement in Maine. Ricca has worked tirelessly in the family planning field in that state, even testifying at times before the state legislature on related issues.

Now she lives on a lake in rural Searsmont, Maine, and works at family-planning clinics in the Belfast and Rockland areas on a per-diem basis. "I see people of all ages, from young teens to postmenopausal women," she says. "I counsel, give exams, and do clinical work. An ob/gyn makes more money, but has less opportunity to fool around and have fun, less adventure. What I really love about my job is the hands-on part. I love talking to people about their sex lives."

She has three children, spread out from Berkeley to Maine. Her first marriage ended amicably in her early thirties; she has been married to Martin Bartlett, a retired commercial fisherman 15 years her senior, since 1989. "It was love at first sight," she says. "My number-one desire now is to spend time with him. I'm a lifelong insomniac, but Marty made me feel peaceful inside. He made me feel settled."

Ricca has a gift for languages; she learned Portuguese and spent time in Brazil. "I've actually *lived* in places that people vacation in," she says. She spent eight years on the Cape caring for her parents in their final years; at one point she asked them, "*Now* aren't you glad I went to nursing school?"

The "money part," she explains, "never had any interest for me. Look at us—we have a fabulous lifestyle." Indeed, their lakeside property on secluded Lake Quantabacook allows them to go swimming and boating from their dock all summer and to ski on the ice in wintertime.

"I go with the flow and don't judge myself," she reflects. "I feel I have all the things I wanted to accomplish—a fine family, love, work that felt simple and real. Nursing felt right immediately. My life has been about people. Dropping out was definitely the right turn to take. My life has turned out so great—happy and fulfilled. I thought that the '60s was a moment in history that I wanted to experience fully—it impacted the rest of my life and made me feel free to be an adventurer. I've lived a life without fear and I don't have any regrets."

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BERNARD LEVINE

BERNARD LEVINE CUTTING-EDGE HISTORIAN

For his first class on his first day of his freshman year, Bernard Levine went to Edwin O. Reischauer's East Asian history course. The place was full. "I sat down, as I always did, next to the prettiest girl in sight," he says. She was Chinese from Macao, and they struck up a conversation. Levine had no notebook ("Taking notes distracts me from paying attention to the speaker") but she did, and when Reischauer said something in English, Chinese, or Japanese, she recorded it in the corresponding language. "She was raised all over Asia by her uncle, who owned the biggest circus in Asia," he recalls. "She had read the *entire reading list* for the course that summer! I was a little intimidated by that, to say the least. Still, I realized that one of us must be wrong here: either I am really *under*-prepared, or she is really *over*-prepared. Probably we were both wrong, but it got me thinking: do I want to spend my limited time here in big sur-

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vey courses, where you could learn everything you need to know from books?"

The answer was no, and Levine navigated his studies in an unusual manner: taking most of his coursework in graduate seminars. He concentrated in economics with a special interest in city planning. "I had a great time," he says, "and I would have left a lot sooner if I hadn't discovered graduate seminars. Though it never occurred to me that anyone would want to leave a place like Harvard—people fight like hell to get in, why would you leave? And it was great fun to be there at that time."

He lived in Leverett House, did some woodcarving, and made a few friends—"I was outgoing compared to how I am now." Though he had attended what he calls a "leftist" private secondary school—Commonwealth School in Boston—and looked like a hippie, with abundant red hair and a bushy beard, "Dope-smoking and left-wing politics didn't interest me," he says.

Remarkably, Levine dropped out only one semester before graduation. "Aha! moments, the elation that comes from doing something you really want to do and having it work out well, those peak experiences—I wouldn't stick with something if it didn't produce that kind of experience," he says. "I had been getting that from transportation economics and agricultural economics, and from working at Design Research. But I came back senior year and I wasn't getting it anymore—it was over.

"I knew I didn't want to do city planning, to play in that bureaucratic world," he continues. "I also knew that if I stayed another semester they would hand me a diploma, and that diploma is going to open a whole lot of doors that I don't want to go through. And I know that I am not real strong, and if I have that key, at some point I'm going to be seduced and want to go through one of those doors. So by not having the diploma, I will remove the temptation. That actually worked out very well, because I *was* tempted, more than once."

Dropping out cost Levine his student deferment during the Vietnam War. "I had a medical exemption and a high lottery number. When the draft notice came, I went to an allergist in San Francisco who called me 'another one of those hippie malingerers.' Then he gave me the skin test and said, 'I don't know how you're alive. You have the most severe allergies I've seen, ever.' "

Levine's parents reacted to his decision to drop out with "horror and fury," but it didn't cause a rift because, he relates, "The rift was there from age three. They never had any interest in me except as an expression of their own desires and aspirations. I did not ask for their permission or approval to leave college, and wouldn't have gotten it."

Home life had never been cheery. (Levine was named after George Bernard Shaw, more for the author's socialist politics than his literary achievements.) His father, Leo Levine '33, was an immunologist who had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s; his mother, Selma Levine, A.B.E. '67, was secretary to the senior tutor at Dudley House. At Commonwealth School, Levine intentionally got into trouble so that on Saturday he would have to do menial chores at the school as punishment—he preferred that to life with his parents in suburban Newton.

In February 1969, Levine headed west, looking to connect with a love interest in San Francisco—who promptly returned east to enroll in college. He knocked about the city for a couple of years, working as a stevedore and in construction. His first job, hanging sheetrock, had five other Harvard students on the site. "I realized that I wasn't strong enough to do this kind of work," he says, "and that it wasn't getting me far enough away from Harvard!"

He tried a small business gathering wild yarrow stalks in the hills near San Francisco, which natural food stores sold in bundles of 50 because dividing piles of yarrow is a classical method of consulting the *I Ching*. "Then they found a lower-priced source," Levine says. "That was my first lesson in business."

Bernard Levine (opposite) impaled by a trick knife, and in his garden in Oregon (above), where bowling balls on poles add a decorative element.

In September 1971, a couple at the house Levine lived in invited him to come to a flea market; they were moving and had some items to sell. He went to a Goodwill store to find something he might sell at the flea market, and purchased a box of old knives for $3.00—30 knives, as it turned out, at a dime each. "I knew less than nothing about knives," he says. "The little I knew was wrong. But I spread my knives out on a cloth and was overwhelmed by people."

Levine learned that there were knife collectors, and the brand names that were collectible. "It was a revelation," he admits. He continued selling knives at flea markets on weekends. "It turned out to be much longer hours than any job," he says. "I'd spend all week scrounging up knives and on Friday bring them to a cutlery shop in North Beach where they'd restore them for me. The grandfather there—born in Romania in 1885—taught me a lot about the European cutlery business in the early twentieth century.

"My great love in school had been history," he says. "Old knives are a good window into history, and a window that looks out in every direction." From the very first day, Levine recorded every knife he sold, including brand markings and a description, eventually logging 13,000 entries. This knowledge prepared him for his first book, *Knifemakers of Old San Francisco* (1978), which one reviewer called "the most important book ever published on antique American knives." *Levine's Guide to Knives and Their Values* (1984, with three subsequent editions) has become the standard reference work for knife collectors, dealers, and aficionados.

He has written prolifically for knife magazines and for mainstream publications (his "Whut Izzit?" column on knife identification has run since 1978 in *Knife World*) and published five books, moderates online knife forums, appraises knives, does consignment sales on commission, and for 30 years has worked as an expert witness for knife-related questions like patents, liability, and legality of ownership. He considers exposing frauds—things like "fantasy knives" that purport to be antiques but aren't based on any historical prototype—"one of my favorite things to do."

Photographs by Michael James Photography

In 1987, after almost two decades in San Francisco, Levine bought a house with a yard in Eugene, Oregon. He lives a largely solitary existence: he has never married or had children, hasn't had any particular love interest or even, he says, close friends. He's passionate about his garden ("I spent most of the 1990s in the garden"), designed and maintained with the help of a landscape architect and a professional gardener, which has been featured on national tours. Books now fill the walls of his house, even though he didn't open a volume for about five years after leaving college. Two years ago, he resumed intensive work on a "really big novel" that he first drafted in the mid 1990s.

Shortly after moving to Oregon, Levine read an article about fellow Harvard dropout Bill Gates '77 and asked himself, "If I had as much money as Bill Gates, what would be different in my life?" He came up with two things he didn't have: a really good library and a really good garden. "I realized that I didn't have to start Microsoft or be a billionaire to do both of those," he says. "So I've done them."

JENNIFER BOYDEN
BACKWOODS BRAHMIN

"THE FURTHER UP THE HOLLER you go, the more backwoods you get," says Jennifer Boyden. "Both the terrain and the people." "Holler" is slang for "hollow," the hollowed-out area between two mountain ridges, sparsely dotted with houses. It's a common term in West Virginia, where flat land is scarce. At the bottom of the holler is typically a stream, with a road winding alongside it, heading out to the main road and civilization. "Up the holler" is the direction away from the main road, where the landscape becomes wilder and the people live farther apart and are shyer, more reserved. Years ago, when Boyden and her daughter first drove Boyden's new son-in-law to their home "up the holler," they went so far without seeing a house that he thought they were playing a prank on him—that Boyden lived somewhere else entirely and there was no house there at all.

But there was. In fact, Boyden has had her backwoods house in Roane County, West Virginia, for more than three decades. It's a long, long way from her Boston Brahmin upbringing. It would be "an understatement" to say that the Boydens were from Boston, she explains. "I can't think of anybody in my father's family who didn't go to Harvard. It was the only thing ever considered." The New Hampshire property where the Boydens summer has been in the family since 1799. One notable progenitor, Roland William Boyden, A.B. 1885, LL.B. '88, LL.D. 1924, was a lawyer, a banker with the House of Morgan, and a Harvard Overseer who died childless, "so we got his loot," Boyden explains. "We've run the family for I don't know how many generations on Uncle Roland's money."

Nonetheless, "some of Pop's family took a left turn," she says. Her father, Roland William Boyden '32, LL.B. '35, Ph.D. '47, didn't enjoy his year with the white-shoe Boston law firm of Ropes & Gray, and went off to teach at the legendary, avant-garde Black Mountain College in North Carolina while studying history at Harvard. In 1947 he was among the founders of the progressive Marlboro College in Marlboro, Vermont, where he was a dean and history professor until his death in 1981.

Jennifer, the eldest of three girls, was packed off to another forward-thinking place, the Cambridge School of Weston, one of the first co-ed boarding schools. "We were snobby about the public-school kids with their hair all teased up," Boyden recalls. "Our hair was long and straight, like Joan Baez. At our school, the boys' hair was too long, and the girls' skirts were too short. I had a wonderful time, and could postpone being a miserable teenager until I got to Harvard."

When Boyden's Radcliffe acceptance arrived, her parents "were so delighted that I decided to go. That's not a good reason to choose a college." She also wanted to experience life in a big city. But once enrolled, she didn't like the size of big lecture courses and found classes like French "too hard. I remember sit-

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOANNE RICCA

Photographs by Brian T. Murphy

ting in the basement of Cabot House trying to read French in despair." Furthermore, "You never knew any professors"—her father had taught history classes in their living room—"and it didn't feel very friendly." Boyden flunked a Spanish course after sleeping through a final exam, "and when you sleep through a final, you know you don't want to be there." She shared an off-campus apartment with her friend and fellow dropout-to-be Joanne Ricca, but unlike Ricca, "I was not into the hippie scene," she says, "and didn't like smoking pot."

What Boyden did cherish was Phillips Brooks House, where she volunteered to tutor inner-city students in Roxbury and, over the summer, taught poor rural kids in a PBH program in Kentucky and West Virginia. "I really loved it," she says. "It was a whole different culture, with its own dialect, music, and cuisine, and fundamentalist snake-handling religions. The people were warm and accepting."

A year later, she dropped out. Her family supported her choice: "They were worried about me because I was moping around," she recalls. Boyden applied to the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program. "I was running away from a lot of things," she explains. "One was that '60s scene. Another was having to be a Boyden intellectual. I romanticized—and still do romanticize—the simple life in the country and the people who live a less complex life. It's very satisfactory if you have your health and Uncle Roland's money in the background. It's difficult if you live in rural poverty. But in 1967 I thought that was the way to go."

In West Virginia, Boyden, attached to a county agency, moved in with a local family that had "a tiny little kitchen with a table, a tiny living room with a coal stove, and one bedroom downstairs, which they gave me. The family of five slept in the attic. The father was a coal miner with black lung disease; he had disability payments. They had a big garden and rolled their own cigarettes with Prince Albert tobacco, and there was lots of instant coffee with 'canned cream'—it's actually canned milk, an Appalachian staple. They went to the store only when the check came. People were not well off and indoor plumbing was an unusual luxury."

After a short period of work as a community organizer, Boyden began teaching second grade in 1968, "and you don't know much about teaching school when you've been at Harvard only two years," she says, "and not at the Education School, either." She also met Claude "Wes" Westfall, just out of the Air Force, who became an auto mechanic; they married after a few months and had two children, Andrew and Elizabeth, in 1969 and 1971.

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In 1972 Boyden enrolled in Morris Harvey College in Charleston, West Virginia, driving an hour each way on bad roads to study child development and education. Wes "wasn't too keen on the idea" of Boyden returning to college, and as a part-time student, it took her until 1979 to complete her degree and get a full-time teaching job.

Wes didn't like her going to work, either, feeling it was a "step back toward my old life in New England," Boyden says. "And it was different from staying home, doing the laundry, and canning tomatoes." They divorced in 1980. Boyden stayed single only about a year before remarrying: she wed John Kampsnider, a school psychologist who had four children from two previous marriages. They didn't have children of their own: "We decided they'd be obnoxious," she explains, smiling. "We were both hot-tempered."

Boyden had a long career in teaching young children in the public schools of West Virginia, settling into her greatest love, kindergarten teaching, from 1989 until she retired at 60 in 2008. Her kindergartners "were almost always poor kids. As a teacher, my goal was to make sure they had a good day, despite whatever wasn't going right at home. The school even fed them two square meals. And they didn't watch TV."

She and Kampsnider "grew apart—they were all pretty rough years," and divorced in 2008. Boyden and her sisters cared for their mother in her final illness before she passed away early this year. "I feel kind of lost right now," she says. "Retirement and divorce and my mother's death all came really close together. I haven't quite figured out what's happening next. In another way, it's exciting—63 is not old at all."

HM

What's your take on dropping out of Harvard? Visit harvardmag.com/extras to see other readers' stories and opinions and share yours.

Her son and daughter, now 40 and 39, both have houses in Birmingham, Alabama. Boyden foresees spending the winters in Birmingham and summers at the old Boyden place in New Hampshire, where she plans to spend most of her time. She hopes to travel, and wants to see the Himalayas before she dies.

And another possibility beckons. Three of her five grandchildren attend a progressive Waldorf school in Birmingham, where Boyden came out of retirement briefly to substitute teach. "It was amazing to be in a school that does things right," she says, "after fighting an uphill battle for years in the public schools, against people who wanted to test, test, test." Teaching in a Waldorf school is a big commitment, though: the same teacher stays with the students from first through eighth grades. Yet Jennifer Boyden doesn't deny that she's tempted to drop back in.

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, is deputy editor of this magazine.

Jennifer Boyden, opposite and below, with Waldorf school students, one of whom (below) is her granddaughter Geneva Avery.