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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

A Dream of Being a Whitewater Rafting Guide

Daniel Stillman loves his new life guiding and camping on scenic Western rivers



Most people in their 50s don't think about becoming a whitewater rafting guide out West. But Dan Stillman did. And now he's doing it. PHOTO: ERICA BIGGERT

By *Julie Halpert*

April 22, 2018 10:03 p.m. ET

Daniel Stillman quit his full-time job as a physical therapist last year, driven by a challenge he had wanted to pursue for decades.

He became a full-time white-water rafting guide, helping lead multiday trips on rivers in three Western states over the course of the summer.

The job is seasonal and physically demanding. It requires loading and unloading the rafts with thousands of pounds of gear, and sometimes rowing as much as 15 miles a day, depending on the river.

DANIEL STILLMAN

Age: 52

Hometown: Asheville, N.C.

Primary career: Physical therapist

Current path: Guide for multiday white-water rafting trips

Why this path: Mr. Stillman loves being outdoors, listening to the guests' stories around the campfire and sleeping under the stars.

It requires great skill to navigate the rapids as well.

“The difficulty lies in reading the current, anticipating when to turn and how much to angle the boat,” says Mr. Stillman, who is 52. “We look out for rocks, which can pin a boat, and big waves, which can flip a boat.”

It helps that Mr. Stillman has always been athletic. He ran the Boston Marathon in 1994 and has been a mountain biker since he was 26.

He plans to return to the job in June, having spent the off-season as a part-time physical therapist in Asheville, N.C., where he and his wife still live. Mr.

Stillman has worked as a physical therapist in the area since 1988.

Mr. Stillman's first experience in white-water rafting was in 1991 in Asheville, when he and his wife went on a guided trip with another couple. The water was very high, the raft flipped and his wife's friend couldn't swim. The guide had to rescue them from the water.

Mr. Stillman says he was invigorated. "I thought, 'This looks really cool. How do you become a guide?'"

He began working as a guide in Asheville on the weekends a few years later. Though he longed to spend more time at it, he wasn't financially ready to leave his full-time physical-therapy job at the time, he says.

Now his children are grown and he has fewer expenses. So, two years ago he started looking for a job as a white-water-raft guide for multiday trips out West.

"I wanted to pursue this dream while I was physically strong enough," he says.

He got plenty of rejections at first, because of his age. He ultimately found a job with Northwest Rafting Co. in Hood River, Ore. He gave notice at his physical-therapy job last April, and six weeks later he headed to Oregon.

"It was super scary when I quit," he says. "I remember being in Kansas, driving out west. There was a bad snowstorm that grounded me for a half a day. I am heading west thinking, 'What the heck did I do? I had a good life. Why did I give that up'?"

But any doubts vanished once he hit the water.

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For the first two trips, Mr. Stillman rowed a boat with gear in it but no guests. After that, he was made a river guide, helping to lead some 10 trips over the course of the summer on Oregon's Rogue River, the Lower Klamath River in California and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River in Idaho.

Still, it wasn't the rafting part that fazed him; it was the cooking. Guides have to prepare gourmet meals in a camp setting. And when the trips cost more than \$1,000 per adult, the customers expect high-quality meals. But he

succeeded with his first meal of steak, salad and baked potatoes.

For many of his guests, it was the first time they'd experienced the wilderness. Highlights included watching a Bald Eagle chase a Blue Heron, and getting 20 feet from a bear who stumbled into the camp kitchen. Another memorable moment was jumping 15 feet off a rock into the Rogue River with a guest afraid of heights. Mr. Stillman held her hand as they jumped together.

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The workday begins at 6 a.m. and doesn't end until 10 p.m.

His wife is considering retiring from her job as a nurse so she can spend her summers in the West, too, he says.

"When I wasn't working, I was lonely," says Mr. Stillman.

He hopes to keep working as a guide, perhaps until he's 70, he says. "As long as my body will let me."

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you're starting over, at reports@wsj.com.

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