

Second Act Stories (www.secondactstories.org)

Episode #25
Telephone Repairman Follows A Life-Long Dream:
Designing Women's Shoes

Who	Audio Segment
Chris Donovan	<p>It was a two-day course over a weekend, by this European shoe designer, his name was Aki Choklat-I said, "You know, I'm gonna take this?" I'm gonna bring my designs down and show him. I wanted to get some sort of critique from him.</p> <p>So, the first day of class was just drills in design, drills, and drawing, and all this other stuff. And at the end of the day, he pulled me aside and he says, he goes, "You were born to do this." He goes, "There's..." If I choke up throughout this, I hope.</p> <p>Andy: No problem.</p> <p>But he said, you know, "You were born to do this." He goes, "You have to go for a master's," and the only place they offered masters are in Europe.</p>
	INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major life changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>When I first heard, Chris Donovan's story, I thought to myself, I don't care what it takes. I have to interview this man.</p> <p>It took several months and a dozen or so email exchanges. But last month, I finally traveled to Massachusetts with only one thing in mind: interview the telephone repairman who is now focused solely on the one thing he always wanted to do in life: design women's shoes.</p> <p>Chris Donovan and his partner Steve Wierzbicki invited me into their home and I set up the microphones. And here's the interview the emerged.</p>
Andy	So, I just wanna start with some background. You were a telephone line repairman for 25 plus years?
Chris	I had a lot of jobs in the phone company. I started out as a telephone operator. I ended up as a repairman. I wasn't outside on the telephone poles, but I was inside in the central offices where I did all the wiring, and connecting of fiber optics, and stuff like that. So, yeah, you know, it was a good job. I mean, it was a very secure, but it wasn't fulfilling at all.

Andy	So, take me back to your love of women's shoes and where this begins, and this kind of interest that you have?
Chris	Oh, okay. I know the exact moment it happened. I was a junior in high school. It was a parochial school, so all the girls wore these awful uniforms, like mustard yellow and a polyester bright blue...
Andy	Same thing every day?
Chris	<p>Oh, every day. And they hated it obviously. And to express themselves, they would always either do their hair insanely big, and they started wearing the platforms. And I remember one of the girls walked in a pair of platforms, it was so high. And I'm looking, and I was wondering how she walked in on those. And it's like it just doesn't seem, it was so cool as like, "What could you do with that?" I mean, the possibilities on that could be incredible. And I started drawing in my humanities notebook, in the margins, and I just started sketching-</p> <p>I tried to sketch her shoes, and it continued. It continued for the next 35 years. Whenever I sat down anywhere, any kind of scrap of paper, on the back of all my work orders, I would be sketching shoes. You know, on the back of napkins in restaurants.</p> <p>It was just I always loved. There was something about shoes that just drove me crazy as far as sculptural aspect of it.</p>
Andy	So Chris is sketching women's shoes in high school. And this continued during his 25+ years working for Verizon. He even transferred to the company's Providence, Rhode Island office so he could take some night classes at the Rhode Island School of Design.
Chris	<p>Yeah, it was an amazing school, and they had night courses which I actually could afford. But they didn't have any... There was no other outlet. There was no shoes. Basically, I started taking anything I could just to get into the creative idea.</p> <p>And then, a fashion course popped up. I had never seen it before. And I'm like, "It's, you know, something. I'm gonna take this." So, I signed up for it, and I was the first one there because we get excited. And so, I'm sitting in class in the back, and all these other students that are coming in, and they were all young and beautiful and, you know, all these things. And the teacher walked in, and she immediately looked at me, she goes, "Oh, you must be looking for photography." And I'm like, "No, I'm looking for fashion." And she laughed. And she goes, "Okay, okay." So, she started the class. And...</p>
Andy	One of these things is not like the other.

Chris	<p>Right. I stood out. I, apparently, looked like a photographer. And so, she started talking about, "Oh, we're gonna be doing seasons and stuff like that." And I'm like, "Can I do accessories?" And she goes, "Well, like what? Women's shoes?" And I go, "Yeah." And she goes, "Okay. You can do women shoes. Everybody else will be doing clothing but you'll be doing shoes." So, that was the very first time I did anything as far as delving into the path of the fashion world.</p>
Andy	<p>So Chris is working at the phone company by day and taking night courses in the evening. And then something changed his life.</p>
Chris	<p>I got diagnosed with prostate cancer.</p> <p>I was pretty young. I was 50 years old. It was a big surprise because there's no history of it or anything like that. And so, it was funny because I think in my family, we had people who had passed away from cancer, and it was just like one of my biggest fears. You know, like, I was always dreading that someday I might get cancer and, of course, then it happens. And we went through the surgery, and I've been quite, you know, clear ever since.</p>
Andy	<p>That's great.</p>
Chris	<p>So, really, happy about it. But it also changes the way you think.</p> <p>It made me realize I'm a lot braver than I thought. Secondly, you know, we have only a certain amount of time here, you know? Do I wanna be laying on my deathbed saying, "Oh, I'm so glad I played it safe." You know, and it was like, "No, I know I had more in me." So, it's just like, I wouldn't be proud of that. You know, and all the things I worked for all my life, the security, you know, and even though my life was really great, it wasn't miserable. It wasn't what it could be. You know, and I wanted to do something bigger. And that's when I knew I was like, "I need to follow this. I need to find out why I have this passion for shoes."</p>
Andy	<p>Chris started to search all over the internet for classes in shoe design. But nothing really seemed to fit. Until one day, a course popped up in New York City.</p>
Chris	<p>It was a two-day course over a weekend, by this European shoe designer, his name was Aki Choklat. I said, "You know, I'm gonna take this?" I'm gonna bring my designs down and show him. I wanted to get some sort of critique from him.</p> <p>So, I got there. They were like 20...actually, with me 20 people in the class. Usually, it's only like six or eight. And people came from all over the United States for this class, which really surprised me. And was, well, what didn't surprise me, it was like 19 women and me. So, that tends to be the ratio.</p>

Andy	Again, one of these is not like the other...
Chris	I stuck out. So, the first day of class was just drills in design, drills, and drawing, and all this other stuff. And at the end of the day, he pulled me aside and he says, he goes, "You were born to do this." He goes, "There's..." If I choke up throughout this, I hope.
Andy	No problem.
Chris	But he said, you know, "You were born to do this." He goes, "You have to go for a master's," and the only place they offered masters are in Europe. He goes, "I would suggest either Italy or London, and I will write you a letter to get into any school you want."
Andy	He just pulls you aside from the other 19 people?
Chris	Yes.
Andy	And he says "you've got something here?"
Chris	Yes.
Andy	Wow.
Chris	So, this was the first time anybody, especially from the fashion world said, "Wow. You know, you've got something." So that blew my mind. I mean, I spent 35 years drawing shoes and having someone to tell you like that it was like, I was so exhilarated. My God, my heart was jumping out of my chest. And so, what we ended up doing was,-he started giving me pamphlets saying, you know, "I really think you should be doing this, and this, and this." And I'm like, "Guy, I have a house, and I have a spouse, and I have a big fat dog at the house. You know, what do I do?" You know, I was like, "I can't just drop. I have a job, you know." So, I went back to the hotel that night and I called Steve back at home. And he says, "What did they say?" And I go, "Well, he wants me to go to Europe for master's." And without even...
Andy	Take your time.
Chris	Sorry.
Andy	Take your time, Chris.
Chris	Without even hesitation, he said, "Well, we'll sell the house if we have to." And I'm like, "Will you drop everything and, you know, have me do this?" And he said, "Yeah, because it's that important."
Andy	In a separate interview, I asked Chris' spouse Steve about that telephone conversation.

Steve	<p>Well, first of all, I was super excited that he finally found a program for shoes. You know, since I've known him, he has drawn shoes. In middle of conversations, he'd be looking straight at you, but drawing a shoe. I love that.</p> <p>And if you have a passion, you got to follow it. So, when he called from New York and said that the designer wanted him to go to a master's class, I can't stop that.</p>
Andy	<p>Chris and Steve didn't have to sell their house. But they did take the money they had saved for a major kitchen renovation and put it towards Chris' tuition at Polimoda, one of the best fashion design institutes in the world. Yes, with Aki Choklat's letter of recommendation, Chris was accepted and packed his bags for Florence, Italy.</p>
Andy	<p>What were the first couple of months like?</p>
Chris	<p>Awful. It was winter. Okay, so their winter. So, it rained every single day. I had to, and I'm gonna sound like my grandfather, I had to walk up the tallest hill in Florence every day carrying about 50 pounds of shoe lasts.</p> <p>And on top of that, the stuff they were teaching me, I wasn't getting at all. I was like, "They're trying to teach me collections and all this." Other stuff that mostly students had bachelor's in fashion. And this was basically my first time, and so I'm trying to figure out what you're trying to talk to me about? Because all I ever did was draw pretty shoes, you know. And so, yeah, the first few months was a massive struggle to just to figure out. Yeah, I thought about leaving.</p>
Andy	<p>But for Chris there was a clarifying moment in an important conversation with one of his professors.</p>
Chris	<p>Actually, I was trying to do my lookbook, they call it. I had to produce this lookbook through photoshop and create this real fashionable thing, you know, showing my line. And so, I'm sitting there trying to do it, and she came over to me, and she looked at it, and she goes, "That's awful. What are you doing?"</p> <p>And I like start laughing. I'm like, "Oh, I'm trying to do my lookbook. I've read to do this fashion book." And she goes, "You're not fashion." She goes, "Look around you." She goes, "See all these students here." You know, she goes, "They're all 20, you know, 24." She goes, "They're fashion because you're not."</p> <p>And she goes, "What were you before this?" And I said, "I was a telephone repairman." And she says, "So you're crude? Do crude." And I knew she wasn't being mean. She wasn't. She was being honest. She's like, "Do what got you here. You know, use your own voice. Don't try to be something you're not."</p>
Andy	<p>And that was a lightbulb moment for Chris.</p>

Chris	<p>And I think that was a big thing. You know, when you go to fashion school in Italy in this amazing city, I'm trying to keep up with this fashion thing. And it's just like it wasn't me. And as soon as that happened, the wheels start turning and I did a lot of self-reflection, and all of a sudden, my design started changing. And all of a sudden, the teacher started going, "Oh, my God. You got it. That's it. You have your own voice. You're doing great." And so, yeah, and by the end, I ended up finishing at the top of my class and opening the final show with my shoes.</p>
Andy	<p>So, you get this degree, a master's, nine months in Florence, Italy. Tell me about when you came back home to the US?</p>
Chris	<p>When I came home, actually, before I left, actually the teacher that got me, that Aki, I asked him, I said, "So, what's the possibility of me going home and getting a job?" And totally serious, he's like, "None. Just none." I'm like, "Oh, oh, great, great." He was serious. He was being honest. And he goes, "You're 55?" He goes, "You got to go home, and what are you gonna do?" And I'm like... So, I did. I came home, and I was open to almost anything.</p> <p>And I figured, "Oh, I'll go and apply there and see if I could either work there or even, you know, as an intern." You know, but no one wants to see a 55-year-old intern walk in. And so, I'm like, "This isn't working out." No one even talked to me. So, that's when I just said, "I gotta keep on doing what I know and something will come up."</p>
Andy	<p>And something did come up. Chris learned about a competition on Project Runway, the popular reality tv show focused on fashion. It was a chance to meet Tim Gunn, a well-known television personality and fashion consultant, and have him critique your work.</p> <p>Chris was named one of three finalists and eventually won the competition. Here's a very short snippet of what Tim Gunn had to say about this Chris' shoe designs on Project Runway.</p>
Tim Gunn	<p>Have I seen this before? No. Does the world need this? Yes!!!</p>
Chris	<p>I got a chance to go to New York and meet Tim who's exactly the way he is on TV. He's absolutely amazing. He's kind and he's honest. And, yeah, he's a wonderful guy. All during the day that they filmed it, he stood with us, and just chatted, and gave me advice, and talked about everything. And it was a great time. It was great experience.</p>
Andy	<p>So yes, Chris won the contest. But he still didn't have any job prospects. So he ultimately decided it was time to produce his own line of shoes. Over the past year, he has been working with an Italian shoe manufacturer to produce the line. And that's what he has been doing for the past year.</p>
Andy	<p>I want you to contrast the two jobs, working as a telephone line repairman and what you're doing now, just how do you compare the two?</p>

Chris	<p>Well, one kind of suck the soul right out of you, the other one gives you a life. I think when you're creative, you know, it's this part of you that needs to express itself in some way.</p> <p>This is the hardest thing I've ever done. But it's, by far, the best thing I've ever done. My God. I'm so engaged in everything I do. And as I do it, the more I learn, I don't wanna say the easier it gets, but the challenges, you realize that I can face anything.</p>
Andy	I wanna take in a little bit of a different direction, Chris. So, if you were giving advice to someone who maybe like you had a dream, something they'd wanted to do for a long time but they put it on the back burner to make a living, what advice would you give them in terms of considering the second act?
Chris	Be prepared, practice even though you may not see an avenue now, okay. You may not know how to do it, but practice and study, and do everything you can no matter what it is to be prepared for when opportunity does happen. Because at some point, the path is gonna open up, and you're like, "This might be the way I'm gonna do it." But do whatever it is that you're interested in doing, study up on it, practice it, be prepared for when you do find the way, it's a bit of an easier path.
Andy	Okay. Final question. Earlier in the podcast, you talked about your partner, Steve. Do you think you ever would have done this if it hadn't been for him?
Chris	No. I'm gonna brag here, no. Knowing you have somebody at home who's supporting you and is willing...who realizes that...who has the same values as you that, you know, it's not about money. It's not about what you have. It's not about security. It's about experience. And I think he realizes that, you know, life has...you have a certain period of time. When you realize that life is gonna end, it makes it much more important.
Andy	We're going to give Chris' partner Steve the final word on today's podcast.
Andy	So, what sort of advice would you give to spouses or significant others in helping a partner pursue a second act like Chris?
Steve	Be supportive. It's a long hard road, work with them. Give all of yourself. It's gonna be long days. It's gonna be long nights. It's gonna be ups and downs. Don't fear the down. When it comes to businesses, everybody fails. Don't look at it as a failure. Look at it as... I don't know what you'd look at it.
Andy	Learning.
Steve	Learning. Yeah, learning. It's a learning process. Everything you do should be a learning process.

<p>Andy</p>	<p>You can get a sense of Chris' new line of shoes by visiting his website which is www.ChrisDonovanFootwear.com. As Tim Gunn of Project Runaway suggests, they are like nothing you've ever seen before.</p> <p>Chris Donovan Footwear is now in the final stages of production and is expected to launch in January of 2019.</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION</p>
<p>Andy</p>	<p>As I reflect on Chris Donovan's telephone repairman to women's shoe designer, I find a couple of powerful lessons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The impact of a traumatic event...For Chris, this was learning that he had prostate cancer. It caused him to rethink his life and what he wanted to do as he turned 50. 2) The importance of persistence...There were so many different points in this story when Chris could have just said, "To hell with this dream, I'm just play it safe at the phone company." But he kept on going. And his story isn't over as he prepares to launch Chris Donovan Footwear. 3) The power of a supportive spouse or partner...When Chris told Steve, this European designer wants me to go to Europe, Steve's first reaction was, "Let's make this happen" or as he actually put it "We can sell the house." He didn't even have to think about it. What a selfless and caring response. <p>So my special thanks to Chris and Steve for sitting down with me and allowing me to share their amazing story with all of you.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are many more second act stories just around the corner.</p>