

Episode 38

Finding New Life

As A Hospice Chaplain

Who	Audio Segment
Don Hessemer	<p>That's a frequent observation that people will make. "Oh, how do you do that work? That must be so hard." And you know, from an outside perspective, I suppose it is because, you know, let's face it, nobody is comfortable with death and with dying and with, you know, facing these end of life concerns.</p> <p>On the other hand, you know, like I was saying before, you do develop relationships. And you know, there have been many situations where sometimes you lose a patient quicker than you expect, you know, they die suddenly. And you're surprised by that and, you know, there is some personal grief that goes on.</p> <p>But I wouldn't say it's hard work. To me, it's something that again, going back to using the word "calling," I feel I was called to do.</p>
	<p>INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW</p>
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>Today's episode focuses on someone I've known and admired for a number of years. Don Hessemer and I were part of a Saturday morning running group when I lived in Central New Jersey. He had a long 38-year career as an environmental consultant in New York and New Jersey. But last year he decided it was time for a change.</p> <p>So at the age of 61, a time when many people are counting the days to retirement, Don decided to switch careers and become a hospice chaplain. Everyday he works with patients and their families as they approach the end of life.</p> <p>When I read Don's announcement about this new position on Facebook, I remember thinking to myself, "What an awful and difficult job." But Don doesn't think of it awful or difficult. And in some ways, he doesn't even think of it as a job. It took him nearly 40 years but he feels that he has finally found his true calling.</p> <p>Here's our interview with Don Hessemer...</p>

Andy	I always like to start out understanding someone's first act. And looking on LinkedIn, I saw that you worked in the environmental consulting field for like 38 years. A long time.
Don	<p>Ever since I got out of college, I kind of found my way through the environmental field. I went to school, and I actually studied forestry up in Syracuse College of Environmental Science and Forestry. And when I got out of college in the late '70s, I still had no idea what I wanted to do and I had no interest in working in forestry. And so I said to myself, "Well, I don't wanna waste my degree. I have a good science background."</p> <p>So I ended up working with a series of companies that were involved in investigating commercial and industrial properties for contamination from, you know, pollutants and so forth.</p>
Andy	And these are small, midsized companies or large companies or a mix?
Don	Most of them were large. And along the way too, I will say that I had a couple of periods of unemployment where I was out of work. So I was a project manager, I was a line manager, you know, throughout my career, which is one of the things I enjoyed. I enjoyed managing people as well as doing the technical work.
Andy	Your second act has been focused in the religious area. I'm just curious, maybe you can detail your own religious background growing up and sort of through the years and that sort of thing just to set a little foundation for them.
Don	I'm a cradle Catholic, which means I was born and raised Catholic. I went to a Catholic school, elementary and high school. My parents, both are devout Catholics and so we had a strong Catholic upbringing.
Andy	Don was doing a lot of work with his local church, St. Bartholomew's in Scotch Plains, NJ. He was teaching Sunday school and organizing volunteer activities. And then one day his Pastor, Father John Paladino, pulled him aside.
Don	My pastor must've seen something in me that I wasn't aware of myself and he one night asked me the question, "Would you ever consider becoming a deacon?"
Andy	And did this question that he posed to you just come out of the blue, like you really never thought about this before?
Don	<p>Yeah, that's exactly how it happened, Andy. And that's what made it more...a little mysterious. And the more I thought about it and prayed on it, I truly believed that, you know, being a faithful person, that God was calling me through my pastor.</p> <p>And so I decided to respond to that call, which I considered a calling. And I entered what was called the diaconate program, a formation program of study to become an ordained deacon. And that was four years of study.</p>

	<p>And I was ordained as a Catholic deacon in 2011. And so now I'm continuing to do my environmental work. That was my profession. That was my job. You know, that's what was paying the bills. But in addition, I became a deacon and I served my parish church.</p>
Andy	<p>And not everyone knows what a deacon is. Can you just characterize it and also distinguish it from a Catholic priest?</p>
Don	<p>The deacon is kind of like a bridge between the laity and the priests. Not all of us are married, but most deacons are married men. We have families. We're out there working in the secular world. We have children. We have the problems of, you know, raising families and such. We're most visible at mass. We're able to assist the priest during the mass. We distribute the cup, the chalice during communion. We are also given the faculties of being able to baptize. We can lead prayer services, funeral services.</p>
Andy	<p>And by being a Deacon, it allowed Don to officiate at the wedding of his daughter Brittany.</p>
Don	<p>I did the whole thing. I walked her down the aisle as the father of the bride in my three-piece suit and when we got to the foot of the altar, I very slowly went off into the sacristy and did a Superman change. I took my jacket and tie off. I put my vestments on, I came back out and I was the celebrant at my daughter's wedding, which was amazing.</p>
Andy	<p>Start working me towards, you have become a hospice chaplain.</p>
Don	<p>One of the priests in our parish would frequent the Center for Hope Hospice in Scotch Plains right here in town. And he would say mass maybe once a month. And he kind of introduced me to the whole hospice world. I mean, I really knew nothing about hospice. Hospice was a place where people went to die. You know, kind of the stereotypical, you know, perception of it. But I would tag along with him and accompany him and you know, assist him at mass. And then we would go around to the rooms where people couldn't get out of their room and attend mass and we would, you know, provide them with communion and so forth.</p> <p>And then not long after that, this particular priest happened to leave. He went off to another parish and I continued to volunteer there. And it was at that point where I met the head chaplain who had worked there and continues to work there at the time, Carol White. And she kind of told me about chaplaincy and how one becomes a chaplain and the training that's required. And so she kind of planted another seed that I pondered and I said to myself, "I think maybe I'd like to do this work, you know, and if someone's gonna pay me for it, even better."</p>
Andy	<p>I spoke with Carol White by telephone and asked her what she saw in Don.</p>

Carol White	I saw his concern for each individual, the time that he took with each person. Sometimes when priests come in, they come and do their thing and they just leave. Don would sit and talk to the people and listen. And that's the main thing that a chaplain does, they listen. They do not talk, they're not there to save souls, they listen. And he had that ability from the beginning. He listened to the people, the people liked him and asked for him to come back, and I think it was just his presence and his caring.
Andy	So you become a deacon, you are studying to become a hospice chaplain. But you're still working full-time. At some point you decide, you know, "I'm ready to leave the environmental consulting." And talk about that decision.
Don	I looked ahead, I projected ahead and I said, "Okay, it's gonna take four years to do this training. I'll be 62 at that time." And I don't know, 62... My dad retired from his job at 62, although he was in a different profession and, you know, he was able to do it. I said, "You know what, at this point in my life, 62 seems like a point where I may want to, you know, make a turn, make a change of direction and what I'm doing as a job," you know. So it was a goal that I had four years before I actually, you know, lived that goal, which happened last summer, actually.
Andy	Were there financial concerns in terms of, I'm gonna guess you make a little less money than you did previously?
Don	<p>Yes. Then that was a big concern. And again, you know, something that I had to consider, I had to plan for. And my wife and I did do that. But yeah, you know, in terms of this change,</p> <p>I was reading something about callings. And you know, sometimes people have a calling. It might be to religious life or maybe to something else, but it doesn't necessarily follow a career path. In other words, I'm not doing this work to advance myself or to make more money. To me, yes, it's a job. I'm getting paid. I work 40 hours a week for a hospice organization. But to me, I always look at it as more of a calling, more of a vocation.</p>
Andy	So I wanna take it a little different direction. You have sort of navigated the waters of a second act. What advice would you give to someone who, you know, maybe has been in a career for a long period of time and is interested in exploring something else?
Don	Yeah, I would advise them to, you know, take a look at what their interests are, what their passions are. Is there anything that really, you know, defines them as who they are? And you know, it might be a calling. But just look beyond, you know, either what you went to school for and are now working at in a particular field and just kind of step outside that mindset of, you know, "This is what I was trained to do and this is my job and this is what I'm gonna do until I retire." Is there anything else in your life that you find very meaningful? And you know, take the risk, take a chance.

	<p>So, you know, it's different for everybody, but I guess the takeaway in my situation was, I did find something later on in life that I was drawn to. And in terms of, you know, a second act or a second career, you know, this is where I ended up.</p>
Andy	<p>That's interesting. So you really feel being a hospice chaplain is your calling?</p>
Don	<p>Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. There's no third act for me.</p>
Andy	<p>Unlike many of our guests, I've known Don Hessemer for a long time via a Saturday morning running club. When he was first ordained, we gave him the nickname "The Streaking Deacon."</p> <p>What struck me about Don's path was the deliberate, steady pace of his career reinvention. It started via his volunteer work at his church. Encouraged by his pastor, he then took four years of training and became a Deacon. He then got involved as a volunteer at the Center for Hope Hospice and with more encouragement from Carol White he went on to become a certified as a hospice chaplain. That took another four years of study. And then he finally made the leap from a corporate job to his full-time role today. Kind of like training for a marathon, it took him a long time to prepare but today he really feels he is doing the work he was made to do.</p> <p>Finally, there is the religious aspect to today's calling. Don felt that God was calling him to become a Deacon and then to become a hospice chaplain. Like several of our earlier episodes, Father James Martin, Pastor Mark Salvacion and Cathy Heying of the Link Garage, their new work is less of a job and more of a calling.</p> <p>Let's put aside whether you are a religious person or not. Don, and many others that I've interviewed are living a life of purpose. And that seems to be a common thread among nearly all successful second act stories.</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION</p>
Andy	<p>So that is a wrap on Episode 38 of "Second Act Stories." Our special thanks to Don Hessemer for taking the time to meet with me on a Saturday morning. Special thanks as well to Carol White of the Center for Hope Hospice.</p> <p>I'd like to give a shout-out to our Second Act Advocates – a group of 150+ individuals that help share the podcast with their own social media followers. Our advocate – actually advocates – for the month of March are a married couple, Bevan and Stuart Rogel from Tampa, Florida. Bevan Rogel is the President and Founder of Encore Tampa Bay and Stu runs his own company called Graylan Ventures. Thanks to both of you for being such strong supporters of Second Act Stories.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>

