

Episode #42
 A Midlife Shake-up: Stay-At-Home Mom
 Pursues A Year Of Public Service
 (5/8/2019)

Who	Audio Segment
Amy Yontef-McGrath	<p>I felt that I was watching my children pursue their futures, my husband pursue his career, friends choose their path, and I really felt like I was on the sidelines watching. And that kinda hunger inside of me for something more really came to the surface. And when my dad passed away, I think I found myself in a funk and I knew that that was my turning point. I knew that I needed to do something. So, it happened that about maybe a couple weeks before my 49th birthday, I had this idea that what if I didn't have to find the final destination? What if I gave myself this year of exploration and I would discover new passions instead of going back to old ones.</p> <p>And so, I was gonna use this year and commit to doing 50 public service projects. I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone, try some new things, and really shake up my life.</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>This episode is a bit different (and we love "different" here at Second Act Stories). Today, we'll introduce you to Amy Yontef-McGrath. This dynamic woman lives in Montgomery County, Maryland and is the proud mother of three.</p> <p>Amy found herself in a bit of a funk as she approached her 49th birthday. She loved her job as a stay-at-home mom for the past two decades. But her children were getting older and starting to leave the nest. And it was clear that she needed something new. Or as she told me, "I needed to shake-up my life."</p> <p>In a stroke of creative genius, she came up with "Follow Me To Fifty," a year-long journey to complete fifty public service projects and write about the experience in a blog -- all in advance of her 50th birthday. Here's Amy Yontef-McGrath's story.</p>

Andy	So, Amy, just tell me a little bit about your background and where you grew up, family life, where you went to school just a little bit of background to start us off.
Amy	I grew up in a great suburb of Washington, D.C., in a community in Maryland, had a great neighborhood, great place to grow up, upbringing. I had a pretty good sense of myself. Ambition, knew what I wanted to do, knew that I wanted to be a lawyer, knew that I wanted to use the law to help people either to solve great injustices or to help little people feel big, give a voice to more people, and to pursue law.
Andy	Who inspired you to go to law school?
Amy	I'm gonna give it to my grandfather. My grandfather was an attorney who often helped the underdog. He had a great ability to listen to people, to warm up to people, and I saw the impact that he was making and I wanted to do the same.
Andy	So after law school, Amy is pursuing her dream to help the underdog. She joined the Community Law Center in Baltimore, Maryland. And she is working to help everyday residents of that city. And on the personal side she married John McGrath, the guy she took to her senior prom. And five years after getting married Amy and her husband had Jacob, the first of three children.
Amy	Like many things, there are sometimes extremes. I was this very motivated, ambitious woman who always saw myself working and contributing outside of the home. And then, the other extreme was I held this beautiful baby in my arms and I really wanted to be there. So, the decision for me and my family at the time was to put my practice of law on the back-burner. I thought I would return to it and to be a stay-at-home mom.
Andy	And how old are you when Jacob is born?
Amy	I was 29.
Andy	Twenty-nine, okay. And you had two other kids?
Amy	Less than two years later came Sarah, and three years after that, came Ella. And I found myself the woman who was gonna save the world changing diapers.

Andy	So that is Amy's backstory. As we often do in Second Act Stories, we're going to jump ahead – in this case about 20 years. Amy is no longer 29, she is about to turn 49. Her kids are now 21, 19 and 16.
Amy	I felt that I was watching my children pursue their futures, my husband pursue his career, friends choose their path, and I really felt like I was on the sidelines watching. And that kinda hunger inside of me for something more really came to the surface. And when my dad passed away, I think I found myself in a funk and I knew that that was my turning point. I knew that I needed to do something.
Andy	Author and second act expert Nancy Collamer has worked with dozens of stay-at-home parents facing the challenge of their children growing up and then needing to find a new and fulfilling role for themselves.
Nancy Collamer	The most difficult thing when you are going back is answering the question "what have you been doing" and there's this big gap. So clearly you've been busy with lots of important activities but people sometimes struggle with reframing what they have achieved and what they've achieved and what they have done in terms of language that is suitable for the workplace. I think the other challenge is it can be a really shift on the home front. When you go back to work there has to be a renegotiation of those responsibilities among the different stakeholders at home.
Andy	Amy struggled with what to do and how to hone-in on the right second act for her. And she came up with an ingenious answer.
Amy	So, it happened that about maybe a couple weeks before my 49th birthday, I had this idea that what if I didn't have to find the final destination? What if I didn't have to know exactly what I wanted to do, if I wanted to practice law, if I wanted to work with children? What if I didn't have to know the answer to that? What if I gave myself this year of exploration and I would discover new passions instead of going back to old ones. And so, I was gonna use this year and commit to doing 50 public service projects. I would write a blog really just to keep me honest about it, to keep me on track. I wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone, try some new things, and really shake up my life.
Andy	Amy, this is a really creative idea. I gotta hand it to you. Where did it come from?
Amy	I mean, it came from me. So, I have always been helping people. So, doing 50 projects, that was certainly ambitious, ambitious enough to kinda change up my routine, but not out of the realm of possibility.
Andy	The phrase "Follow Me To Fifty," tell me about how that came about.

Amy	<p>I've always been into themes. I threw my kids elaborate birthday parties where the invitations match the cake, and the table cloths matched. Everything is very themey and branded, and I did that for myself. I came up with "Follow Me To Fifty." I thought that my blog would show people what I was doing, raise awareness and attention for some maybe unknown causes or organizations, and I wanted people to follow me on this journey.</p>
Andy	<p>So, I wanna hear about the first project. Tell me what you did for in week one.</p>
Amy	<p>Week one, right out of the gate, it was amazing. I went down to Nat stadium, went down to the boathouse right there, jumped in a kayak, and cleaned the Anacostia River. Mind you that day that the river was quite brown. I gloved up. I eagerly got in my kayak and I intended to collect the most trash of anybody in my group. And that I did. I collected tons of empty water bottles, a lot of unmentionables that I found in the river. And I towed back an uninflated water-logged mallard duck raft.</p> <p>It was a phenomenal experience and launched the potential of what "Follow Me To Fifty" would be.</p>
Andy	<p>Give me a flavor of two or three of the more interesting volunteer assignments that you did.</p>
Amy	<p>Another favorite of mine has been to have the privilege to furnish apartments for refugee families arriving into the country. So, I worked with a group called KindWorks. And what they do is, honestly, from soup to nuts, furnish and set up the kitchen and the home of a family arriving from a foreign land. We make beds up. We stock the pantries with their native foods. We have a meal on the table ready for them to eat. And it's not just the product. It's how it occurs. It's the people all coming together, bringing things from their homes, bringing things that they inherited from their families, and piecing together somebody else's home. And by the time you leave, it is beautiful.</p>
Andy	<p>That sounds really cool.</p>
Amy	<p>It is.</p>
Andy	<p>Give me one other one that sort of sticks out to you over the course of this year.</p>
Amy	<p>Another one that I really got a lot from was at a homeless resource fair. I was able to one-on-one usher someone through a fair of resources. So, for instance, we were able to obtain a photo ID for him to have. He had no identification. We were able to get him a cellphone. We put his name on a housing list. We got him a haircut. I had a lot of time just to talk to him to learn about him, to show him that I was interested as well. And just to have that one to one contact was very fulfilling.</p>

Andy	<p>If you visit Amy blog, www.followmeto50.com, you'll get to see all 50 projects including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #13 Amy's month-long stint working as a food coordinator at Gaithersburg Helps, a local food bank; • #18 Placing American flags on the graves of 340 war veterans at the Monocacy Cemetery; • #36 Helping the Greater DC Diaper Bank – a group that provides diapers and other products to families in need. • #44 Amy's work with the Democracy Bootcamp a program to encourage voter registration <p>And her blog has been inspiring others – people like Karen Myers who Amy met during the course of Follow Me To Fifty.</p>
Karen Myers	<p>I was like, you know, I want to give back more than I have been doing and I could do that. That would be a good challenge for me to try to do 50 different volunteer activities and learn about different people and different opportunities and different things out there to help people.</p>
Andy	<p>Are you similarly on a quest to hit 50? Or is it a smaller number?</p>
Karen	<p>I am on that quest to hit 50. And I'm up to 30 and I'm about halfway through my year. I'm on track.</p>
Andy	<p>It sounds like you met some really interesting people during the course of this year.</p>
Amy	<p>That was, by far, the gem of this whole project. I have always had a tight group of friends. And now, I have an army of diverse people who were once strangers who now I call friends.</p>
Andy	<p>I wanna focus in on the word diversity because it sounds like this experience exposed you to people you normally never would have hung out with. You never would've hung out with this refugee family. You never would have, you know, spent time with a homeless man. Do you feel like you're, I don't know, sort of a richer person because of these experiences?</p>
Amy	<p>Absolutely. And it's interesting that you are asking the question in the way you are because I live in a very diverse community. But there's a difference between living in a diverse community and being involved in a diverse community. So, yes, I always had these neighbors from different countries or heard these different languages be spoken, and drove down and saw someone in need. But this year, I got out of my car. I walked over to someone new. I walked into somebody's home. Someone came into my home. I embraced the diversity.</p>

Andy	Along the way, I don't know, you've done your 27th project, and you would think, "Oh, my gosh. This is tiring. I don't wanna keep going on here," or was it, "Wow, I can't wait to get to number 28?"
Amy	If I could've, I would've done all 50 in a month. I loved it. I had to pace myself. I loved it so much. I think I just...I returned to that old Amy, the Amy before I had kids, the Amy that sought new adventures, that was getting good feedback, that knew that I was contributing. I absolutely loved it.
Andy	Now you might wonder what Amy did for project #50, the crescendo of the "Follow Me To Fifty" year. She headed to the West Coast and went for a walk. Yes, a 50 mile walk along the California's famed Pacific Highway.
Amy	I kind of fashion myself as a Forrest Gump of walkers. Fifty miles was a nice goal. I gave myself three days to do it. It wasn't for speed or endurance. I just really wanted to take a new place in to do...I thought I would use it as my reflecting on the year and really end with a bang.
Andy	And you went all by yourself.
Amy	I did go all by myself.
Andy	Why did you choose California and the Pacific Coast Highway?
Amy	I wanted to go somewhere I'd never gone before. Exploring new things was the theme of the whole year.
Andy	Okay. Okay. So, you talked about the takeaways for each project. I'm wondering about the takeaways for the whole year. Did it get you out of your funk first of all?
Amy (25:12)	Absolutely. When I got off the kayak, I was out of my funk.
Andy (25:16)	Okay. That happened quickly, okay.
Amy (25:17)	Happened quickly. I craved it. Absolutely. "Follow Me To Fifty" really transformed my life. It woke me up. It opened all of my senses. I started to see a lot more. I heard a lot more. I wanted to taste and smell a lot more. I just kinda craved new experiences. It definitely got me out of my funk.
Andy (25:41)	So, what were some of the other learnings about the year? What have you learned about yourself?
Amy	I learned a lot about myself. I learned that I'm not done becoming who I am. That's the beauty of all these second acts that we educate ourselves. We have a family. We choose a path. And then, it's not over. And we're all works in creation, and that was true of me and I still am. And I love learning. And I'm not done.

Andy	Okay. And you've had that a couple of months since then to reflect upon it. What's ahead for Amy?
Amy	So, when I set out to do this, I thought that I would land in a fixed spot. I told you I thought that something would be revealed or...you know, an old passion.
Andy	One of those 50 would turn into a passion, something like that?
Amy	I thought one particular cause would steal my heart and it would...a clear path would be forged. It didn't happen like that. I realized I love the variety of it. I love doing it. I love promoting volunteerism. I love inspiring and motivating other people to try new things, to learn about new things. So, I'm not really stopping. I'm not changing. I'm not doing "Follow me to 60," but I'm continuing to go on this journey. I've had some really neat opportunities since. And I'm trying to share my message and to get people to really think about the possibilities very differently.
Andy	So what exactly is Amy's message to others? Here's how she describes it.
Amy	Again, my message is really two-fold. It's to shake up your life, do something different. Find a passion at every age. Does it have to be community service? Absolutely not. Do something totally that suits you. Community service was the thing that suited me. And so, that was my bridge. I say it's my bridge from funk to unfettered joy. But my other message is that being involved in your community is very important, that we all do for our neighbors we do for our families because we consider that our community. But our community is really much bigger. And when your eyes are open to the needs of someone suffering or dealing with a struggle, it now just feels rote to feel invested in finding solutions to their problems, too.
Andy	On April 29 th , she was honored by the Montgomery County Volunteer Center at their annual awards dinner.
Introduction of Amy	It is truly my honor to present the Volunteer of the Year Award to Amy Yontef-McGrath (continue applause under my comments below)
Andy	We're going to leave you with a portion of Amy's acceptance speech that night.
Amy	Follow Me To Fifty transformed my life. It woke me up and sharpened all of my senses. Like you, I saw the beauty of our diverse community but I also saw the struggles of our neighbors facing chronic homelessness, food insecurity, and illness. I hear the loud calls for action and advocate for change as well as the deafening silence of those seeking simply to be counted and treated with dignity.

	<p>And now having seen, heard, and felt all of this, there's no question that I will continue doing and taking action. This is MY calling and I can't wait to keep going. I'm proud to call myself a service junkie and hope that my blog has and will continue to educate and continue to inspire you to see, hear, feel, and what community really means.</p> <p>Thank you very much for this award. Please keep following me, I'm not done (3-5 seconds of applause).</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION</p>
<p>Andy</p>	<p>Our special thanks to Amy for taking the time to meet with me. I also want to thank Nancy Collamer and Karen Myers for being a part of today's podcast as well.</p> <p>Amy's story really grabbed me. She loved being a mom and threw her whole heart into it. But as her children started growing older and heading off to college, she knew she had to find a new source of fulfillment in her life.</p> <p>So she launched "Follow Me To Fifty," a year-long journey in the lead-up to her 50th birthday. What an incredibly creative and compelling way to give back to her community and re-energize herself at the same time.</p> <p>It completely shook up her life. And she very quickly moved from "funk to unfettered joy." That sounds like a pretty amazing change.</p> <p>So that is a wrap on Episode 42 of "Second Act Stories." If you like what you are hearing on Second Act Stories, I hope you'll consider leaving a short review or rating on iTunes (so far, we have a perfect 5-star rating). And of course, we'd love it if you can share the podcast with your own social media following.</p> <p>But most of all, we hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>