

# Women follow their bliss

*Doing what they love, loving what they do*

By Lesa Knollenberg

*"I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be."*

*Joseph Campbell*

Follow your bliss. Pursue your passion. Lofty words, but when the milk just expired and the electric bill is late, who has time to tackle creativity? Meet two Dane County women who have pursued their dreams and succeeded. **Lisa Lathrop**, "The Cheesecake Lady," has parlayed her love for baking into a growing, conscientious enterprise. **Dr. Helen Counts**, a physician with UW Health, is also a gifted musician. Both women share a formula: combining self-awareness with serendipity.

With a background in the hospitality industry, Lisa Lathrop has done it all. From wait staff, cook, and hostess to manager and accountant, "this hospitality business gets in your blood," Lathrop says. "But I got tired of working restaurant hours." Then came a nine-and-a-half year stint as a state employee. Working by day and making cheesecakes as a diversion by night gave rise to her next plan. "I knew the next step would be my own business," she admits. After rave reviews of her specialty cheesecakes, she decided to pursue her own shop. She plotted carefully, took advantage of the UW Small Business Development Center classes and started small.

While planning, Lathrop tested recipes and gave them away to friends, family, neighbors and co-workers. Feedback was stellar. She sent a complimentary cheesecake to a neighborhood restaurant, Pavlov's Pizza, and the owner called back. "What's the deal with this cheesecake?" he asked. "It's so good!" That exchange was the beginning of the next step: sharing a kitchen with Pavlov's during the day, before the pizzas were made at night.

Cheesecakes are a tricky gourmet product. And Lathrop is a purist. All dairy products used in the Cheesecakery's goods are made in Wisconsin. Add to that her proclivity for quality – she makes her own cookie

crust and vanilla from scratch, for example – and baking is labor-intensive. The cheesecakes need a two-step baking process, are finicky, and require 24 hours for flavors to meld. "People don't do these things anymore," Lathrop adds. "We're more like a European-style bakery."

The Wisconsin Cheesecakery is thriving thanks to Lathrop's sensibility, determination and a dash of synchronicity. While reading an article about a program called "Vocation Vacation," where business owners become mentors to individuals looking to change careers, Lathrop decided to contact the owner. Because she had learned so much throughout the creation of her business, she knew she had insight that might prove useful to another start-up. The owner of Vocation Vacations, originally from Madison, was coming back to visit that weekend. They met, developed a rapport, and The Wisconsin Cheesecakery is now one of Vocation Vacation's newest business mentors. Serendipity opened the door, but the 7th Heaven Cheesecake was the enticement.

Helen Counts didn't plan on moving to the Midwest. After graduating from the University of Virginia School of Medicine, she interviewed from Maine to San Francisco, with eight stops in between. Madison was her last interview, a last-minute flight on a cold January afternoon. She could imagine doing her residency and fellowship here. She liked the support and cama-



**Dr. Helen Counts always has seen a link between music and medicine.**

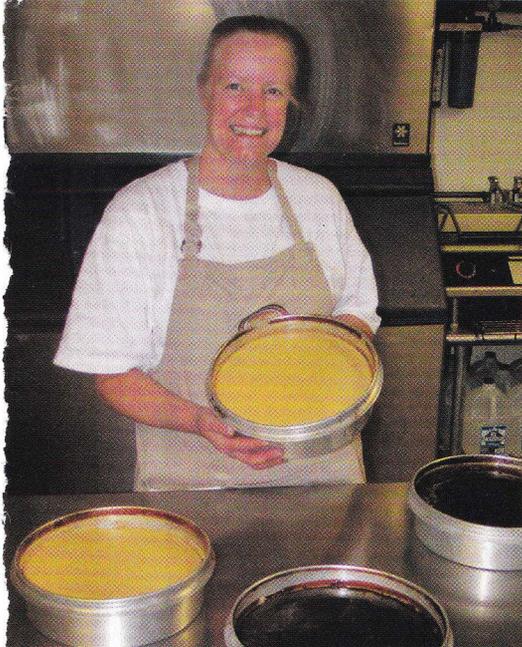
raderie of women on the teaching faculty, and it felt "right" here. So she stayed.

Since that January, she has fashioned a well-constructed life. She juggles a thriving career as a primary care physician with the UW Health clinic in McFarland, teaching at St. Marys Hospital and is teaching faculty for the UW Madison Family Residency program. She is also a songwriter with a CD, *Into Your Arms*. With all of this, one would expect her to discuss goals, schedules and lists. Instead, peppered among the talk of books and music, is one concept: balance. She notes the importance of balancing time, talents and tempo. "As a physician, I'm often pressured for things," Counts explains. "To write songs, I usually need to be home, with my

## *How to get their stuff*

The Wisconsin Cheesecakery has outgrown their shared kitchen and Lisa Lathrop and company are currently moving into their own space. Check out their website at [www.wicheesecakery.com](http://www.wicheesecakery.com) or call 661-1211.

Helen Counts' CD, "Into Your Arms," is available at Borders Books Music and Café (near Hilldale) and A Room of One's Own Bookstore in Madison.



**Lisa Lathrop used to make cheesecake for fun— now they are her business.**

brain on autopilot, and not be distracted.”

Balancing the science of medicine with the creativity of songwriting is natural, according to Counts. “Music and medicine have always been linked, in my mind,” says Counts. “To write a good song, you need a feel for something. It requires patience, creativity and listening to the theme and what it tells you.” The same requirements hold for medicine: patience, creativity and listening. “Every patient could tell you their symptoms in different ways. You need to be good at seeing the big picture.”

Following her convictions has led to open doors for Counts, as well. As a student, she used her music to appease an especially critical patient in the psych ward. Then, writing her entrance essay about those ties between music and patients’ trust won her a spot in the UVA Medical School. Likewise, after a meeting with her influential colleague and pediatric teacher, Dr. Murray Katcher, he casually asked “What do you do in your free time?” After hearing about her music, he introduced her to his son, music producer Aaron Katcher. Katcher produced *Into Your Arms*, which features local musician Leo Sidran, among others.

Some call it synchronicity, some call it fate. With careful listening and planning, doors opened to the unknown and these women are creating fulfillment in their careers and lives. It’s a process, and Counts summarizes it well: “Know in your gut what you want; listen to yourself. Do what you do best.”

*Lesa Knollenberg is a local freelance writer with an affinity for cheesecake and music. Especially at the same time.*

## Follow your dreams

What if you don’t know what your dreams are? Life Coach **Sharon Vander Zyl**, of **LIFEWAY, LLC**, has this advice: Research yourself.

**Discover your gifts.** Make lists of your desirable qualities. Think about what you are passionate about. What do you lose track of time doing? “The ‘Cheesecake Lady’ probably lost track of time making her cheesecakes,” says Vander Zyl. “That’s usually a good indicator of your passion.” Ask five or six trusted friends what they observe in you. You might be surprised.

**Check out career advising services at the local colleges.** There are a number of tests that help determine your interests and abilities and match them with potential careers.

**Split your brain.** Take the information you’ve gathered and look at it two ways. To process with the right side of your brain, tackle the information creatively. “Make a collage of your dreams and where you would like to be in five years,” Vander Zyl advises. Then take a look at yourself more concretely, or with the left side of your brain. Vander Zyl has her clients complete some of these sentences about themselves:

“What do I want to do in five years?”

“I am brilliant at...”

“If I only had five years to live, I would...”

**Consider a life coach.** Some people can walk through this process intuitively, and some may need a nudge. A life coach can be a friendly, persistent nudge to help you keep a disciplined eye on your goal. They’ll also help you evaluate your own balance: career, family/friends, fun/recreation, spiritual and physical. “When we’re balanced as a whole person, we’re happier,” says Vander Zyl.



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