

How These Entrepreneurs are Pivoting in the Pandemic

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Mike Kravinsky, an independent filmmaker

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The pandemic pivot is a stark reality for droves of older small business owners resolute to stay in business.

That kind of grit is the spine of the [midlife entrepreneurs](https://www.nextavenue.org/midlife-startup-tips-from-women-entrepreneurs/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/midlife-startup-tips-from-women-entrepreneurs/>) I've interviewed in recent years, several of whom I profiled in my book: "Never Too Old to Get Rich: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Starting a Business Mid-Life." (Full disclosure: Next Avenue is the co-publisher.)

I talked with four pandemic pivoters to find out what they've done, what they're doing and how it's going:

The Baker

For Jo-Ann Barett, owner of the Aromas Boutique Bakery in Harlem known for its singular custom cakes and catering, the on-off switch flipped in what felt like a blink of an eye.

"At the beginning of March, we had one hundred percent cancellations — mostly large wedding and graduation cakes," Barett said. "Giving refunds was terrifying. We didn't have to, but we recognized the situation our couples and customers were in, and we gladly did that." "We asked, 'Okay, what's next for us?'" Barett said. "How do we stay in business? Not *if*, but *how*?"

Barett and her sister, chef Eileen, looked at their options: "We asked, 'Okay, what's next for us?'" Barett said. "How do we stay in business? Not *if*, but *how*?"

"A lot of customers immediately called to check on us

and ordered cookies and cakes to be delivered," Barett said.

Pre-pandemic, the Barett's bakery was run from a shared office space and a private commercial kitchen, so the financial overhead of a storefront bakery hasn't been an issue.

The sisters' COVID-19 lifeline was a \$10,000 small business relief grant from the Verizon Small Business Recovery Fund, allowing them to shift to 90-minute virtual cooking classes as a revenue source.

They used some of the money to buy things like stands, clamps, backdrops, and portable cooking equipment and built a recording studio in the dining room of the home where they live together. Other outlays were earmarked for marketing the videos via a Zoom account and social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Jo-Ann Barett has also taken photography and editing classes.

"Our virtual classes have been a big hit," she said. "We focus on nutrition and creating healthy gourmet food and Latin dishes like empanadas and rice and beans inspired by memories of childhood meals cooked up by our parents. Mom is from Puerto Rico and Dad is from The Dominican Republic."

Some of the recorded classes are paid for by attendees (typically \$40 per person); others are posted free on YouTube as a marketing outreach. Teen classes go for \$10 an hour and cover cooking basics such as preparing a grilled cheese sandwich or making scrambled eggs.

So far, they have recorded more than three dozen classes and are producing a series in partnership with Active Plus, a New York City-based health and wellness nonprofit for youth in at-risk local communities.

One stumbling block: "Flour and sugar were hard to find

in the early days [of the pandemic]. I was looking everywhere from Amazon to Costco to Target," Barett said. "Prices were going up, and I was keeping my fingers crossed the items would be available when I needed them."

Right now, "we are probably six months out from paying ourselves modest salaries again, but we are covering our basic costs," Barett said. "Thankfully, I'm an optimist. Despite what's happening in the world we still get to do what we love."

Her advice for midlife entrepreneurs: Keep going. "There are days when I struggle. I say, 'Let me read something, let me learn something.' The biggest fear is doing nothing," Barett said.

The Midlife Resort Owner

In November 2018, Next Avenue Influencer in Aging and hospitality entrepreneur [Chip Conley](https://www.nextavenue.org/chip-conley-influencers-in-aging/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/chip-conley-influencers-in-aging/>) opened the [Modern Elder Academy](https://modernelderacademy.com/) (<https://modernelderacademy.com/>) , a boutique resort for midlife learning and reflection in Mexico. Conley calls the academy, which has enrolled 500 students from 17 countries, "the first midlife wisdom school."

The pandemic forced him to close its doors on March 15, 2020. On October 4, Conley will reopen the Modern Elder Academy, but now only with Sabbatical Sessions of two-week minimum stays, rather than the earlier, more expensive, one-week workshop bookings.

The Sabbatical Sessions, which cost \$3,500 for two weeks (\$2,500 per person for a double room), focus on themes ranging from cultivating awe and wonder to crafting an encore career to improving your relationship with money. Guests receive chef-crafted three meals a day, COVID-19 enhanced protocols, upgraded WiFi and more space than before.

"Airbnb's success during the pandemic has proven that people want longer stays in outdoor, nature-filled environments that feel safe," Conley told me. "So, our sabbatical program is leveraging that consumer need with the icing on the cake being our programming."

Conley sold out the first month and a half within the first two weeks of announcing Sabbatical Sessions.

"The biggest challenge has been letting go of dreams and expectations, " said Conley. "We'd developed an

amazing workshop calendar with guest faculty. The beautiful jigsaw puzzle was complete and then the COVID earthquake shook the table and the puzzle fell on the floor."

His advice to midlife entrepreneurs: "Don't take the pandemic personally. It didn't happen to you. It happened to *all of us*. The question is how will you use it as a call to action to prove your business is more needed than ever."

Conley also urges small business owners to stay curious. "Be open to the shifting needs of your customers as well as new business models," he said. "Our revenues won't be even half of what they would have been with our workshops; we've had to cut back a lot of costs. Being open to these kinds of changes allowed us to create a new business model that was more suitable to the time."

The Nonprofit Market Owner

Five years ago, Doug Rauch, a former president of Trader Joe's, opened [Daily Table](https://dailytable.org/) (<https://dailytable.org/>), a 3,500-square-foot nonprofit market in the lower-income Dorchester and Roxbury neighborhoods of Boston. The idea: to sell groceries and produce at ultra-low prices as well as healthy cooked and ready-to-serve meals at prices intended to vie with fast-food restaurants.

Rauch wouldn't let the pandemic shut down operations.

"Because we are front line and a mission-oriented grocery, we had to stay open," he said. "Now more than ever, people needed us. They were getting laid off. They didn't have money to buy groceries."

So, first, Daily Table put up plexiglass shields in its stores and gave employees gloves and masks. The 40 retail, kitchen and driver employees got a \$2-per-hour pay raise for the upcoming weeks, too.

"Our staff was dealing with a very high level of emotion and fear," Rauch said. "We talked to them over and over again about the critical role they were playing in the neighborhood."

The grocer also shifted from preparing healthy meals customers picked up at the store to offering boxed raw materials, so they could prepare their own meals at home. "Instead of us putting the labor into it, they wanted the beans and raw chicken because they could

cook themselves," Rauch said.

He was able to secure grants to deliver ingredients for about 50,000 meals for free.

"We offer SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients a two-for-one discount [up to \$10 per day] for all fresh produce, through a partnership with the City of Boston's Double Up Food Bucks program," said Rauch.

He'll soon launch an online delivery service for SNAP-eligible customers, letting them place orders on the Daily Table website and get them delivered by a service like UberEATS or DoorDash. "We cover the delivery fee," Rauch said.

"It is heartbreaking," he noted. "The need is immense."

His advice to midlife entrepreneurs: "Be honest in your assessment. Don't ignore and gloss over the questions: 'Can we weather this storm? What do we need to do differently? How can we innovate? How can we respond to the changing environment?'"

And, he added, "remember, this too will pass," he said. "Yes, this is a tragedy. It shocked everybody. But you want to be positioned to survive and thrive on the other side of it by focusing on what are goods and services that people need."

The Independent Filmmaker

For Mike Kravinsky, an independent filmmaker running Nextnik Films, in Arlington, Va., the pandemic shift meant making movies differently.

As soon as his short film "Bird's Eye" finished shooting in January 2020, Kravinsky switched to lockdown mode.

"I edited it, and then the outside work like audio mixing and color correction were done remotely at post-production facilities where no one else was in their rooms," he said. "It was actually pretty seamless."

Kravinsky's biggest challenge during COVID-19 hasn't been financial as much as human. Making films and TV is a group effort.

"Although many can work at home, and we make it work, there's something about working directly with people, getting their immediate thoughts and ideas

because they're standing right in front of you," Kravinsky said. "I miss that."

His ability to shift seamlessly has a lot to do with the technology — not just web conference apps, but organizing video files, editing and music creation.

Still, Kravinsky notes, some people need to be on set during filming, like camera and field audio people. "So far, I haven't heard of any bad outcomes, but I worry about them," he said.

As for offering advice to others, Kravinsky demurs. "I just hope everyone can get through this. Many are hanging on by a thread," he said.