

# ONE MORE TIME

by Max Wells

Publisher, Wise Publishing Group

*"There are several examples of pioneering work by Richard ... an app that teaches people Braille using a smartphone's vibrating interface."*

(The letter "O" in Braille on a smartphone, seen above)

Encore careers are a way to give back to younger generations, which will turn the avalanche of aging into a positive.

It was late afternoon when I interviewed Marc Freedman over the telephone. He was living in a tiny house in California with three children under age 5, so he had risen early that morning to write because of the peace and quiet, but also because, "It's the time I'm the sharpest, and so I apologize for any rambling answers."

I wanted to find out more about "Encore.org," the organization of which he's the CEO and that helps people who are searching for a calling in the second half of life, particularly those who want an "encore" career dedicated to something beyond themselves. I'd heard that the organization gives out actual cash money, as prizes, for yearlong fellowships that allow people to make the transition to "purpose, passion and a paycheck in your second act."

So the obvious first question was the source of the funding. Far from being a well-intentioned trust fund kid, Marc is the product of a working class family from Philadelphia. The main source of the moolah is the Atlantic Philanthropies, a foundation created by Chuck Feeney, (Conor, 2007) who made his money with the Duty Free Shoppers Group — you've probably contributed to that fortune buying duty-free booze on your way to some foreign vacation. Apparently, the guy has given away over \$6.2 B — which is a lot of mojitos.

The long answer to my second question — Why Encore? — is in Marc's recent book *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife*. (Freedman, 2011) The shorter answer, in Marc's own words: "As you get closer to your own death, you recognize that human beings are a species that live on from generation to generation. And yet, we've systematically sent older people off to age in segregated playgrounds where they get to imagine that they were in a second childhood, instead of fanning the generative impulse and enabling it and helping people come to the natural conclusion that the best way to spend this phase of life is through investing in younger generations."

"Investing, as in giving young people money?" I asked.

"No, not money. We've got 10,000 people a day turning 65. Many people are concerned that we're about to be overrun by a lot of greedy geezers. But there's another way to frame it. This group went to higher education institutions at a greater level than any preceding generation. We've invested hundreds of billions, maybe trillions, of

dollars in them, and they're in many ways at the top of their game. To write them off prematurely would be a vast waste; and not just of the experience or human capital. They may be part of a new creative class. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that experimental genius in the arts, for example, blooms late. We tend to think of innovation and entrepreneurship and creativity as the exclusive province of young people, but this may in fact be just as rich a pool, but also of a different type. So we may gain a new force of innovation."

Marc went on to describe how Encore.org gives away "Purpose Prizes" of \$100,000 to individuals who are combining their passion and experience for social good in areas such as education, health care and human services.

I'm a bit of rambler myself, and we touched on a variety of interesting, if tangential, topics (encore careers as practical idealism, the Electrical Workers Union's "Work Connection" that tried something similar decades ago, evidence that older people prune their social networks so they can focus on the people they care about most). The conversation left me so intrigued I jumped at the opportunity to meet one of the Purpose Prize winners closer to home.

Richard Ladner, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington, received his Purpose Prize in 2008, to cap a distinguished career in theoretical computing; there's a theorem named after him that has all sorts of practical implications, including how we create privacy in the digital world. (Ladner, 1975)

Born in 1943 to deaf parents, Richard early on became familiar with the limitations, solutions and attitudes associated with disabilities, and used this understanding in his choice of encore career.

We met at lunchtime in early spring at his on-campus office, from where we could see a bald eagle circling over the edge of Lake Washington, probably eyeing the fresh batch of fledgling blue herons. Tall and white-haired, Richard looked every bit the part of a professor, his reticence quickly giving way to an enthusiastic account of the work.

For the past decade, Richard has worked with other professors and scores of students on "Broadening Participation in Computing." The thrust of the work is to get more disabled students into computing, with the dual purpose of training

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*"The best way to spend this phase of life is through investing in younger generations."*

those individuals for well-paid employment, as well as providing a cadre of people with the knowledge and motivation to create better accessibility solutions.

A third, though less-targeted, purpose is to spur innovations for a broader audience. As Richard puts it, "Working at the extremes of accessibility — on technology for those with disabilities — is like working on technology to fly to the moon. How much good stuff came out of that? There's a byproduct effect: speech recognition, speech synthesis for example. Even the telephone itself came out of Alexander Graham Bell trying to build an assisted device for deaf children."

There are several examples of pioneering work by Richard, his students and collaborators, including:

- A smartphone app to help blind people find bus stops and know what to expect when they get there
- A Web-based screen reader to allow blind people to use the Internet anywhere
- A more efficient process for translating textbook graphics into a tactile form
- An app that teaches people Braille using their smartphone's vibrating interface
- A talking calculator and carpenter's level

The fruits of these efforts were described in a recent *New York Times* (9/23/13) article about blind people using apps on their smart phones to, among other things, take photographs and read the denomination of bills. Some believe the devices are the biggest assistive aid since Braille. And just as importantly, they're inclusive, in that they don't have the stigma associated with specialized devices.

Each year, Richard runs a summer academy to continue the work that brings together deaf or blind students to learn programming and computer animation. He laughed when I asked him about his plans to retire. "I have partially retired. I'm no longer teaching. Of course, I'm not paid as much, but I really like working with students on projects. And I'm on various boards and doing different things for different organizations."

"Do you want to retire?" I asked.

"Only from things I don't want to do. It seems like every year something interesting comes up, and I just pursue it."

"It's almost as if you're built for the encore career."

"Exactly," he said. "It's not that hard to have an encore career if you're a professor." ♦

**Sources:**

O'Clery, Conor (2007). *The Billionaire Who Wasn't: How Chuck Feeney Made and Gave Away a Fortune Without Anyone Knowing* (ISBN 978-1-58648-391-3).

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Ladner, R. (1975). "On the Structure of Polynomial Time Reducibility," *Journal of the ACM (JACM)*, 22(1). pp. 155-171.

Links to more information about the work at the University of Washington <http://tiny.cc/ladner>

"Disruptions: Visually Impaired Turn to Smartphones to See Their World." *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2013.



**BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 16**

**Answers to Crossword Puzzle**

G	I	F	T		A	O	R	T	A		G	A	L	
I	D	I	O	T	F	R	A	N	C		E	G	O	
L	O	S	E	R	T	E	N	T	H		T	I	P	
T	L	C		A	G	E	S		A	T	A	L	E	
			E	V	E	R		D	O	N	A	T	E	
T	A	B	L	E	T		B	R	A	C	T			
I	D	Y	L	L		L	A	K	E		P	R	O	
M	A	T	E		S	C	A	B	S		A	R	I	D
E	R	E		A	C	A	D		B	L	O	O	D	
			U	S	A	G	E		T	E	M	P	T	S
C	H	A	R	I	T		B	A	S					
E	Y	I	N	G		C	A	R	E		J	I	F	
R	E	M		N	O	T	E	S		T	W	I	R	L
E	N	E		A	B	O	D	E		S	A	M	O	A
S	A	D		L	I	N	E	S		Y	A	N	K	

**Answers to Sudoku**

5	1	3	8	2	4	7	6	9
4	2	9	1	7	6	8	3	5
6	8	7	9	3	5	1	2	4
8	9	6	3	5	2	4	1	7
3	5	4	6	1	7	9	8	2
2	7	1	4	9	8	6	5	3
9	4	2	5	8	1	3	7	6
1	6	5	7	4	3	2	9	8
7	3	8	2	6	9	5	4	1

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