

## This baby boomer loves her job

It was a year ago this week that I returned to the Bangor Daily News after a four-year stint in public relations. In the newsroom, journalists refer to the move to PR work as “going over to the dark side.” They’re sort of joking around, because they don’t want their colleagues to feel too bad about taking a better-paying, more stable job in the corporate world.



MEG HASKELL

But it’s only partly a joke. Because the most high-minded goals of journalism — to tell truth to power, to shine light on injustice and deception, to inform the electorate, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable — are not really aligned with the mission of corporate communications. In the world of public relations, the goal is basically to make your company or organization look good and sell more of whatever it’s marketing.

I learned a lot in my PR job and met a lot of bright, accomplished people. It’s true that the pay was better and the benefits were fabulous. If I had been good at it, it would have been a more secure work environment than the uncertain world of the news media. But although I did my best, I wasn’t particularly good at it. And I didn’t really enjoy the kind of writing I was doing there.

So it was with real delight that I accepted the opportunity to return to the newsroom, where I had previously worked for almost 10 years, primarily covering issues related to health care and health policy. This time around, I’m sitting on the Features desk, with a broad assignment of writing for and about the baby boom generation and their elders. My work is featured in this section we call “Next” because, as a generation, we’re all contemplating what comes next for us.

It suits me, this new focus on issues related to aging. As a baby boomer myself — just about to turn 62; thanks for asking — I get a lot of ideas from the conversations I have around the kitchen table with friends and family. We talk about our relationships with our adult children, our grandchildren, our partners, our siblings and our aging parents. We discuss our plans for retirement and the rewards of staying in the workforce. We share our dreams of travel and adventure, the opportunities to serve our communities, the pleasure of learning new skills and developing our creativity.

There’s a lot of talk about our health, too — fending off normal changes related to aging, the fear-some possibility of serious illness, the benefits of this diet or that exercise plan. We share stories of elder-targeted scams, fraud and abuse. We discuss issues of faith and spirituality, which for some assume new significance with advancing years.

We talk about all kinds of stuff. It’s all interesting, pertinent and grist for the mill, along with current developments in politics, policy and culture. A lot of it forms the inspiration for my stories in the Next section.

Here’s the best part of my job: the amazing people I meet who share their lives with me and my readers. In the last year, I’ve met

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Suzie Hockmeyer navigates the waters of the Kennebec River while helping to guide a trip recently in The Forks. Now in her mid-60s, Suzie is still a registered whitewater guide, taking groups on adventures from Northern Outdoors in The Forks.

## On Maine’s wildest rivers for 40 years

### Meet the first woman licensed to guide whitewater rafting

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

It was 40 years ago this past spring when Suzie Hockmeyer’s then-husband, Wayne, launched an unwieldy inflatable raft into the Kennebec River gorge, hoping to locate some great new fishing spots for his sporting clients.

The section below the Harris Station dam at Indian Pond was essentially uncharted territory at the time. Recently freed by provisions of the federal Clean Water Act from its historic role as a corridor for driving logs to market, its nearly vertical walls and turbulent waters rendered it virtually unreachable. Few people had ever ventured into its contorted interior.

Watch the video  
bangordailynews.com

The raft that day was a bulky British Leyland assault craft purchased from a military surplus outlet. It was loaded with a crew of overconfident, underprepared bear hunters from a nearby sporting camp. The wild ride they embarked on, paddling and hanging on through some of the biggest, most dramatic white water in the northeastern U.S., marked the genesis of Maine’s rafting industry.

“Back at the beginning,” Suzie Hockmeyer recollected in a recent conversation, “it was like



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Northern Outdoors raft adventurers enjoy a waterfall entering the Kennebec River as part of their trip recently in The Forks.



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Suzie Hockmeyer pulls a portable kayak into the water during a lunch break as part of a rafting trip recently in The Forks. Hockmeyer and her former husband, Wayne Hockmeyer, are widely regarded as the founders of whitewater rafting in Maine.

the Wild West around here. No one knew anything about rafting, including us.”

But that’s changed a lot in the intervening years. And Hockmeyer’s vision, persistence and determination has driven much of that change.

Now 65, a grandmother of four and divorced since 2003, Hockmeyer is the co-founder and senior partner of Northern Outdoors, the first and oldest whitewater rafting company in Maine. She is widely credited with helping to expand and develop year-round recreational tourism in the Kennebec Valley. Licensed in the early 1980s as the first female whitewater rafting guide in Maine, she has done much to tame rafting’s renegade reputation and grow its appeal for women and families. She is a respected negotiator for the now tightly regulated rafting industry and an effective convener and consensus builder in a highly competitive business environment.

And, despite contemplating retirement and coping with the onset of rheumatoid arthritis, she still delights in taking groups of adventur-

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## What the Bangor Fair was like in the 1970s

We worked all year toward one goal — showing our prize steers and lambs at

Bangor State Fair. In the 1970s as a teen, I was a member of Penobscot County 4-H Beef Club. My first bull calf came from the baby beef auction at Fryeburg Fair in the fall. He was a



JULIE HARRIS

shorthorn I named Rasputin, but I called him Razzzy.

The goal was to raise a prime beef steer — a castrated bull calf — that would bring a good price at market. It was a simple way to learn up close and personal the basic principles of farming.

I fed and watered Razzzy, groomed him, exercised him to tame him and build muscle, and was responsible for his daily care. I had to keep a log of how much I fed him and when, and when I did maintenance for his living space. The log was attached to the outside of Razzzy’s pen in the barn.

The 4-H club members were subject to periodic inspection from the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Service, which was in charge of our 4-H program. Our leader was Merton Libby, a long-time and well-loved Extension agent who had a passion for 4-H and the kids who participated.

After he passed, an award was established in his name and given to the 4-Her each year in recognition of his or her hard work and how well the person upheld the standards Merton had set for us. I was fortunate to receive it one year.

As it would get closer to fair time, I washed and groomed Razzzy more often, and eventually clipped his hair at his neck, brisket and tail, trimmed his hooves more carefully, and practiced posing him, getting ready for those few moments when in our 4-H whites we would show off our year’s work to a judge in the show ring at Bangor State Fair.

In the early 1970s at the fairgrounds, the barns were along the Buck Street fence, where the horse barns and equipment are now for the raceway. When the city expanded horse racing and the midway, it built the barns where they exist today.

Our animals were auctioned off toward the end of the fair — a very emotional event for me each year — but I then had money to put in the bank toward next year’s animals and some toward college. I also had to submit an accounting of my project’s finances at the end of each year.

And even though I swore each year I could never go through the emotional turmoil of selling my animals again, I was ready by fall to purchase another bull calf and to start fresh.

We learned so many important life lessons through the 4-H program, from practical finances to dealing with loss. We learned responsibility to another living thing that depended on us, and to other human beings. We learned the value of hard work and personal accomplishment. We learned how to be good losers and gracious winners. We learned where some of our food comes from and how we could influence its quality.

We learned it’s OK to love something for a short while, even knowing we would have to let it go.

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## One woman’s vision is a leap of faith for downtown Bucksport

BY MEG HASKELL  
BDN STAFF

BUCKSPORT — The pretty Penobscot River town of Bucksport, located just off Route 1 in Hancock County, was hit hard by the 2014 closure of the local Verso paper mill. The mill had been the center of economic life for nearly a century.

Now the town is struggling to reinvent itself. And as it does, 65-year-old seasonal resident Kathy James has seized the opportunity to realize a life’s dream. Behind a deceptively nondescript Main Street storefront, a team of workers is renovating a three-story, 9,100-square-foot space into a full-blown arts center. On track to open this fall, the Lighthouse Arts

Center will feature gallery space for dozens of painters, potters, sculptors, jewelry-makers and other artists and artisans; studios for lessons, guest lectures and demonstrations; and a retail shop for art supplies and gifts.

“We want to make Bucksport a destination for the arts community,” James said. Her building won’t be ready in time, but she plans to have a limited opening event on Aug. 13, during the second annual Bucksport Arts Festival.

James bought the 150-year-old building last December, following the death of her husband, Roger. At the time, it housed a beauty salon on the street level and two small apartments upstairs. The renovations are being handled by

D.A. Builders, a four-generation family business headquartered in nearby Frankfort.

Inside, the remodeled space is airy, with high ceilings and lots of natural light. Banks of windows line the southwest walls, offering compelling views over the river, the landscaped riverfront walkway, the soaring Penobscot Narrows Bridge and historic Fort Knox across the water in Prospect.

It’s easy to imagine creative juices flowing here.

### A leap of faith

James, a dedicated watercolorist, calls her project “a God-driven dream.”

“Artwork is part of my faith,”  
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Kathy James, 65, shows off the three-story building on Main Street in Bucksport recently. James is renovating the space for an arts center — gallery, studios, classes, supply and gift store.