

Chronicle Careers

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BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

Conference Confidential

Surely the only reason a historian had left academe was because she couldn't get a job, right?

By ALEXANDRA M. LORD

"How long did you adjunct," whispered the professor, "before you became a public historian?" He glanced around, as though concerned that we might be overheard discussing that great taboo for Ph.D.'s, a nonacademic career path.

Surely the only reason I had left academe was because I couldn't get a tenure-track job, right?

Even as I searched for a polite answer — I was never an adjunct, and I happily left a tenure-track position to become a public historian — I knew that whatever I said would do little to eradicate the prejudices he and many others have about nonacademic careers.

I have attended many scholarly conferences since I left academic work six years ago. At each meeting, I have encountered people who find it hard to believe that anyone would choose to leave voluntarily or that anyone who is not a professor can be a scholar.

An academic conference, as everyone knows, is as much about spotting the university on your name tag as it is about learning new ideas. Stories abound of students and professors casting covert looks at name tags only to discover that they have been wasting their time talking to a "nobody."

After leaving academe, I worried that I would become a nobody.

Just before my first conference as a public historian, I looked at several academic blog sites. One blogger, musing about the many independent scholars and public historians she saw at conferences, described us as "failed scholars."

I was stunned by the casual dismissal of scholars whom this blogger candidly admitted she did not know. Unlike her, I did know independent scholars and public historians, many of whom had degrees from top universities. Those people had published with leading presses. They paid to attend conferences, and used vacation time to do it.

Why were those scholars "lesser" than the professor who had failed to publish for a decade or the adjunct who was still A.B.D. after 12 years? In puzzling through that question, I found myself reassessing my own career. I left academe for many reasons, but paramount was my dislike of the intellectual narrowness of academic life. As a professor, I was frustrated by teaching the same classes again and again. Although I always changed the books and assignments, my classes covered the same basic principles, year in and year out. I was learning and growing, but my students, who changed every year, would remain undergraduates forever.

Long before I struggled with those heretical thoughts, my father-in-law, a chemist with a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had reached the same conclusions and left academe. He did not believe that leaving meant intellectual failure. Instead, leaving had opened doors to careers that not only encouraged intellectual growth but actually required it.

In my own case, my new job as a public historian meant that I was routinely pushed into becoming an expert in a wide range of areas, an experience I found tremendously exciting.

Eventually, I stopped worrying about how academics at scholarly conferences would view me and my choices. And when a professor pompously told me that academic history was serious while public history was fun and "lite," I focused not on the implicit insult in her comment but rather on its absurdity. After all, what kind of a scholar believed that historians at the Holocaust Museum engaged in "fun" history?

I have now attended dozens of academic conferences as a public historian. Each conference has had its absurd moment — the time when an unpublished professor lectured me and my colleagues (all of whom had published with leading presses) on how to publish an article, and the time when a graduate student assumed that I did not have even a master's degree and earnestly urged me to get one.

But despite those moments, the conferences have enabled me to see myself, my values, and my passion for history more clearly. Long ago I decided to study history because I loved it, but somewhere along the way, I was seduced into believing that academic success was more important than intellectual growth.

Freed from that narrow vision, I was finally able to say what I pleased, do the work I wanted to do, and publish when I had something to say — as opposed to publishing so I could earn tenure.

Armed with both my new view of the historical profession and new confidence, I created a Web site about nonacademic careers for historians that wound up getting attention in publications like *The Village Voice*. To my surprise, that work, which I had undertaken simply because it interested me, led to my being asked to serve on committees for national historical organizations. Through that committee work, I began to meet well-known academics. I have always been paralyzed by acute shyness but gradually, as I formed contacts, networking became easier.

I also found kinship with an often overlooked group of scholars: public historians and independent scholars. Conversations with those historians helped me to rediscover the love of my field that I had lost in graduate school.

My greatest surprise, however, has come from those graduate students and professors who look at my name tag and see my name, not the institution. Glancing over their shoulders, they murmur, "Is there really an intellectual life outside of academe?"

In answering, I am reminded of friends from graduate school, many of whom recently gained tenure. Years after becoming professors, they have all said that tenure has finally given them the freedom to speak openly and to explore a wider range of subjects. When I hear that, I smile. Leaving academe gave me that freedom long ago.

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Section: Chronicle Careers

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