

Career 2.0

Not feeling satisfied at work? You aren't alone. The vast majority of Americans are uninspired by what they do, leaving them to fantasize about making a switch in their working lives. Strange thing is, few of us ever force those daydreams into realities. These six Denverites actually did engineer changes—and are better off for it.

BY JAYME MOYE
 Photography by Jeff Nelson

NAME: Libby Huskey

AGE: 36

FIRST ACT: Lawyer

MOTTO: *Life is about balancing risks, the calculated squaring off against the outlandish. Both are worth it.*

➔ Romance novels may seem like an odd choice of reading material for someone with an advanced degree and a high-stress job as a patent lawyer. But Libby Huskey says many professionals like her use the lighthearted reads as a way to escape. What many people like her *don't* do, however, is quit lucrative careers at law firms to write them. "I've always been a really good technical writer—I mean, a lawyer is a professional writer," Huskey says. "The question was, could I write fiction?"

In the days after she left her job as an attorney, Huskey, who writes under the pen name Libby Rice, joined Colorado Romance Writers (a local group that supports romance writers), signed up for writing conferences, joined a critique group, and took a story-writing course. "My transition is more a study in what one ought not do," Huskey says. "I quit my day job and then got started, instead of doing it on the side for a while. But for me, working 60 hours a week and commuting to Boulder left not a minute of time for anything else."

Something Huskey did do before leaving her firm was prepare financially. She and her husband dialed back their expenses to subsist on one income. She then spent nine months writing her first manuscript. "I write a book like I write a patent application," she says. "It's a painstaking, angsty process."

Love Me Later is the story of a lawyer who gets hired to work on a deal for a Danish company only to realize her employer is a dangerous—and alluring—man from her past. Huskey envisioned a three-book series built around second-chance romances and decided to self-publish to have greater creative control (and to keep a larger share of the profits). She says her legal background came in handy with executing contracts and setting up a limited liability company, but she doesn't ever pine for her old job.

Love Me Later was published in September 2014; *Art-Crossed Love* was published in January; and Huskey is currently working on her third book. She says sales have been slow, which she expected as a rookie writer, but reviews have been promising. One reviewer on the romance novel blog the Book Reading Gals called *Love Me Later* one of her favorite romances of 2014. Huskey calls the book the best thing she ever did.



Libby Huskey gave up her lawyer gig to try her hand at creative writing, something she'd never done before.

SECOND ACT
Romance
Novelist

NAME: Andrew White

AGE: 56

FIRST ACT: Nuclear Engineering

MOTTO: *Knowledge is a never-ending quest.*

↓ Andrew White had always felt satisfied by his career in nuclear engineering, for which he conducted research on nuclear reactor safety and material accountability. Although he was curious by nature, White had never thought about going back to school or switching job tracks—until his youngest daughter, Rebecca, was diagnosed with Williams syndrome, a rare genetic disorder marked by learning disabilities, hernias, developmental delays, and heart defects. Then, two years later, his son, Jay, was diagnosed with Parry-Romberg syndrome, an equally rare illness that causes deterioration of the skin and soft tissue on the face.

White and his now ex-wife, a physician, began researching their children's disorders. As parents, they needed to know

if anything could be done to reduce Jay's and Rebecca's symptoms, what type of monitoring each needed, what they could do to ensure each child's well-being, and how they could help them become happy, fulfilled adults. For White, the research was just part of being a good parent, but it also intrigued him. So, when one of White's major research projects got canceled at work, he decided to leave his job and, at 38 years old, go to medical school. "I wasn't worried about the academic challenge—that was something that spurred me on," White says, explaining that a scholarship to the University of Illinois at Chicago also helped relieve any financial worries. "My biggest hesitation was the time I'd have to spend away from my family."

In 1998, White's medical training brought them to Denver, where he completed his residency at Children's Hospital Colorado. He currently practices as a pediatric neu-

rologist and epileptologist at Denver Health Medical Center, where he gleans immense pleasure by helping patients. His first "patients," of course, were his children, who are now grown and doing well. Rebecca lives in Israel in a progressive group home. Jay is a successful attorney in Northern California.

Reflecting on his choices, White says his career change didn't help his children in the way people might assume. Rather, the shift from engineering to medicine drastically improved his bedside manner, a skill that benefitted his kids more than simply having a father who understood human physiology and could manage their care. "I'm far less nerdy than I used to be," White says. "I understand people better; I understand my kids better. Medicine made me a better parent because I get what's going on with them and the problems they face in life."

NAME: Mark Snipe

AGE: 44

FIRST ACT: Corporate Finance

MOTTO: *We are what we repeatedly do; excellence then is not an act but a habit.* —Aristotle

➔ New York City born and bred, Mark Snipe got his undergrad degree from Cornell, his MBA at New York University, and admittedly wanted to be Gordon Gekko (the infamous stockbroker played by Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*). That is, until he actually started working in leveraged finance. "I wasn't very good at it," Snipe admits. He quickly made the switch to corporate finance and spent the next 15 years building a rock star resum  with positions at Seargams, Universal, and NBC.

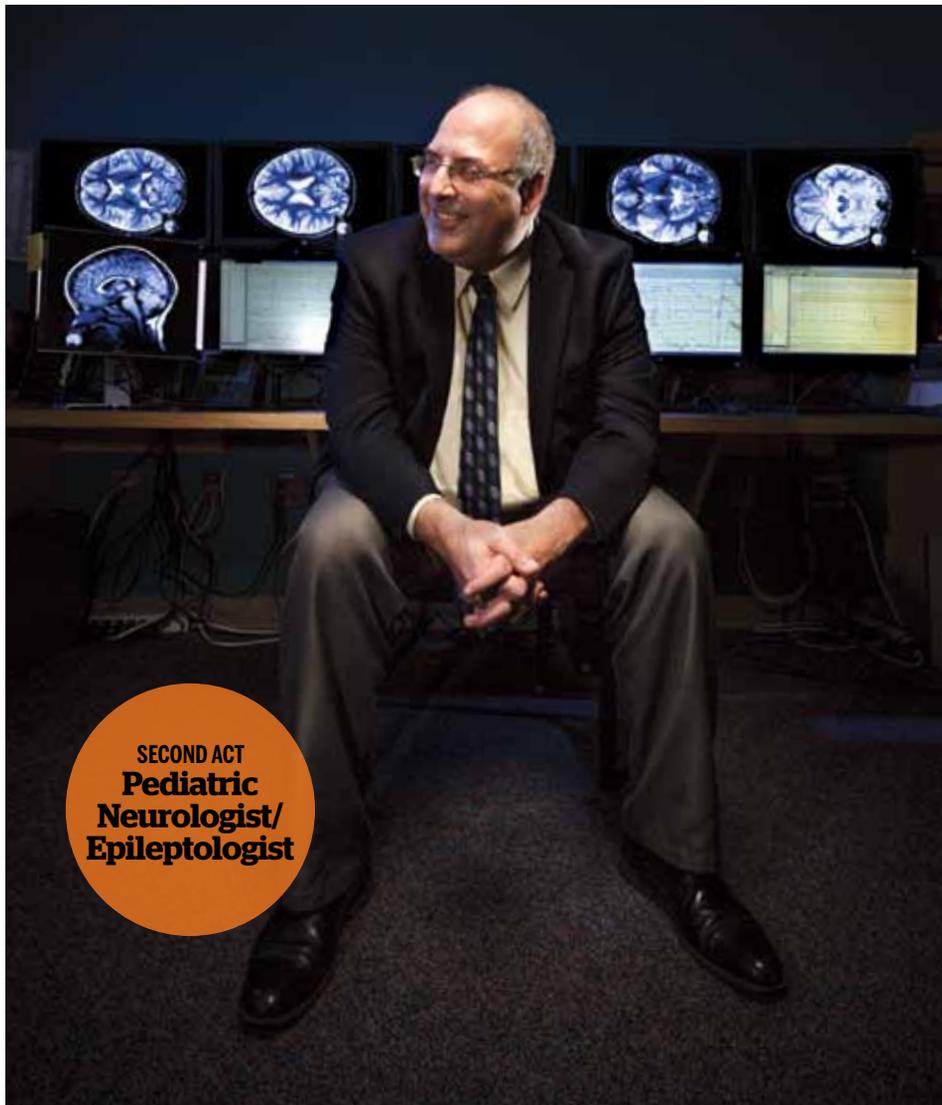
In 2007, he took a finance job with apparel giant Ralph Lauren. The position appealed to him on many levels, not the least of which was the fashion aspect. "My nana was a salesperson at Saks Fifth Avenue, and my parents were both fashionable people," Snipe says. "It's just something I've always been into."

Snipe spent five years with Ralph Lauren before moving on to Lacoste's North American footwear division. Then his girlfriend dropped a bomb: "Maria decided she wanted to leave New York City."

Snipe begrudgingly got on board when he realized a move would afford him the ability to open his own menswear boutique. "New York is so ridiculously expensive, I couldn't do something like this there," he says. Swayed by a trip to visit Snipe's cousin, the pair chose Denver: "We were blown away," Snipe says. "Denver has this incredible small-business community. Everyone we met was so optimistic. We fell in love."

Despite Denver's lower cost of living, Snipe soon realized it would take more cash than he expected to open a retail shop. He also had to convince wholesalers—who are highly selective about where their brands are distributed—his boutique was worthy of their products. "It wasn't easy," Snipe says, "but we'd moved across the country, so I had to make it happen."

In early October, Snipe opened Sully & Co. on Eliot Street near Jefferson Park. Named after Snipe's dog, a miniature schnauzer, the shop sells only American-made clothing and accessories with classic designs and contemporary silhouettes. "I don't miss anything about my old job," Snipe says. "Not because it was bad, but because this is much more exciting and fulfilling."



SECOND ACT
Pediatric
Neurologist/
Epileptologist

Mark Snipe had long worked for corporate retailers before chucking it all and opening his own menswear boutique.

SECOND ACT
**Boutique
Owner**



NAME: Taylor Swallow

AGE: 38

FIRST ACT: Business

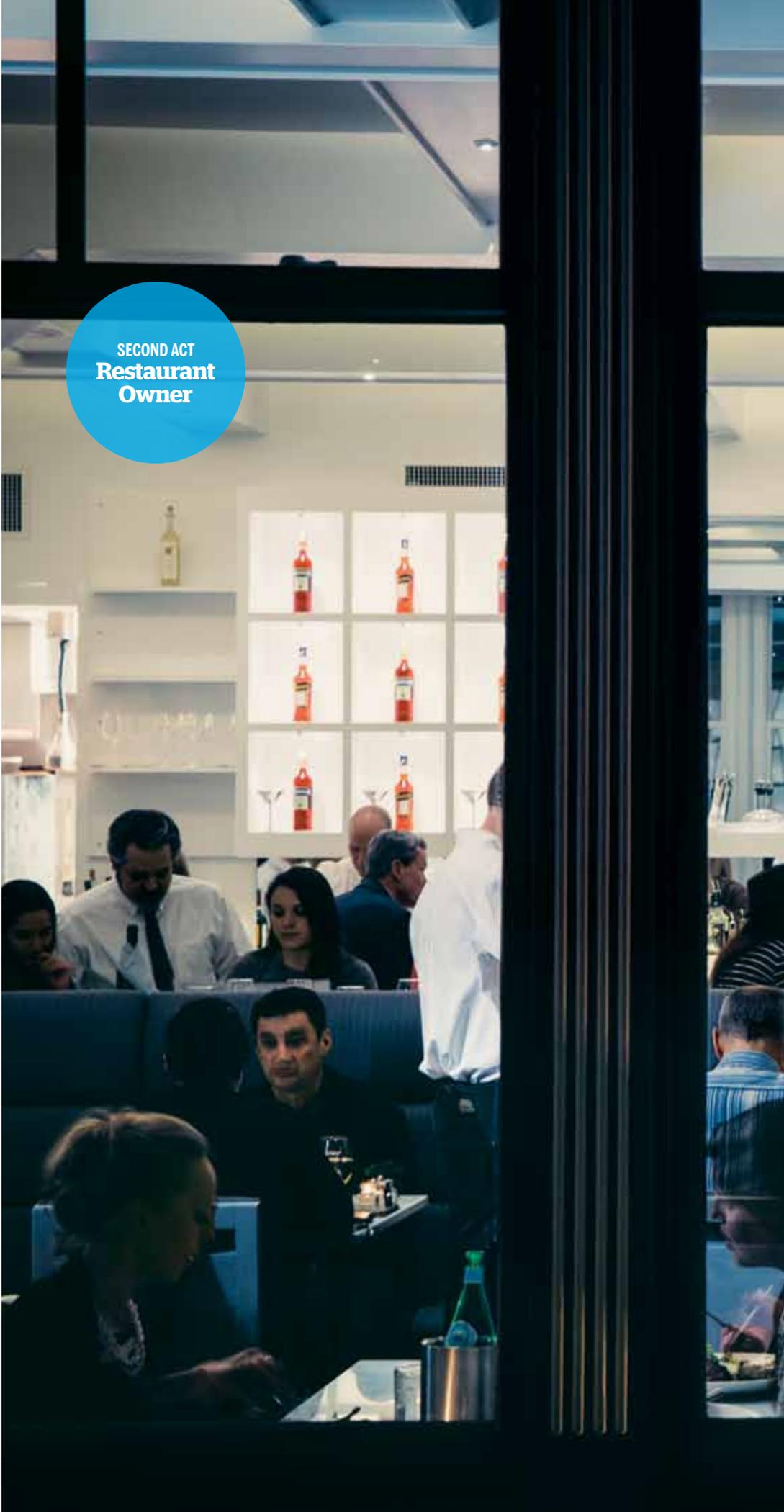
MOTTO: *The only true failure in life is not trying.*

➔ Taylor Swallow was one of those guys who always talked about opening a restaurant “someday.” But his career path suggested that day would likely never come. After getting a degree in finance from the University of Colorado Boulder, Swallow spent 15 years in business, chasing whatever opportunity seemed most lucrative at the time. He worked for corporate giants and slaved for startups. At age 31, Swallow even started his own business, a consulting firm for luxury real estate developments; two years later, he started a second company, this time a lending firm for real estate borrowers. But with each new venture, Swallow became more and more certain he wasn’t in the right field. “I just didn’t enjoy it,” he says. “I guess you get to a certain age when happiness has to be part of your career.”

In 2012, after Swallow’s wife happened upon an ideal space for a restaurant in Jefferson Park, Swallow felt inspired enough to contact chef Brian Laird for advice. “We met for coffee and ended up talking for hours about what a restaurant should be and what kinds of restaurants Denver needs,” Swallow says. “We kind of had that stars-aligning moment, and I said, ‘Let’s do this!’”

A few months later, Swallow left the lending business and, with Laird heading up the Italian-focused kitchen, set about lifting his restaurant concept off the ground, a process he calls “scary exciting.” Swallow had heard that restaurants have the greatest failure rates of any business. As such, his biggest fear was very fundamental: He worried no one would come—or worse, that people would come and not like it. “It turns out the failure rate for restaurants isn’t any different from other businesses; it’s just perceived that way because a restaurant failure is so public,” he says. “Not that that made me feel any better.”

On October 28, 2014, Swallow opened Sarto’s Social Italian Eatery on West 25th Avenue. The restaurant, which earned accolades for its chic sartorial-themed design (the name means “tailor” in Italian), has been full nearly every night since. “It’s been incredible,” says Swallow, who’s running the front of the house. “I couldn’t be happier.” Friends aren’t surprised Swallow’s latest gig has made him content. The 38-year-old loved helping his parents in the kitchen even as a little kid. “People I’ve known for a long time and who have suffered through my other lives see the change in me and are like, *This is obviously what you were meant to do.*”



SECOND ACT
Restaurant
Owner



Taylor Swallow opened his restaurant, Sarto's, in late 2014 after deciding his business career was no longer satisfying.

A man with a tattoo on his left arm, wearing a light blue shirt and a dark vest with a logo, stands in a distillery. He is surrounded by numerous wooden barrels stacked on metal racks. The barrels have various labels, some with numbers like 676, 630, 628, and 626. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man and the barrels.

**SECOND ACT
Distiller**

Following a long career in the oil and gas industry, Al Laws opened his Denver distillery.



NAME: Al Laws

AGE: 45

FIRST ACT: Oil and Gas

MOTTO: *There are no shortcuts.*

← Growing up in Alberta, “the Texas of Canada,” Al Laws says he expected he’d work in the energy business his entire life. And he almost did. For 23 years, Laws climbed the corporate ladder, from an economic policy analyst position for the Canadian Association of Oil-well Drilling Contractors to a senior analyst job with Merrill Lynch’s Exploration & Production energy team to a post in Denver with BMO Capital Markets building its oil services coverage. In parallel, Laws developed expertise in one other area—whiskey. “I started drinking Jack Daniels at age 18,” he says. “I lived in Canada, so that was OK.”

By the time Laws moved to Denver in 2007, he was a whiskey connoisseur. A collector and avid taster, he’d toured Kentucky’s bourbon distilleries and read everything he could on the topic. Laws soon discovered Stranahan’s, the first Colorado-born whiskey, and began thinking about making his own.

Laws started saving his money and, in 2010, bought a building at 1420 South Acoma Street that he began outfitting as a distillery. Then he started experimenting with different recipes, often brewing his spirits at 4 a.m. before work. “I wanted to do an American four-grain whiskey because they’re challenging to make, and because they showcase the four American mother grains: corn, wheat, rye, and barley,” Laws says. After six months, he felt he’d made a batch exceptional enough for full production. Then he waited three years while his hooch aged appropriately. “The speed at which stuff happens in this industry is tough for me,” Laws says. “I’m used to the way things happen on Wall Street—fast.”

Turns out, his Four Grain Straight Bourbon was worth the wait. The first 4,000 bottles sold out immediately, and the bourbon is currently available at 170 stores, bars, and restaurants across the state, as well as in New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. On October 4, 2014, Laws Whiskey House distillery officially opened, and a few weeks later, Laws celebrated his last day in the oil and gas industry. While he sometimes misses interacting with the type A characters in his old line of work, he says he’s never going back. “It’s a 180-degree shift from what I used to do—and it feels awesome.”

NAME: Niki Koubourlis

AGE: 35

FIRST ACT: Commercial Real Estate

MOTTO: *Passion trumps fear.*

↓ Niki Koubourlis’ career change came as a shock to those who knew her: By all accounts, the hard-charging Washingtonian had made it big. Her career had begun 13 years earlier in commercial real estate—a job that took her to Seattle, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and Chile. But secretly, Koubourlis was miserable. The success couldn’t overcome the fact that she was working 18-hour days in a job she wasn’t passionate about.

Then, about two years ago, her work brought her to Denver for a seven-week business trip. In a move Koubourlis acknowledges was bold, she decided to stay. She quit her job and relocated from Chile to the Mile High City. She took seven months off to recharge, concentrating on exploring her new surroundings. “I spent more

time outside in those seven months than I did in the previous 15 years,” she says. “By spending time in nature, I was discovering all these things I hadn’t made time for because I’d been so fixated on financial success.”

During that time, the concept for Bold Betties Outfitters took shape. Koubourlis was trying different activities, from backpacking to snowshoeing, and constantly needed new gear. “I was a big fan of the business model for Rent the Runway, where you can rent a \$10,000 designer dress for like \$80, and thought, *Why not do that with gear?*”

Koubourlis used skills she’d honed in her first career to research the viability of an adventure-gear-rental company for women. Then she went to work making Bold Betties Outfitters a reality. “The hardest parts were not looking for a real estate job when my self-appointed break ended, and giving up financial security,” Koubourlis says.

She did both anyway, and in August 2014, Koubourlis launched boldbettiesoutfitters.com. The startup’s primary revenue stream is the rental of recreation apparel and light gear such as sleeping bags and tents. But Koubourlis isn’t stopping there. “My vision is to enable women to have adventures,” she says. To that end, Koubourlis plans to integrate a women’s outdoor rec group she started on meetup.com in March—some 600 strong—with the Bold Betties website and take the group nationwide. The idea is that women can connect with other “Bold Betties” wherever they travel for adventure advice and more. At press time, Koubourlis had begun adding content to her website to educate women about outdoor endeavors. “I can’t afford to dine out or buy as many shoes as I want these days,” she says, “but what I’m doing is so much more fulfilling than what money could buy me.” ▲

SECOND ACT Gear Company Entrepreneur

