

Age Holds No Limitations
The Lois West Bristow Story

In the world of PhD. recipients, Lois West Bristow stands out. In August 2009, at the age of 80, she received her PhD. in depth psychology from the Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara. She may still be considered by the handful of nonagenarian PhD. recipients as being a “whippersnapper,” which would describe her perfectly.

Her dissertation was on individuation, Carl Gustav Jung’s term for how we grow and become all we can be, of which she is a blazing example. “My dissertation incorporates the ordinary day-to-day experiences and how we interact with them. It is the transforming process - the more aware we become of it, the more we can grow. It enhances the process of understanding life, of understanding ourselves and understanding our ability to change what we want to change in our own lives,” said Bristow.

Jung pointed out that this introspective process most often happens in our middle-age years when we begin to examine the meaning of our lives, who we are, and who we want to be. In the spring of her 75th year, Bristow kept having these ‘nudgings,’ as she calls them, unconscious messages, that she should get her PhD. This is crazy, I thought to myself. I do not need a PhD. I hired many PhDs in my consulting business. Even my friends thought the idea was crazy! However, the thoughts would not go away, she said. I sent away for the curriculum of several graduate schools and institutes, but in the end, they were not for me.

A friend told me about Pacifica and when I read their material on the depth psychology program, my body vibrated with intense excitement. I knew this was the place for me. Bristow had no idea why she was going back to school, as she did not intend to have another career. She is the only one in her family to earn a PhD. Perhaps this is what all those crazy thoughts were all about, said Bristow. Here in the final chapters of my life, I would (by going back to graduate school) be able to interweave what I have learned in life with the knowledge I seek. Now I am the old woman, one who has gained and yet still seeks wisdom, and I felt as though I was coming home to set the capstone, never thinking that a new career would grow out of this.

Bristow signed up for the five-year-program. “When I interviewed Lois she stated that the reason she wanted to get a degree in depth psychology was that she never wanted to stop learning,” said Pacifica Professor Dr. David Bona. I saw a woman not only thirsting for knowledge but having the gifts and openness of an excellent candidate for a PhD program. She was the only person in her class to graduate in four years. She turned in her dissertation the day before her 80th birthday and gave her oral defense the last Friday in August. The next day, Sept. 1, would have been the beginning of her fifth year.

Lois has the mind of an inquiring philosopher, and her writing was brilliant, said Bona. She was able to see deeply into the realm of the psyche and to express her insights with poetic imagination. I served as the external reader for the Pacifica Graduate Institute in the evaluation of Lois West Bristow’s doctoral dissertation, said Dr. Malca B. Lebell. While completing a scholarly work of research demonstrating the rigor and academic discipline required of a doctoral candidate, Dr. Bristow’s writing does not lose its poetic grace as she uses story to bring theory alive and into the common experiences of ordinary lives. One does not think of reading dissertations as being interesting. This one certainly was had a tail wind from the universe but I also worked hard.

If I had not been a writer, it would have been so much more difficult, said Bristow. Besides her PhD. in depth psychology, she holds a master’s in depth psychology, a master’s in education and a bachelor in sociology. Bristow has written a biography titled *Will I Be Next? Bea Gorman’s Life Story*, as well as one unpublished novel, has published educational material, written speeches and articles, and has written numerous funding proposals and training programs. She also published two recordings, one for junior high and one for preschool, which were sold to school districts nationwide.

Bristow’s background is in education, working for various school districts teaching techniques to increase teacher effectiveness. She was also a business owner, a developer, professional horse trainer, lecturer, and public servant. She was elected a county commissioner in Deschutes County, Oregon, and was the first woman to chair the board. She was honored by the governor’s office as one of eight Oregonians who made a difference. She also used to fly her own Piper Cherokee Arrow airplane and when she has free time, she sculpts and has been involved in Community Theater.

She considers her major achievement in life having raised two sons (one deceased) and a daughter. She has five grandchildren with whom she is very close. Bristow acknowledges two important people in her life; her mother, whom she describes as quiet, wise and strong, and a woman named Hilde Kirsch, whom she credits with changing her way of thinking about things. In my 20s, I was suicidal. I used to plot my own death, Bristow said. One day I stood in a tiny waiting room on the eighth floor of the Ross-Loos Medical Building on Seventh Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. The building had no air conditioning, and the small space where I waited alone had an open window, welcoming whatever breeze might come its way. The window beckoned to me gently, warmly extending a soothing pull. If I would just come and jump, the pain would be over.

Walking cautiously to the window and looking down, I envisioned my body splattering on the concrete below and felt an overwhelming comfort as my pain was released. Then someone came into the room, jolting me into reality. I grabbed my purse and left in a hurry. Within a week, I sat in Hilde Kirsch’s office. Unknown to her at the time, Kirsch had taken her training from Jung and it was he who designated her a Jungian analyst. She and her husband, Dr. James Kirsch, M.D., started their practices in Jungian psychology in the 1930s and founded the Jungian Institute in West Los Angeles. Both were close to Jung

and, according to Bristow, they spent six weeks every summer with him in Switzerland. My experience with her Ñ she, a wise old woman, and I, a naive 20-something changed my life, said Bristow. I was born being able to handle the outside world with aplomb, but I did not have a clue who Lois was.

I first met Lois Bristow over four years ago at Pacifica Graduate Institute's welcoming ceremony, initiating a very special friendship even though our ages differ by decades and our homes lay a continent apart, said Jim Blalock, fellow student. My fondness and admiration for Lois continue to grow. I am grateful to having witnessed as she, at age 80, patiently unearthed and held with sympathy the most painful, and yet revealing vulnerabilities of her life-long individuation journey. Yes, she earned a PhD, but most importantly, she developed an even more authentic Lois Bristow.

Lois is the example that if one remains humbly yet courageously vulnerable, life will progressively reveal its mysteries and wonders. I am honored to be her friend. My kids and grandchildren are so proud of me, Bristow said. My Grandma Lois is an extraordinary woman who has accomplished a lot, and she is still thriving at age 80. As my grandmother, she has loved me unconditionally and coached me through life's struggles, growths, and gifts. We have a deep connection. Our relationship is special and unique. I am very proud that she is my grandmother, said Trevor Ellis, Bristow's grandson. Bristow has lived in Los Olivos for 14 years. She was involved in all aspects of building her home from picking out the exact piece of land she wanted, to the architectural design and construction of the house. She oversaw the contractors making sure they would keep to her schedule, and the house was built within three months. She designed the gardens and the water features and laid the stone tiles in the back patio herself, which, she admitted, almost did her in.

I love being 80, said Bristow. Years bring such a grounding of wisdom, education and consciousness that provides a vitality to life. A solid grounded core keeps the balance that enables us to continue to open ourselves up and continue to grow. She is currently writing two books that emerged from the dissertation. She is presently a teacher of life skills, working one-on-one with clients in numerous areas including developing positive parenting skills, resolving conflict, effective use of personal power, confronting without anger, household money management and organizational skills.

I love to work with people. I am a teacher and I teach people how to untangle the knots in life to resolve their conflicts, change their behavior and own their own personal power. I use story as an artistic methodology to demonstrate how we can learn and change. Society today emphasizes being happy, and multitudes take medication to stay in that happy state, but our lives are complex and our feelings are complex and we can't integrate our wholeness until we learn how to process sadness and grief as well as satisfaction and joy. I am more comfortable with the word content. Having a deep contentment in our lives anchors us and enables us to process a multitude of emotions, said Bristow. By undertaking, this task of acquiring a PhD in depth psychology and finishing as she turned 80, she has demonstrated by example that age is a scale of experience and not a measure of how old one is. We are only as old as we allow ourselves to be, said her proud son, Derek Ellis.

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By Pamela Dozois /Santa Ynez News/ Lifestyle Editor