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## Counseling women to chase their career dreams

By Danielle Douglas  
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Joan Russell was skeptical about "success coaching," but she promised her girlfriend she would join her to check it out at a conference held by District-based Vision Quest Retreats in College Park last April. Given Russell's stressful relationship with her boss at the time, the Silver Spring resident also figured some career counseling couldn't hurt.

Along with some 30 other women, Russell, 39, was encouraged by Vision Quest Retreats' chief executive, Nicole Cutts, to rediscover her passions and create a structured plan of action to pursue them.

"She gave me perspective, made me more aware of where I was and where I really wanted to go," Russell said of Cutts, a licensed clinical psychologist and organizational consultant. The two stayed in touch, and Cutts guided Russell through the fear of leaving her job.

Russell has since taken a new position as the director of administration and finance at a company in the District. Her definition of success, however, doesn't hang solely on her career. Of equal weight is leading a balanced life, an ongoing process. To that end, Russell signed up for Saturday's second annual Vision Quest Retreats conference in the District.

This year's event aims to address some of the obstacles, such as poor self-image and financial mismanagement, that hinder women in achieving their goals.

While Cutts believes all professionals face challenges along their paths, she said women are often hamstrung by gender constructs that discourage the kind of assertiveness needed to forge ahead in their careers. What's more, being saddled with the role of primary caregiver, as many women are, can place an added demand on their time and energy.

But opportunities to live your best life, she said, can be found in almost any adversity. That certainly proved true for Lisa Sacco of Bethesda, who gained the courage after a divorce to pursue a deferred dream to design apparel.

About a year ago, Sacco, 40, turned to Cutts for guidance as she tried to reinvent her career. Though she and her husband had been in the restaurant business for more than a decade, it was not her dream.

"I was inclined to go back to what I knew, what was easy for me," she said. "But when I started talking to Nicole, she helped me see the obvious: There are other things that are important to me now, not just getting a job and making money."

Quelling inner turmoil is a key part of Cutts's holistic approach, as is financial counseling. Certified financial planner Marie Isabel Laurion will be on tap at the conference to offer attendees strategies for prudent money management.

Indeed, when Russell was plotting to leave her job, Cutts suggested she create a savings plan to help her through the transition. That advice resonated with Russell, who was drawn to the financial planning portion of this year's conference.

Cutts's own career is a testament to the strategies she advocates, as she ventured out of clinical psychology to pursue her passion for life coaching. Nine years ago, she started Cutts Consulting, which has since provided professional development to companies such as Pepco and Black Entertainment Television. Having completed her own vision quest led Cutts to launch a subsidiary aimed at helping other women do the same.

"When you talk about visions and goals, it can be kind of vague. But Nicole has a very concrete way of communicating how to make those things materialize," Sacco said. "It's very practical."