

Get A Lifers now have one

Seven contestants still give it their all and find it takes hard work and humour to turn their lives around in six months

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[JUDY STEED](#)



RON BULL/TORONTO STAR
Mike Smith packs up cat Limoges for the move to Florida, fulfilling one of the 34-year-old's dreams.

It's been a tumultuous summer for the Star's Get A Life challengers - seven people selected from hundreds of applicants for a two-month experiment in "life coaching." Designed to kick-start major changes in their lives, guided by weekly sessions with life coaches, paid for by the Star, the challenge started on February 11 and wrapped up eight weeks later. It focused on how we get stuck Ñ and unstuck Ñ in common human problems. We promised to return six months later, to see how our brave Lifers carried on, armed with their new-found skills.

Remember our cast of characters?

Ellen Vesterdal, an opera singer and music teacher in her 40s, was a loveable clutter bug. Her car was like a barge loaded with stuff; her home was literally crammed to the gills, her computer and piano lost in her office, buried in stuff.

At the end of the series, she was "liberated," she said, by the junk she'd eliminated with the help of her professional organizer, Susannah Coneybeare, founder of The Sorting House.

The question was: Would Ellen be able to maintain the tidiness, open her mail every day, deal with the newspapers and magazines, books and bags that piled up on her in the past?

Mike Smith, 34, was a sweet ditherer who felt trapped working at Second Cup, fantasizing about being a famous writer or actor, paralyzed by perfectionism. The more grandiose his ambitions, the more humiliating his lack of accomplishment.

Life coach Garry Schleifer helped Mike focus his fragmented interests and make a choice. Mike chose writing, and got his first article accepted for an anthology of gay stories to be published next spring. Would Mike stay on track?

Lillian and Robert, mid-40s, (not their real names), had an out-of-control son who made his mother and stepfather miserable; family life was chaotic.

In psychiatrist Harvey Armstrong's group, Parents for Youth, Lillian learned to set limits with her son. She and Robert started talking. Could they maintain their new sense of order?

Sandra Brawley, 49, had the opposite issue. She was so polite she couldn't object to anything, wouldn't express an opinion, didn't show anger, never said no or asked for what she needed.

Life coach Patricia Muir taught Sandra to speak up, at home and at work. Sandra found her voice. Could she keep it?

Cynthia Abernethy, 44, had a voice but no time. An overwhelmed working mother with two children and a husband, she took on too much. From life coach Frankie Doiron, she learned to set up systems, delegate and look after herself. Would Cynthia stick with the program?

Amanda Smith, 19, was so shy she literally needed to "get a life." She'd spent the previous summer jobless, watching too much TV at home in the basement. At university, she felt lost in the crowd. Life coach Maureen Ford encouraged Amanda to speak to new people every day, to get out there early with her résumé. Would Amanda find work? Make new friends? Come out of her shell?

Our challengers were motivated. They'd convinced us that, more than anything, they wanted to make the changes they'd defined. We wanted to see if eight weeks of life coaching could spark a shift they ardently desired. How did they do?

Ellen Vesterdal was very busy over the summer. She sang in an opera in Halifax, studied dance in West Virginia, went camping in Ontario and on the home front, inspired by her newly liberated spaces, renovated her bathroom, had new bookshelves built and re-arranged her kitchen and office.

"I'm trying to tidy up on a daily basis," Ellen says. But by late August, she admitted, "a little clutter" was accumulating. The mail was piling up. "Like a child with homework, you avoid it for long enough and then you absolutely don't want to do it."

She was a little afraid of my follow-up visit, but she dealt with it. "That's the good thing about having people come to visit," she says. "You tidy up." When Coneybeare and I descended last week, the car was pristine, the house not perfectly tidy but comfy and mostly uncluttered, except for Ellen's office, where paper is piling up again. Overall, Ellen is doing well, managing her multifaceted life, coping with household chores.

Ellen feels that Susannah's "magical organization skills" have helped her shed "a heavy judgment" about the clutter. So confident is Ellen, in fact, that she's looking for love and quoting Goethe: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back ... Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now."

Mike Smith turned 34 in June. Over the summer, he signed up for a course at Ryerson University, "creative writing, on the Internet, but it was too easy to blow off doing work. The teacher said, 'Write something about yourself and tell three lies about yourself and we'll guess.' That was dumb." Though his first story will be published next spring, Mike hasn't written anything since July but he took a bartending course and headed down to Key West, Florida, to see if he could get work there, in the winter. The vibes were so good that dithering Mike drum roll made a decision: move to Key West. On Saturday, Sept. 24, as Hurricane Rita pounded Texas and Louisiana, Mike's mother and her husband picked up Mike and his cat Limoges and set off to drive to Florida. Mike was elated.

The life coaching process helped him "get out of the rut," he says. "With Garry (Schleifer), I learned how to take steps to make a decision. This is my decision."

Unbeknownst to Amanda and Ellen, they helped him, too.

"When I was in Key West, I was sitting alone in my room, watching TV, feeling shy, 'no one wants to talk to me,' and I thought about Amanda, making herself talk to people. So I got dressed and went out and talked to people."

Back in Toronto, he realized he had to get rid of a lot of clutter. "I thought about Ellen, how hard it was for her to get rid of things, and how nice her place looked when she did. So I sold stuff, I donated clothes to a men's shelter, I gave stuff to Goodwill."

He realizes he will arrive in Key West during one of the worst hurricane seasons on record. "If I have to evacuate, I'll evacuate."

Cynthia Abernethy is a high school vice-principal and gets the summers off. In the past, she'd used the time to work hard around the house. This summer, she practiced what she'd learned from her coach Ñ and had fun.

In July, she reported that she and her husband were walking the dog together at night and exercising more. "We got an elliptical trainer with points from a credit card and I plan to get up early and get on the elliptical so I'm in the routine when I'm back at work."

She only missed one Pilates class in a 12-week session and has a Pilates tape to use at home. When the kids were off at camp, instead of renovating the house non-stop, the parents went out to dinner and off to Niagara-on-the-Lake. (Even so, they redecorated the kids' bedrooms.)

By October, was Cynthia maintaining her healthy fitness habits? Staying relaxed? "Arrgh. September is crazy at school. I haven't made it on to the elliptical consistently, but I've lost seven pounds and I've made a vow not to eat the principal's jujubes."

As for the kids' chores, "the responsibility chart is still in effect, they clean the litter box, put out the recycling Ñ yes, we have to remind them regularly, they're 10 and 12."

Overall, Cynthia is aware of "how easily you can slip back into old habits." Sometimes she feels the family "takes advantage of me, but it's my own fault if I let it happen. I have to be vigilant every day."

Sandra Brawley, condo salesperson, made subtle changes over the summer. When I called her office, it was her voice on the answering machine Ñ a first for Sandra.

"Day-to-day, I find myself doing things with ease without realizing until later, things I couldn't have done before. I'll say no or stick up for my opinion. I don't beat around the bush, I make decisions at work ..."

Sandra stayed in touch with her life coach, Patricia Muir, by email once a week, and talked to her once a month, for free. "It helped keep me on track. It's easy to backslide. I'd tell her things I said no to Ñ even minor things."

Sandra says her husband "is expressing more opinions, and that challenges me to assert myself. I have less fear of being assertive."

One example: "We were at Casino Rama with friends, standing around trying to decide what to do next. I was the one who said, 'We're going this way,' and led the way through the crowd. It felt good."

Sandra recognizes that her timidity was rooted in fear. In a previous relationship, her partner was "verbally abusive; I was afraid of being yelled at, so I guess I stopped speaking. It wasn't that I didn't want to talk, I'd hear my inner voice but the moment would pass. I still miss the moment, sometimes, but I follow up later, I don't let things go."

It's an empowering feeling, Sandra says. She's inhabiting her life. She feels more confident.

"Patricia told me to let people know, 'This is what I want, this is what I need.' People can't read my mind."

Muir recommended that Sandra read a book, *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World*, by Marti Olsen Laney. "I think Amanda White would like it," Sandra says.

Muir's last word: "I've encouraged Sandra to take her new wisdom and habits and direct them to her professional life, to promote herself in the condo market."

Like Sandra, **Amanda White** has discovered that little things can change your life – like a summer job. Working at Canadian Tire, she had to talk to new people every day, she made friends at work, and she met another student who goes to York University and lives in the neighbourhood.

"The job changed everything," Amanda says. "I'm going to keep working weekends and some Fridays through the school year."

Over the summer, she talked to her life coach, Maureen Ford, once a month (for free), and saw a counsellor, who helped a lot. "It was about not blaming other people and changing the way I think about myself."

By September, Amanda was bubbling over with good cheer – unlike the morose student who had struggled through her university year feeling terribly isolated. She's decided she'd like to transfer to Ryerson, to take the radio and TV program and get into broadcasting or TV production.

The student newspaper? "I don't have time for it, I have five classes, I work on the weekends, I can't even take dance (hip-hop) any more."

One thing Amanda learned: As much as she wanted to be chosen for the Get A Life challenge, she felt terribly exposed seeing herself in the newspaper. "I feel like that person is not me anymore, I've come so far."

Says Mom, "I'm pleased for Mandy. She's helping around the house, washes dishes, vacuums, does her laundry. She's happier, not as grumpy. She doesn't watch as much TV. She's set goals for herself, she wants to get better marks at school."

Says coach Ford, "Amanda's had a huge breakthrough. She's thinking about her future, she's light years from the young woman I first met. You can hear it in her voice. She's not whispering into the phone. She's talking and laughing, initiating conversations. She's on the right path. She used to look down all the time. Now she's looking people in the face, she's looking ahead. She can see where she's going."

For Cynthia, the main lesson is clear: "You can say you want to change – modify your habits, exercise, delegate tasks, eat healthier – but you have to be vigilant. Take responsibility for yourself *every day*."

There are no easy fixes, especially for working mothers, she says. "Men will go and play a game of golf but we put everybody else first and then we start feeling angry and resentful and frumpy. If you allow yourself to be a doormat, people will walk all over you."

The antidote? "If you're serious about self-improvement you need regular 'vaccinations' or check-ins, whether it's AA or Weight Watchers or talking to a life coach."

We'll give the last word to Mike, who sent this email just before his departure for Florida:

"The 'Get a Life' experience has been so fulfilling and rewarding – thanks to the support and encouragement I've been given, the research skills I've developed, the alternative ways of thinking I've been shown, the input from Garry (the positive stuff, that is!)."

"While I don't think the move to Key West will solve all of my problems, I think it is a huge step in the right direction of finding out more about myself and about what I want to do/where to be."

"This is all part of the journey. I have not abandoned writing. Instead of just hoping or dreaming, I've kick-started myself into taking action, on many levels, so in that sense, it's all good. I am taking action to get a life!!!!"

Lillian and Robert (not their real names) had a rough passage this summer.

Dr. Armstrong's group, Parents for Youth, took a break during July and August.

Lillian's son Frank, in his early 20s, was busy at his summer job – but in the calm that ensued, Lillian's and Robert's communication problems surfaced.

Said Lillian: "Robert gets so mad at little things Frank does, it's like there's a dark cloud over Robert's head for days, then I blow up. Frank took one of Robert's beers without asking. Robert was furious when he found the beer bottle and accused me of hiding it."

Said Robert: "I came home on a hot day and went to the fridge. I'd put two beers in to get cold the day before. Opened the fridge, no beer. Found one empty bottle but didn't find the other. Lillian claimed to know nothing about it."

Robert wanted to say to Frank but didn't: "You and your buddy can have a beer, but put a couple of beers back in the fridge to get cold for me."

As the summer passed, Lillian resented her husband's brooding anger; he was fed up with her "spending money in an out-of-control way" and "giving in" to Frank.

Frank resumed his old "tricks." He ran out of gas — and money — up north. Lillian rescued him. Frank had temper tantrums and scared his mother. She felt helpless.

At the root of Lillian's fear — and inability to set boundaries — was her traumatic childhood. Raised by an alcoholic father who could be violent, Lillian had tried, as a child, to protect her siblings — but no one nurtured Lillian.

When the group resumed in mid-September, Lillian was struck by something Armstrong said: "Don't you want your child to grow up and become an adult?"

"Of course I do," she responded.

"But if you keep ... not letting him have his own experiences, he'll never learn," Armstrong said.

Lillian realized she had, in fact, been standing in Frank's way. She realized Frank had "tried to break away when he was a teenager, and I wouldn't let him."

Armstrong helped Robert understand how Lillian needed her husband's loving support to make changes.

As the group continued, they started having fun. "The feedback we get from the other parents is great,"

Lillian says. "Our best conversations are on the way to the group and on the way home. We just *talk*.

Nobody gets mad."

Over the summer they sold Frank's car and he is back at college and contributing financially.

"As you start to become mindful," she adds, "it runs through your entire life. I've put myself on a budget, I'm paying off credit-card debt."

Armstrong says Lillian and Robert are "making progress."

"He's not as angry with her as he was, and her stress level is not as high. She's setting limits, and the kid is responding."

The problem is Lillian's "wounded self" which she fears she'll create in her own son, he says. This alienates him, because his mom's actions are not based on his real life but past hurts from hers. "She'll deal with it," he says. "She's getting stronger."

Indeed, Lillian feels stronger. She's changing the rules of the game. "I'm learning to face his blow-ups and remain calm. He still tries to escalate things; that was the old pattern. I can't say it's easy yet, but we're getting better."

We will return to Lillian and Robert after Christmas, to see how the family evolves. Can they stay on course?

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