

Quarter  
LIFE  
Crisis  
Project

By Jean Kercheval

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# Introduction

This project started after a conversation I had with Connor, a 27 year-old peer of my daughter's. He told me that he was going through what he called a "quarter life crisis". I went away from our conversation with questions that wouldn't leave me alone. Is this where all the much publicized anxiety is coming from in today's young people, I wondered? I felt the urge to understand things better. This was the seed of the project and it grew from there.

So it began, first with a portrait session and interview of Conner. Then, as the opportunity arose, I photographed and interviewed other members of the "Quarter Century Club". I expected all of the stories from the interviews to be somewhat similar. Boy, was I wrong. I heard stories of broken families, of terminal disease, of cancer cured, of transgender issues, of immigrant family values challenged, of a burgeoning young actor. So many different tales amongst such a small sampling of young people.

*I nearly wept a few times upon hearing their angst and occasional truly challenging situations for such young lives. The project seemed to attract those who's story cried out to be told.*

We discussed some of the decisions and actions that the older generations made in the past that the younger ones are now living with. The damaged global environment, poor economic playing field, and the polarization of politics that must be now dealt with were all brought up by various participants, as well as the anxieties that these things provoked.

While some participants viewed a rather dystopian future for the Earth and society, even going so far as to tell me that they would never bring children into this world, others had a more optimistic outlook.

So I wanted to bring awareness to this time of quarter life crisis as a real and often necessary chapter of many people's lives. In doing so, I'm hoping to also dispel some of these more negative feelings that the young people might have about themselves at this time. And bring validation to the quarter life crisis, thus dispelling the shame and guilt around it.

Maybe by showing a face with a personal story, I can both dispel and normalize some of these emotions and struggles and people can recognize themselves within these individuals shown in this magazine. As for the older generations, it can allow for some understanding and empathy towards these young people who hold all of our futures in their hands.

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Aiden, 24 years old at the time of this interview in August 2020 and came to me by way of his friend, Maddie, who was also a participant in this project.

He started off right away talking about his struggle with his identity as a trans person.

“I’ve for a long time identified as a trans male, like binary female to male. But right now, it’s not feeling a lot like who I am anymore. And so I’m kind of figuring out what my identity looks like right now, all without some of the structure of University being there to make me sit and think about things in a safer setting.”

“I also just kind of recently started letting some of my family members back into my life. *Because when I came out as transgender, there was a lot of drama between myself and my maternal parents and we stopped talking after I left.*”

“And that kind of factors into how I view myself because the elders that I do have in my family don’t really understand where I’m at. They’re all very straight, very cisgender, never really had to question these things...”

“I think the biggest part of my quarter life crisis is that I have very bad anxiety. And I have some PTSD and I am constantly afraid of dying... And I don’t have any reason aside from the fact that I have some medical problems that are monitored and regulated.”

“I can’t see past a certain amount of time, like I don’t see my future. I’m so terrified of dying.”

“I’m terrified of the idea of dying young and not accomplishing the things that I want to accomplish, even if I don’t really entirely know what I want to accomplish ...[I’d like to see] other trans masculine people living their lives happily and get to communicate with them and talk to them and understand that like, things will eventually be ok. I have seen it from a distance. I’ve seen people online who are older than me who have gone through some of the same things.”

“But it’s so easy to feel so singularly unique that it’s hard to identify with anybody. And for me I’m constantly thinking, well, they were ok but what says that I’m going to be ok, cause life is not fair. And so sometimes it’s hard to see farther than, like the end of August or the end of September.”

“I think that’s a lot of my quarter life crisis and it kind of keeps me from moving forward in some of my plans. Because I want to be financially sound and successful. I don’t know what that looks like if I don’t know if I’m gonna be here in three months. I can try to make good medical decisions for myself, but what does that look like when I want to be financially successful? I don’t know if I’m going to be here in three months anyways.”

“Luckily, I have my wife and one of my roommates is a very strong support system and they kind of like talk back at those ideas a lot, but it’s really easy to get kind of lost and overwhelmed really easily.”

I did ask Aiden if he had any advice he could give himself or others going through crisis and this is what he said:

“Give yourself grace. I tell my friends that a lot. And I have to tell myself that because crises are hard to deal with, especially when you’re panicking and when you’re thinking horrible, awful things about yourself and whether that’s from inside or outside, you know, even if it comes from outside, you internalize it a little bit. Just give yourself grace and understand that you can make mistakes still, that it’s not a linear process, it’s going to be all over the place. And that you don’t have to actively love or like yourself even all the time. But if you give yourself the grace and the space eventually you might find that you can at least like yourself a little bit most of the time. I think that’s really important in moving out of crises in general. I think a lot of crisis comes from inside even if it was manifested on the outside. So if you give yourself the grace and space to push past it at your pace.”





Amy was 24 years old at the time of our interview in January 2020. I met Amy through another participant in the program, Janina.

I asked Amy what she thought the quarter life crisis was all about.

“You go to Middle school, you still have a set path, but things start getting tougher. And they tell you, you have to go to college, you need to do this, you need to build, pick all these things and you’re told your whole life that this is the road you’re going to follow. And everything has always been, you know, pretty much laid out for you. And once you reach college, there is no road. There’s nothing that tells you this is what you need to do. It’s very vague, it’s very open.”

“I think society has put these pressures on us where we’re told to go a certain way. And we’re told to be a certain somebody. And then when we get to a certain age, it’s just oh, be who you want to be, well we still don’t know who we want to be.”

“I still don’t know what I want to do every day. I think it brings this impending sense of doom on all of us, because we’re sitting here thinking, but you guys have told us that you’ve known what you want to be your whole life. And now you’re telling me that you don’t know.”

“And so they’ve had this false sense of security, and we’re going to have this job, we’re going to be this person for the rest of our lives, and then you get to adulthood and you find out that it’s basically all just a fake it ‘til you make it game.”

“That’s what I think the quarter life crisis is - this fact that society has decided to put all of these pressures and all of these things and that we’re learning now that it’s not true at all. And it causes panic. And for some people, extreme depression and anxiety and some people may even have some trauma that’s related to their schooling experience that now they don’t know what’s the deal with it? Because they’re so confused and they have no idea.”

“So it’s a really tough, tough road right now for anyone in their 20’s.”

“At my current job, it feels like I’m wasting away, like I’m not using any of my talents that I learned in school. It sucks, it’s horrible.”

“There aren’t as many jobs for people. Most of the jobs are still

being held onto by people who should probably be retired but they don’t want to retire because they’re workaholics and I respect and I get that. But there aren’t many jobs. I have a friend who is a biochemical engineer and she cannot get a job. That’s ridiculous. She’s going to have to get a Master’s before she can get a job.”

“A constant rejection - that’s what our generation is going through right now. Because we want a job. You apply for like 100 jobs and you get one interview.”

“I think that kids now are learning that the younger generations’ voices are just as important as any other, if not even more important than the older ones because they’re the ones who are going to be impacted by the most things. And I think they’re realizing that a lot of things are not going right and that if this continues, this is what’s going to end up happening for you.”

“And this passion thing is kind of bullshit. Right? It’s like, okay, I don’t know my passion. What’s wrong with me? Then social media goes round and round in your head...”

“Social media. You look at Instagram and they talk about, you know, I quit my cubicle job to find my passion and well, how the hell did you do that? I would love to do it, but I can’t do that. I don’t have the money and I know ‘Sarah’s’ the social media influencer and somehow made their living at it.”

“Then you feel crappy about yourself. It’s what some people describe as FOMO, fear of missing out. It’s the idea that social media will make you see what they want you to see. They don’t talk about anything else, no. So their life is absolutely perfect. The girl perfectionism again. That’s the constant. It’s like, by the time you’re 30, you’re supposed to have the house, or something, no longer have roommates. Settle down, have a spouse, a permanent somebody. Maybe you would have a kid.”

“But that’s not at all how it used to be where the rules change and getting people to understand that’s not how life goes anymore is a hard thing because you have lots of people who are very thick headed, who are stubborn and think this is how I thought this is how I see it. And I’m not going to change for anybody else.”

“I’ve been told my whole life not to settle. And now I’m being told I have to settle.”

Amy, 28 years old as of this interview in February 2020, is a fellow portrait photographer living in the Puyallup area, south of Seattle. I had contacted her with questions about her project titled "Just Me", a book about women and beauty and how it's time to change the stories we tell ourselves about what beauty truly is. She showed interest in my project and offered to be a participant.

Her quarter life crisis centered mostly around her livelihood and family.

Growing up with parents who were both very successful entrepreneurs, she decided to give it a go as a photographer herself and opened her own portrait photography business. Now she was assessing whether or not this was the best route for her and her husband's future.

Amy said, "There's a question of am I contributing? I don't want to just go to work and get a job and get paid. I want to make a difference."

"A lot of these thoughts of, am I doing what's right for my future, have come into play. So what about this freelance lifestyle? What's going to set my family up for success?"

"And when should I have children? If we decide to have children, when should that happen?"

"And how is my husband dealing with all this with all the stress? And that affects me and thinking, should I get a job?"

"And then I have so many people that just cheer me on. And I think I can't give up because they believe in me."

"So, my quarter life crisis right now is- do I become a responsible adult? Or do I try and make this thing [her business] work?"

"I'm a responsible adult to start a family and take care of my family - or be creative and live a life. And make a difference. Because I could get a job, but I also feel like then I can't make a difference. That's not where my heart leads me. So that's my quarter life crisis at the moment. What should I do next?"

I asked Amy where she feels the most pressure and anxiety of her quarter life crisis coming from.

"My parents in particular told me that I should get a job. And I see my husband and how he's struggling with the stress of paying all of our bills. And then I think I need to get a job for him. Or at least change what I'm doing. Like I have to figure out why what I'm doing right now is not working enough."

"I feel pressure from comparison with people that I see on social media - educators that have done what I want to do, or even people that are doing the same courses who are getting more success than I am, doing the same thing. Just having more success somehow. I can't figure out why."

"Also, there's a lot of pressure on myself- knowing that I'm not a failure, because I've done so many amazing things and but just thinking that I should be further along or I should do better."

Amy doesn't feel alone during this time because she opens up and shares her vulnerabilities so well.

"I don't feel alone, yet I still feel like, why can't I figure it out? So it's a different feeling. I've talked to so many people, especially women, and I know

that you just never feel like you have figured it out and that gives me a sense of calm...and a lot of peace."

"You are not alone. ...there's always going to be someone that you can talk to that's going through it to give you some sense of belonging. And stepping into fear has been something - being okay with the unknown is so scary. "

"But I also don't want to just settle."

"I think you have to be willing to fight for what it is until it really is too late. So for me, it's not too late yet. . . .we have to be creative... we put so much pressure on money and objects and things. But we have to find what gives us joy."





Brandon was the last participant I interviewed and photographed before temporarily shutting down my studio due to Covid-19 in November 2020. He was 24 years old at the time of our interview.

Brandon worked at ROOTS, a Seattle homeless shelter for youth. A recent graduate from the University of Washington, he was pondering the future of his career. Should he continue to seek work in the medical field in which he graduated? Or instead move into the arena of high tech- with zero programming experience? Going into tech would mean a start over for him. Is he willing to take on that risk? He was taking free online computer classes to learn as much as he could and build up his software skills, all while working at ROOTS.

I asked Brandon if he ever felt all alone during his quarter life crisis.

"Yeah, especially during Covid."

He also mentioned his Korean heritage in referring to this question.

"I'm a mixed race. And in some ways, I consider myself very lucky in regards to growing up - I had the benefits of being raised in an Americanized household so I never found it difficult necessarily to be related to in most of the schools. I grew up primarily Caucasian. We lived in more affluent neighborhoods. And I have a lot of privilege."

"But in all of my groups, I'm the Asian guy, I'm the Asian friend. I mean everyone else gets the distinction of being just the friend, the white friend, whatever. And that feels really weird."

"I'm kind of distanced from my mom's Korean culture. And there's so much about my mom really that I don't know or understand because I never learned Korean. The last couple of years, I've been trying to make the effort to sort of connect more and to learn and do more to try to learn Korean. It's really difficult to learn a lan-



guage when you don't have a teacher or use it everyday though."

We shifted our conversation to the homeless youth he sees through his work, and the government in today's society and how they both relate to the quarter life crisis.

"I think that sometimes people think that [homelessness] is a very distant thing, you know, and that it couldn't be me. But I feel like ...a lot of people are literally just one bad day away from being that person, you lose your job, you haven't been able to save, you can't pay rent, maybe your parents aren't able to support you."

"Tons of people are literally so close and they don't even know it. And it's kind of scary, you know. I try to think every once in a while how close I am to that person. And I think I'm pretty far away."

"And I only know that because I think my safety net is that I have parents who would support me at the drop of a dime. So I try to think, okay, well, what if my parents were unwilling to support me or unable to support me. And if I didn't have this job. I mean, I couldn't pay rent, expenses. Rent's over like a third, close to half of my monthly income. There's no way I could learn programming, there's no way I could even think about my identity or identity politics, I would not have any sort of capacity to think about my quarter life crisis in an intellectual sort of way. I would just be panicked all the time, stressed out, anxious, snappy, probably unhealthy."

"And it's honestly like a great blessing, I can be here and talk to you about my quarter life crisis, because I know I have the capacity and the resources to sort of slog through it. And theoretically come out on the other end, victorious, but I'm really not that far away."

"And I think that's kind of the general malaise and attitude of a lot of people my age anyway. They don't know it maybe or they don't think about it, but it's just this kind of subliminal messaging that at any given moment, you could fall under."

"Our government's social services are not equipped to help you in any way whatsoever."

Also, he said that if you're suffering as a young person, that possibly "If you're trying your best and if bad things happen, it's probably not your fault. It's easy to take a failure as a sign of personal failure, but sometimes it's just the system failing you."

"I think that a great way for people to get out of their quarter life crisis is if they knew that options were available to them way



earlier on in their lives, instead of knowing that there's only three kinds of jobs out there."

"I think that our public education system is so ill equipped to have people be functioning members of society and understanding all the moving parts in the society. And we just reward so heavily like, calculus, memorize facts, write your papers and then go to college. And then you can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer. And everything else is garbage."

"But you know, not a single person, not a single academic advisor said you might want to be an electrician and you can make like \$40 an hour your first two years of training. If I had heard that, I would have seriously considered it. How could you not almost consider it?"

I met Connor on a movie set where my daughter was filming in Baring, WA. He was the lead actor and during a break in filming I ended up chatting with him. I asked Connor the question all twentysomethings hate to hear: "So Connor, what are you doing with your life right now?". He sighed and answered, "I'm in a quarter life crisis". While I'd heard that term before, it had been a while. We continued chatting and I went away from the conversation intrigued.

After much thought, I decided to undertake this project and Connor (then 28 years old) became my first photoshoot and second interviewee in November 2019.



I asked Connor about the story of his quarter life crisis, or about his life path during the last several years.

He explained his meandering career path thus far.

Connor started off at college at Washington State University, and eventually got into a tech program and then into an internship. He then told me that his manager at the internship "would introduce me to all the executives in the company and then I could have a one on one with them and talk to them."

"And there was a guy that went to WSU, the same college I went to, and he had been there for a really long time. So she sent me up to talk with him. And I was talking with him and he said that he'd been here since he graduated from college, and he was like, 50 something. Wow. And I was like, man, you must really love working here. And he just looks at me with the worst look, 'it's a job', he says."

"And I'm like, Oh my god, I cannot end up like this guy. He's been

here for 30 something years and wow. He was so not pumped on being there. So I was just like, yeah, I can't do this. That was three years ago. At that point, I did not want to be there any longer. So I didn't take the full time offer. And then I was like, what am I going to do?"

"I took a really weird job, training hunting dogs. It was on Craigslist and it paid really well. Then I was like, what am I doing? I moved to Spain for a while but even that didn't really help anything. I was just kind of living in Spain. I mean it was nice, it was cool, but I had no objective."

"Then I went to this software school in San Francisco. But I wasn't super good at software engineering compared to the other kids that were there. For me it was just to get a job, whereas these other people were doing it because they were super passionate about it and had been coding since they were like 10 years old and they're like really into it."

"I was applying to lots of jobs. And then out of hundreds of jobs, I only got one interview. And in the end the result is to be back in an office, working for somebody else. So this is not what I want to do."

"So I moved back up here. Now I'm back in Washington state, trying out all these different things. I'm writing for a sports news website, which is pretty cool. All of these things are unpaid, but I feel like I have to start somewhere. So much is remote. There are lots of options."

I asked Connor if he could give any words of wisdom to other young people like himself in crisis.

"You have to decide whose advice matters and whose advice doesn't."

"Follow your fear. If you think, man that could be really cool, but you're really afraid of doing it, that's the point where you have to try it, like you have to. And even if it turns out terrible, like my first couple of acting classes were like misery, I hate this, but I kept going, then I started really liking it. I'm going to different classes now. I'm going to continue acting classes, just for fun. Avoid the end goals, do things you enjoy just because you really enjoy them. My advice, to try things that sound interesting to you. Even if it's the weirdest thing to you, like you've never painted before but you want to try painting, start doing it. But you have to work hard at it too."





I'd known Diego since he and my daughter were High School friends. At the time of this interview in December of 2019, Diego was 24 years old. We first discussed how the quarter life crisis is different today than in the past.

"It's different being 24 in 2019 than in 1989", Diego said.

"What's different now is that we're dealing with problems that really haven't been around for very long. For example, climate change. That's a huge issue right now. It's something that wasn't really a problem in 1919, 100 years ago."

"There's also an incredible wealth disparity, especially in the United States. Also globally, because there's extreme poverty in some corners of the world. And here we are, basically the most powerful nation in the world. The standard of living is very different for different people. But even in the United States, there is this wealth disparity. There's a lot of things that are getting really, really expensive."

"And minimum wage is kind of flatlined, right? Minimum wage literally has not increased in the past ten years. It's the same as it was in 2009. And that was before the market crash and all the economic boom that's been going on since then."

"That's been really hard for people my age, who are just now starting to enter the workforce, who are just now getting out of their college education - which is extremely expensive, not like it was when you were going to college, right? So that's been really difficult to deal with. People are in massive amounts of debt."

"Not to mention medical expenses. Medicine is also very expensive in the United States. I lacerated my finger a couple of years ago, and I had to go to the ER, get some stitches, which only took like 10 minutes, to just stitch you up and say you're good to go. It would have cost me thousands of dollars if I hadn't had insurance. Imagine people who have cancer or even diabetes. These things are very expensive to deal with."

"So these are all the things that we have to deal with in our youth versus what people our age dealt with back in the 60s, 70s and 80s."

"People my age are thinking really hard about what all that is going to mean for a future."

"I'll give you a really deep personal example for me. For the longest time, I've always thought, oh, yeah, well, I'm going to get married, and I want to raise a family and have kids. And I think that's great. And I still want that. That sounds great. To me. It's kind of been like one of my bigger life goals."

"And now I'm starting to think, what if that's not a good idea?"

"What if I have children and they don't survive the effects of climate change? What if they don't have the economic means to sustain the same standard of living I enjoy today?"



"These are such legitimate concerns that I'm no longer so sure that I'm going to have kids. A lot of other people feel the same way."

"So that's been a big impact. That can be really difficult for people like me, for example, who've always wanted that. Always wanting to raise a family and now that there's an actual global crisis, there's an actual reason to fear that your children will not survive, you know, maybe even past your own age. It's kind of discouraging. Really, it's sad. It does affect us."

"And well, I guess, like, in general, there's also not much being done about it by the older generation. Not to blame you personally, of course, it's a very complex issue. But essentially, people that are in power now are doing things that would not alleviate these problems. And I could talk on and on and on about that."

I asked Diego if he had any advice to others just entering a time of quarter life crisis.

"You're not alone, There are millions out there."

"It's important to speak up. My advice would be to speak up and tell the world how you feel and really speak from the heart. That would be my biggest advice, because that's something that I've denied myself for pretty much my entire life."

"Forget about what the world expects from you."

"What is it that you want to do? Look within. Really what is it that keeps you on this earth? Right? What excites you, what gets you up in the morning? Think about these things, and try to incorporate that into your life as much as you can. That's what I would tell them."

"It's very common. Everybody who's 20 something, you know, has that to some extent. But that's not to say that it's an easy task, especially for people who are in extreme poverty or who have very tense relationships with people around them because of their race, because of their sexual orientation or identity, these kinds of things, things that I don't have experience with. So I can't imagine how hard it might be. But I would say that that's the most important thing. But to also fight for societal change, so that we can more liberally express ourselves."





Elli, 21 as of our interview in January 2020, was friends with another participant, Diego, and asked to join the project after hearing about his experience.

I asked Elli about the story of her quarter life crisis.

“My quarter life crisis was definitely all about me trying to find a sense of self.”

“This last year has been my first year as my own adult. I moved out last year. I was in a long term relationship. Now I’m not in a relationship. I’m not living with my parents. I’m really on my own now.”

“What do I do? I didn’t even know what I like to do in my downtime because it was always so involved with my boyfriend so trying to figure out what I like to do as a single person is new. How do I make friends? How do I talk to people? How do I explore new interests?”

“And who am I? What do I enjoy doing? What do I want to do? What kind of paths do I want to pursue in school and do I want to keep my job forever - that kind of a job, or a little bit global? Where do I go from here? It’s kind of everything.”

“I think living in Shoreline and then not moving very far away, my world always felt pretty small. But now it’s getting bigger. And I don’t know how I feel about that yet. People in my industry have been asking me about my job like, is this something you want to do long term, would you be interested in working from somewhere else?”

“The world has a lot more options than I thought it would and that’s a little bit daunting.”

I asked Elli if there were any messages she’d like to pass along to others who might also be in a time of crisis.”

She said, “Be willing to put yourself in uncomfortable positions, like telling yourself it’s ok to mess up and fail. I think we live in a time where if you make a mistake or if you mess something up,

people are very quick to jump on you, attack you and make you feel bad for it. But I think it’s important for people, especially this age, to have those experiences. Yes, I messed it up. It didn’t work out, that’s ok.”

“I think it’s a very important life skill to have to fail gracefully. That’s been something that I’ve been tackling recently. And I’m glad I have been. But I am willing to try new things and make mistakes with those things. Trying new things, and then realizing I don’t like them and that’s ok. As long as you’re trying to do something new and accepting the outcome no matter how it is.”

Finally, she says of the generational divide:



“Older people need to be a little bit more gentle with the younger generations. I think there’s been this very big push of separations between generations and a lot of distrust especially between millennials and the Gen Xers and then people in their 60s. I think it comes from a lack of meeting people where they are and understanding where they come from.”

“One of the biggest criticisms leveled at millennials is that they behave like they are “entitled”. Where a lot of that comes from is that the parents kind of raised them like that. So then it’s not necessarily their fault that that’s how they were raised, or that’s the culture that they were raised in, but they still get a lot of blame for turning out the way that some did.”

“And then there’s the big stigma of they’re all lazy when in reality, so many of them are hardworking and are just trying to find a place in today’s world that they weren’t really prepared for. And so I think that’s kind of a big thing that has been a divide for the generations.”

“So I think just taking a step back to look and listen is important- and not just for older generations - younger generations can definitely work on that as well. That’s something that as people we’re not wired to do. So we need to be very conscious and work on that.”

Em, 23 years old at the time of our interview in January 2020, was a childhood friend of my daughter, and grew up in our neighborhood of Lake Forest Park. Em lived in Seattle, where they nannied full time for a family.

I asked them about their definition of the quarter life crisis. They said, "it's exactly what I'm in right now, sorta like an identity crisis, wrestling with the idea of who you are and who you want to be going forward."

Em explained how they want to move forward with their digital audio engineering degree, but is finding it challenging to fit into their nannying job. They have so many questions - how the schooling and job can work together for one thing. "I don't know what that looks like", they said.

"I don't know how I want to move forward. And I'm still trying to figure out if I financially can live on my own, like, in a studio apartment..."

"I don't know what I'm doing. And I don't know what to expect. And I don't know where I'm going with any of this. So it's just been a disaster."

"So it's just a lot to try and figure out and there's so much pressure from everyone in my life to be like, what are you doing? Which I don't think that it's intentional from any of them, but I think that it's definitely happening. You just feel it. I feel it very much."

"It's one of those things that I have to figure out sooner rather than later. Because my partner and I are looking ahead into the future. And granted, this is like, a few years down the road at least we want to have a couple kids. And so I have to get myself figured out before I can be like, all right, let's have a kid. Because that'll take some work. So it's mild. But kind of scary."

I asked Em how they think that the quarter life crisis is different today than it was for past generations.

"Oh, we're in the age of technology! I think there's a lot of pressure from other people. My mom used to describe it to me as you're seeing people's highlight reels on Facebook and Instagram and whatever else. So you're getting these snapshots of people's lives that are the good parts and you don't see the bad."

"I looked through my Instagram feed and everyone was like, oh my God, I'm doing so well. Look at this weight loss. Look at this- I'm eating better. Look at this- I moved across the country and I'm starting a new life. I started this job. Look at this school that I'm going to. You know, back in the day, you had to mail postcards to your friends if you wanted them to know where you are at. Now it's very easy to just go on Facebook and type someone's name in. We have so many more ways of finding people and seeing what they're up to."

"And I think that makes a world of difference in terms of how you feel about yourself and how you carry yourself. I find that a lot of times if I'm scrolling through social media, and people are posting all these positive things, it makes me feel not great about myself."

"Because I get that feeling of like, well, what am I doing that is worthy of posting? And I'm like, well, I adopted a cat...and that's about it. That's my big news. I traveled for a few days, I went to San Diego by myself. And that was exciting."

"But, you know, it's like one of those things where all my friends are getting these new jobs and higher paying jobs, and I make good money for what I do. But could I be making better money if I had gone to college and gotten a degree? Probably, but I'm not."

"So yeah, it is a wild ride."





Emily was 22 years old at the time of our interview in November of 2020. She stumbled upon my Instagram feed and therefore upon this project and then she contacted me to be a participant. In the interview, I asked Emily about the story of her quarter life crisis.

“When I was in high school, I started my nursing degree at a community college. I told myself, this is my plan, my way out. **Having grown up in a chaotic and sometimes dangerous household, I’d spent most of my adolescence aching for a sense of self-worth, for stability, to be someone that I respected and that I thought others would respect too.** To 16-year-old me, nursing was my way out of the anxiety and turbulence of my childhood.”

“Fast forward five years, and I was graduating from the University of Washington’s nursing program. Everyone around me was elated, we were having celebrations and ceremonies, and excitement continued as I passed the licensing exam and finally became a registered nurse. I was ready for my career in a highly respected field, supported by a loving boyfriend, equipped with good friends, and set to live in an exciting city. I suddenly realized that I had everything that I’d wished for in my adolescence.”

“But as the dust settled from that whirlwind of excitement and achievement, I found a deep and aching emptiness still gnawing at me. **The feeling that I was nothing remained by my side. And I couldn’t understand it, it freaked me out. If I had everything that was supposed to change my life, why did I still feel like I was drowning? I felt completely stuck and suffocated by my internal pain and I was entering this moment of a mental health crisis.** And I didn’t know how to ask for help. After hitting those external benchmarks of success, it felt like people around me expected me to be fantastic and good-to-go. I was choked by my efforts to maintain the façade that I was fine.”

“Through the fall after my graduation, I struggled to move forward. I was depressed and found it difficult to pull myself through each day, let alone apply to jobs. My sense of worthlessness had me asking myself if I was even good enough to be a nurse.”

“Through struggling those months, I eventually began to understand why I felt little difference from my 16-year-old self.”

“We’re raised with the mindset that if we have this internal problem, then here, there’s an external fix for that. So we go around thinking that our loneliness can be fixed with a relationship, our feelings of worthlessness can be cured with external successes, our dissatisfaction with life can be erased if we move somewhere else. We make all of these external changes thinking we can run from ourselves, but in the end no matter what we’ve modified about our environment, it’s still ourselves that we have to live with.”

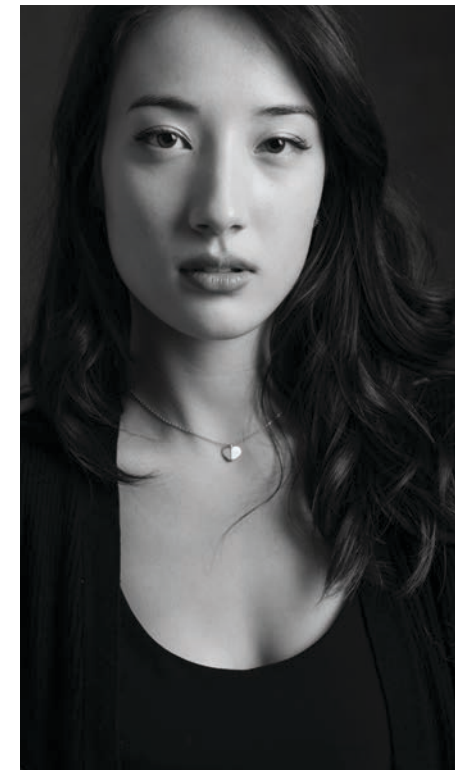
“It wasn’t until I’d gotten everything I had thought I wanted that I could finally understand the profound brokenness inside of me that needed healing.”

“I think for anyone who has had childhood trauma, there’s a lot of work in your young adult years of recovering, and it’s a journey to even understand what kind of recovery needs to happen.”

“That being said, I’m working on my mental health. There are lots of amazing resources out there. A mindset that’s helped me as I continue to heal is having compassion for myself. I didn’t have a tangible sense of what that looked like until this past year. The imagery that’s helped me is imagining my younger self.

As I live my life as an adult and make mistakes or feel unsure of myself, I try to modify my internal monologue from the harsh critic that I’ve historically been into the kind of loving supporter for myself that I deserved as a child.”

“Healing of course is a continuous journey, but I’m not in a mode of crisis anymore. I’ve been extremely blessed in my adult life so far, and what’s left for me now is persisting with the internal work that I know I need to do.”





Hannah was 24 years old as of our interview in September 2020. I met Hannah through a young woman I'd encountered on a zoom networking call.

I asked Hannah how she sees the quarter life crisis as different in today's world as compared to past generations.

"I'm from the South, so things may be different. But my family - my parents, my grandparents and everybody - they were married and had kids by the time they were my age. So I think it's different for me than it is from them because now I live in a different area and it's culturally very different. So I'm not trying to start a family right now whereas that was their next step. They went to high school, then college, got a job and then got married and had kids. That was the progression. I am so very different."

I asked Hannah about her own quarter life crisis.

"So I work right now for Amazon Web Services. I was in sales because I just kind of felt like I was supposed to do sales. My Dad does sales. That's what he knows and I kind of felt like I should be doing what he knows and does. So I was doing that, and I hated it."

Then she actually created another job position for herself within Amazon, "but now I'm just like, do I really enjoy going into this job every day? And I feel like since it's the first company that I've worked at, it's somewhere where I'm supposed to stay for a little bit. And I just don't really know. I don't know what else I have

experience in. Because this is my first job. And now, I just have no idea what I want to do."

"But I think the biggest part is do I want to live in another country? Do I want to stay here? Do I want to quit my job and just travel for a while? And yeah, there's no security in any of it. And that's also stressful for me. Just think about if I don't have this job anymore? Or if I even move to another country? What do I have when I want to not do that anymore?"



"Honestly, I think that my biggest concern, and I always think about this is when I do eventually want to have kids, I want to be able to provide for them well. And so I want job security and to make enough money to where I can provide for my kids which is, I feel, a weird thing to think about when I don't have children. But that's just where my mind goes."

"So even thinking about like, not having job security and not knowing what I'm doing is just stressful in itself because I'm like, well, what happened? I started doing therapy. And I think that's helped a lot."

"I think what I'm trying to get to is a point that I should like to stop focusing so much on the future aspects and just enjoy what I'm doing right now. And seeing where things go, which I think helps me."

"I'm such a forward thinker and it sometimes doesn't work out very well for me. So I am trying to just be excited about what I'm doing right now. And let the ideas flow as they come rather than trying to figure something out. I think it is helpful."

Janina was 22 in November of 2019, at the time of our interview. She was a makeup artist that I hired for a couple of my photo-shoots in the past and I had contacted her to see if she would be interested in being one of the first participants in my project.

We started off talking about how the idea of success is a huge factor of the quarter life crisis.

"I feel like one of the key points of a quarterlife crisis is how you define success, and what you've been told is supposed to be success. Now you need to find what success means to you. What's going to make you happy? What's going to make your life content? What's going to set you up for the next 10, 20, 30 years? I feel like that's what really is like the focus."

"Both of my parents define success as having a well paying job, where you're living comfortably. And so for that they wanted my siblings and I to all go through college. Go through college and you're going to get a good job and that's your life and if you want to have a side business or a hobby, that's fine. Like for the longest time for me, doing makeup has always been viewed as a hobby of mine. And [my parents] don't want me to pursue it any further."



Janina ended up going to the UW and graduating at 20 years old due to Running Start, a program that allows 11th and 12th grade students to take college courses at Washington's community and technical colleges, which means that students earn both high school and college credits for these courses. She said her time at UW was a "ruthless machine" and she was spit out at the end, raw. Then came the post graduation job hunt. Janina worked retail jobs and later a coordinating position at a small salon while looking for a "real adult" job.

"I had to get a job because I had just gotten a degree but nobody would hire me. My parents told me 'okay, that sucks and you need to start from the bottom and climb the corporate ladder, like, start at Costco on the floor and then work your way up to their offices'."

"Well, I'm not the corporate one of the family. I have a twin brother, who's the opposite of me, and he's majoring in finance. He's gonna go do corporate. He's gonna make a lot of money. He's good to go. I've always been the creative, artsy kid. So corporate doesn't work for me. In the end, it would just make me miserable, and I knew that was gonna happen at some point. I'll just like suck it up, because there's no other way to make a "real" living."

"There were many times where I was about to just like, throw in the towel and be like, I should just go be a stripper because like, I don't think there's anything else I'm good for."

"I ended up having a mono in the winter (beginning of 2019). It resulted in me being unemployed for like six months. That was kind of the time where I sat down and was like, what am I doing, and am I in crisis?"

"So I was figuring out why I was so unhappy. It was that I kept failing - I could never make my parents happy with [their expectations of me], it was never going to work out. They're definition of success was not something I could achieve. I just needed to get up and do my own stuff."

"Eventually I found a really good job. It's not a job that I want to do forever but I'm at a really good company that is hundred percent me. It helps pay the bills and I live independently."

"And now I'm getting back into like, makeup work and feel more creative and just overall happier. Yes, everything that I used to do that made me, me, is coming back. Wow. And it feels so good. And I'm so happy and it's just fabulous."





Jordan, 24 years old at the time of this interview in August 2020, was an actor and podcaster and getting ready to start a new project as a co-host on a new platform called IGTV.

In December 2019, Jordan began experiencing anxiety, which was new to him. He discussed this period of anxiety as key to his quarter life crisis.

Jordan explained, "I don't know if it was going into a whole new decade? It's like this is going to be a big year for everybody. What do I expect? Is this going to go well? Is it going to go bad? My mind is going in completely different directions. So it was just a lot going on. There's so much to look forward to, but there's also a lot to take care of and it's like, am I gonna be able to take care of all this stuff? There's just so much to do."

"It's just my mind racing, racing. And I've never felt that until I actually experienced it and dealt with it in ways that helped me."



"My industry, it's like a roller coaster. The journey I'm on is very rewarding, but it's also very exhausting."

"Should I just continue to keep focusing on the stream that I was in [entertainment]? Or should I go into psychology, my degree? So it was just a mental battle really, that I had to go to war against. I slowly started doing a lot of self reflecting. It was a battle for the past two years. When I was 22, I started seeing a lot more success, because I started taking it much more seriously."

"But the duration of [the period of anxiety] was happening for about a good two months. And it was just taking the wheel for a second and getting me out of that paradigm of worry, and that anxiety that I was feeling that helped. It was just more of a realization that this is life, like this is gonna happen."

"So it's normal. It's like, everyone's going to go through it at some point in their life. So I kind of took that into realization and focused on what do I have to do to get out of feeling that way and I found other ways to deal with it."

"I honestly did a lot of self reflecting as to my career. That's how I got out of the juggle, juggle between like, should I go back to psychology or should I continue entertainment? This [entertainment] is my passion. I know life is driving me in this direction. So I'm gonna go with it. This is where my gut is telling me to go. My gut is almost always right."

"I know that I wasn't born to sit in an office. And you know, with this degree that I know I'm not going to use when I have a completely other passion that I love so much to do...I need to explore my curiosities a little bit more. And that kind of got me out of the mental state of worrying so much and being so anxious."

"I know people can't always find their passion. But it's more about finding your curiosities. If you're curious, go be curious and see what that's about."

"You're driving now, you're taking the wheel yourself. You can do all this, just be smart, have faith and trust the process. And so that's what I was doing a lot of the time and before I knew it, I wasn't feeling that [anxiety] anymore. And it was just a sense of relief. And it was also a sense of knowing that I didn't have anything wrong with me."

"I thought something was wrong with me at first, like, why am I going through this at such a young age? But knowing and studying upon this anxiety state, I guess the quarter life crisis as you call it, it's all a part of the process of life, the journey of life. And so once I took that into consideration, things were a little bit smoother."

"Just know that life might take you into a direction that may seem like you're unworthy to the world, or you just feel like you don't know what to do with yourself. Yet, kind of going back and rewinding to what I was saying before, it all starts with what I believe in. We're all here for a reason. We all have purpose. Try to find that purpose, create curiosity, and that curiosity will lead you to that passion eventually."

"I'm a firm believer that the universe will bring you what you want, as long as you put in action, and just have fun with life. Even with everything going on in the world, we can still find peace, we can still find positivity with other people. And doing what you love will always be in the core of your heart."

# Kathie

Kathie was 24 years old when I interviewed her in September 2020. Originally from a small town in Nebraska, she now lives in Seattle with her two roommates. I met Kathie through her roommate, Hannah, who was also a participant in this project.

I asked Kathie about her quarter life crisis.

*“My Mom was diagnosed with cancer during Christmas break, right before I graduated college and she passed away a couple months later [about two years ago] in March.”*

Kathie had made a five year plan as an assignment in her senior year in college and realized that it was centered around her mother and staying in the Midwest. Things changed with her Mother’s death.

*“And then I was kind of reevaluating my whole life of what I truly wanted to do. Is this something that my mom would be proud of me for doing? It’s not something that I can ask her about anymore. So I had to trust my gut and recreate myself while also keeping her values in mind too.”*

*“My dad is from a Vietnamese family. Me, as a first generation American in my family, being born and raised in America, there was always that cultural conflict. He was always the very stereotypical Asian dad who was very much worried about money and school and grades, and my mom was the one to take care of all the emotional needs.”*

*“So, once I graduated and was off on my own, paying rent on my own, working on my own, completely providing for myself, my dad didn’t really have a role in my life. When my mom passed away, I think [my Dad] just didn’t know how to become that emotional person for [my sister and I].”*

*“It’s just me, out on my own, away from home.”*

*“Now it just feels like I don’t have that parental guidance in my life.”*

*“I’m figuring out how to be completely on my own. It’s just that whole, figuring out your identity, it means putting yourself first and setting boundaries with the people ... that you don’t feel add significant value to your life.”*

*“I think that’s been one of the most important lessons that I’ve learned is growing into my self identity. I think it takes a lot of self awareness to understand those things and be able to identify it in the people around you. I feel like in the past, I’ve definitely been a people pleaser and that’s led me off track for who I want to be.”*

*“And hopefully, by the time you’re about 25, upper 20s, then you’re at that point where you have some type of job that can provide for you. And once you reach that stage, then it’s like, your parents don’t provide you any other guidance outside of that. And it’s really up to you to figure out what you want out of life and how you want to continue adding value into your life.”*

*“So yeah, I would say for people around this time, it would be to increase that self awareness in yourself to really tune out the voices around you telling you what you should or should not do.”*

*“I feel like after you graduate college, that’s your obligation to your family. I think that’s what every parent wants their child to know that they’re going to be okay, by having some type of stability.”*

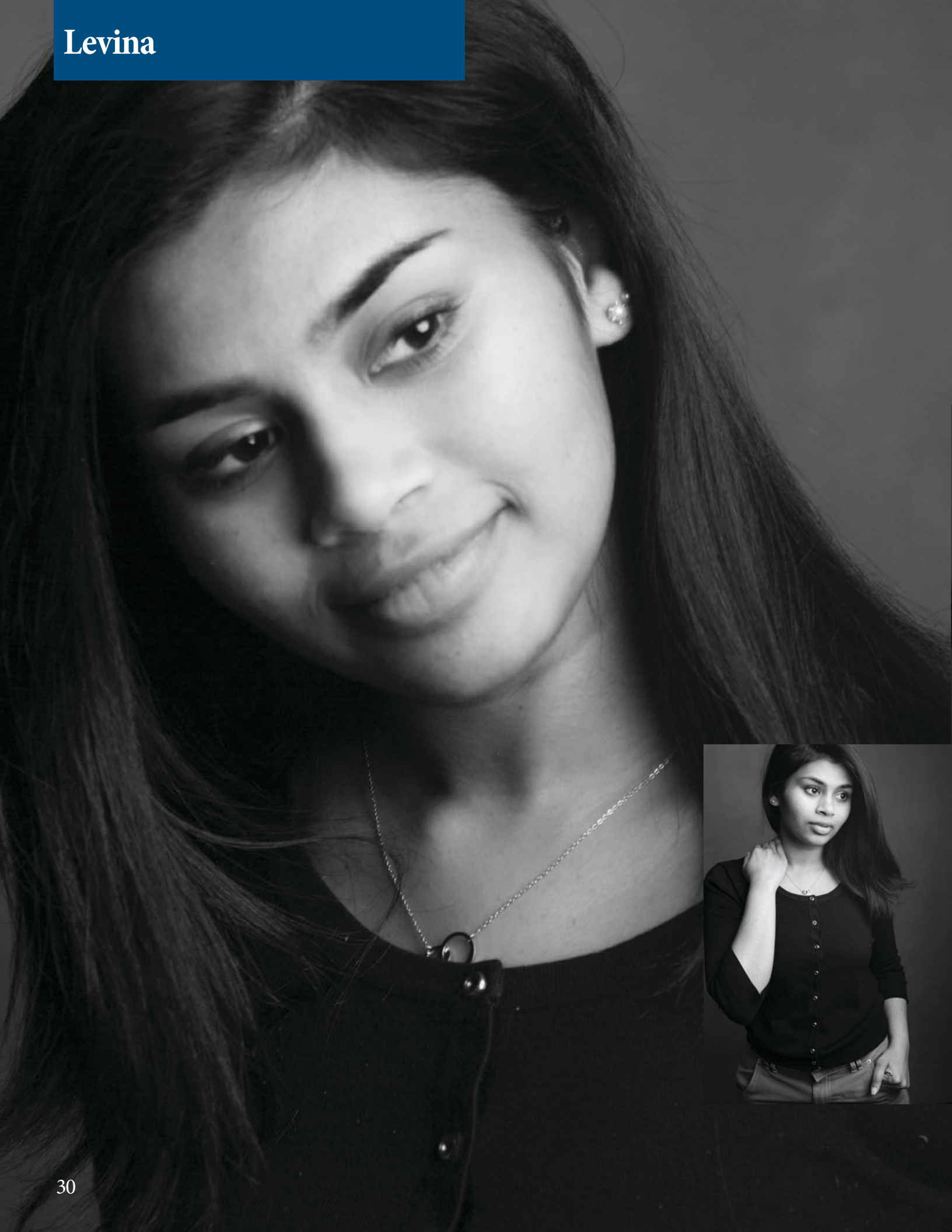
*“Then from that point on, it’s about your happiness. And just how you want to make your impact on the world.”*

*“And you can’t fully figure that out if you keep listening to what other people think you should or should not be doing.”*

*“Also I think that if everything is stable for your whole life, then you never really have to reevaluate anything, if it’s comfortable, then you’re just going to continue to be comfortable, and you don’t have to think about what’s going to make it better.”*

*So I think that [for me] having those hardships and just shaking up my world a little bit, allowed me to reevaluate my life, really try different things to get out of that rut and see what’s gonna get me back to baseline or even higher in a different way. It causes a lot of growth.”*





Levina, 26 years old at the time of this interview in December 2019, was introduced to me by a young man who had grown up with my kids in our neighborhood. Levina and I discussed many themes- freedom, success, and a sense of obligation within an immigrant family being a few of them.

Levina said, "I think that the [quarter life crisis] is the time in your life when you're released from a schooling system, or programs that you've been a part of into freedom... [for me] it led to not actually knowing what I was doing because every other path was prescribed for me."



"So it's having the freedom and also having the privilege to choose what to do. There's this poem about how there's plums falling from a tree and they're all opportunities, but she just can't even grab onto one because she's so scared of holding onto one and not being able to do the other opportunities. And that's like freedom, right? It's like getting to have that freedom to even grab

onto whichever fruit you want. But in the end, she just watched them all plop down onto the soil. And it was sad, but also very telling." [See poem below.]

I asked Levina the story of her quarter life crisis.

"Should I be putting myself way out there? I think that comes from also coming from an immigrant family who sacrificed so much for me."

"I just feel like a part of me wants to make a lot of money in some way to show them that all their sacrifices were worth it. And they always say we just want you to be happy. But I'm so confused if I'm attributing happiness to a certain amount of success or if I can find happiness just being at peace with maybe working a nice teacher job. So I'm just totally at a crossroads."



"So I am supposed to be applying to classroom teacher positions coming up in January if I want it for the next school year. And that's really scary. So I feel really confused."

"I think that trying the things you loved as a child is a huge clue into what you love when you're older. I really do think life is like a little spiral and you continually come back to the things you were."

"I've always been a creator. When I was younger, I always loved building things. I loved taking care of things. And now, I'm a teacher. It makes total sense."

"But it's hard to fit in your childhood love into the current world. That's like what I find to be the hardest part. I think it's just important to learn to like every part of yourself and to explore those things."

"My gosh, I have taken kind of a hiatus because I'm feeling all this pressure to look a certain way. And then you know, I end up performing. And it's like the worst excuse, right? It's the worst experience."

Here is the poem that Levina refers to in her interview:

"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet."

Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar



Mackenzie was 32 years old when I interviewed her in February of 2020. She heard about my project through another participant, Amy, and asked if she could be involved too. Mackenzie's story centered around her diagnosis of a terminal lung disease. She tells me her story.

"So I have a very unique Quarter Life crisis story, I think"

"My life was very much just kind of going along. I'd graduated from college, I was working. I met my now husband and we were planning on getting married in a few months."

"I started experiencing trouble breathing. My lips were turning blue going up stairs. Getting dressed was so exhausting. And so I went in and did a bunch of tests and they said go ahead, get married, you'll be fine. So I got married, came back from my honeymoon, and followed up with some more tests."

"Literally within that month of being home from my honeymoon, the doctor said that I had this rare lung disease, it was terminal, that I had probably a year to live. The only treatment to survive would be a double lung transplant."

"So we spent the next year doing lots of tests. They treat a lung transplant as a last resort because it's so difficult and so dangerous. I mean statistically speaking, 50% live after five years of a lung transplant. So it's very much like a 'saving your life' kind of thing."

"After diagnosis, my husband and I traveled to San Francisco to seek treatment at UCSF for my lung transplant. We had a lovely couple that took us into their home because it's so expensive to live in San Francisco, so that I could have the procedure and heal. But UCSF did a lot more tests, put me on some medication and I slowly improved enough to where I wasn't needing the lung transplant."

"Meanwhile, I'm on oxygen 24/7. My body changed a lot. I gained 60 pounds in a couple of months from all the steroids. I felt like I wasn't myself."

"So my biggest quarter life crisis has been redefining myself and loving myself in all the different phases - heavy, thin, boisterous, mellow, lazy, active."

"There's beauty in all of it."

"We're constantly changing. There is no fixed mark of who we are. We have to learn to love who we are at the moment. And just know we're not always going to be 'this'. We're always going to be growing and we have to be ready to adapt and grow. It's a constant metamorphosis."

"There's no shortcut, you have to figure it out, you have to experience all those emotions, you have to sort through your past trauma and all these things and maybe you'll never figure it all out, but you just keep moving forward and make choices like what's your next big move."

"I think survival really is just taking it one day at a time and living in the moment. That's the biggest thing I've learned. It's good to make plans. But God laughs at our plans sometimes because there's a bigger thing. That's what we're supposed to learn through the struggle."

"Learn to love the struggle. There's just so much beauty in it, too. The kindness and goodness of the world when you let people help you and let people in."

"Everybody has their struggles and their trials. We have to have them to grow. We have to go through it. There's no way around it, we have to go through it. And it's gonna be so crucial to the rest of our life and who we become. You know, if we skip out on the hard stuff, we just don't learn anything. And letting people in and seeing the beauty and letting people serve you and help you and love you along the way is so important. And you do the same for others. That's what it's all about."





Maddie was 23 years old as of this interview in February 2020. She saw her friend Em's post of our project pictures on Instagram and contacted me about being in the project too.

Five months prior to this interview, Maddie discovered she had cancer. While she was in treatment, she was living with her wife in Ellensburg, and working as a teacher in early education.

I asked Maddie about the story of her quarter life crisis.

"I didn't ever think I would have a quarter life crisis. I've done all these things. I've gotten an MS diagnosis. I've been a mental health advocate. I've been a public speaker at my school. I've presented work. I've done all this stuff. Then a simple diagnosis like cancer just flips it around and you're like, I have no idea what I'm doing anymore."

"What am I gonna do? I was applying to PhD programs. I had like, super big ambitions. We were talking about having kids. We were buying things for kids and looking at donors and it was just like....", Maddie tears up.

"My body is still able to [have children] but it's such a hard conversation because there's already the judgement of being queer and wanting to have kids and the question of are you gonna? Are you gonna carry or is your wife gonna carry? Are you going to have a donor? I was like, I don't know all that but now it's a total idea of can we at all? It's frustrating because a year ago, we were hoping to be pregnant by now, like prepping and having a baby shower and it isn't happening because my body can't get it together. It sucks because I could have lived with MS. That was fine. That was something I could deal with."

"And then finally, when I felt like I had a path and had an idea

of what I was doing, a road block or a sinkhole comes along. So I went into crisis mode very quickly. We've been there since September. It's been really weird. It's a pretty big crisis. Like really big."

"I don't think I've ever felt this scared of the unknown."

"I felt like in other situations, I could walk away from it. I had choices. But there's no getting away from an illness that's taking over."



"There are some days when I'm just so angry at the world about it. And I'm like, don't ask me questions. Don't talk my way. Don't look at me. Don't bring it up. And then there's other days, I'm comfortable talking about it."

"Yes, I feel like my body is being poisoned every day. How do I fully explain to someone that I'm worried and it makes me anxious that it's not working. I'm always going to be worried that it's just gonna spread and I'm going to die. Or maybe that it works. And it shrinks it and we scratch it off and I can live life and be ok. People just don't seem to understand."

"I wish I was as happy as I was 100 pounds ago. People just don't seem to understand that every time someone tells me 'you look great that you've lost so much weight', it's a constant reminder

of how sick I am. And it's being celebrated. Even when I say it's cancer."

"And the questions of what type of cancer? What stage? When did you get diagnosed? What's the plan? How do you feel? Do you feel like it's working? I think that's the number one question I've gotten. My thesis work is just so much more important. And it's like even with our family, it's so just like backseat."

"Yes, I feel lonely. I don't really have anyone close to me that has experienced cancer. It still seems a little bit foreign because I can't see it. I can understand the bone breaking pain of it, but it's so hard to convey the feeling. It's so much different than any other pain and any other experience."

"I'm alone in the sense that like, it's me against this and I'm the one that makes the final decision on treatment and what steps I make and taking care of my body if I make the choice to not take it. Like, that's on you and it's a lot of me versus me. And it does feel lonely, a lot of the time, even though I'm surrounded by people that know and love me."

I asked Maddie if she had any messages that she'd like to pass on to others who might just be entering a time of crisis.

"Just don't be afraid to ask for help and to talk to others about what you're going through, because if you do it alone, it isn't safe. And when you don't need help, don't be afraid to offer it, and to kind of pull a little bit because I think our generation is very good about straight up asking each other what's going on and telling each other not to lie to me. It isn't helpful to yourself or anyone around you."

"And it comes back to the fear of not wanting to burden people and not wanting to hurt them or make them scared for you. Don't be afraid to ask for help."

"And I think everyone deserves to have that but it takes being transparent about what's going on and building those relationships and not being afraid to kind of seem weak for a little bit."

Max and my son were childhood friends and as of this interview in February 2020, Max was about 27 years old. He had lived internationally, attended college and was living in the Seattle suburbs with his parents and autistic younger brother, who he helped care for while also working at a job which he discusses in the interview.



Max talked about the poor working conditions at his job which was making him fatigued and frankly angry. He said he was “coming to terms with the real working conditions of most of my generation, because most of us can seem to only get entry level kind of jobs or internships, even people that go with four year degrees wind up getting jobs that are at this level.”

“And also... it’s wrong in damn near every sense of the word, there shouldn’t be a concept of like, oh , it’s entry level, you know, so you shouldn’t expect to make enough money to live or to eat or whatever. No, all jobs should pay you enough to live and to eat and to have health care. A person creating a job that pays like \$15 an hour? They’re not creating much of anything except for poverty.”

“ And that kind of flies in the face of what we’ve been told about job creation and whatnot, but it’s true. You see a factory and you know, they created \$12 an hour jobs and then great, you’ve created poverty.”

We discussed what a quarter life crisis meant for him.

“A quarter life crisis is like talking stock of the trajectory of your life. What do you actually want? But what you want is probably something that you figure out your whole life. I’m scrambling to figure it out, like what am I feeling? What am I going to do?”

Regarding the future, Max said:

“I’m not sure if I’ll ever have the quality of life and the comfort that my parents were able to get.”

“We have very credible reasons to believe that we will have a future in which the planet will not remain habitable, and that the systems and structures that Mom and Dad’s generations were able to rely on will not be reliable for us. It’s disheartening. How do you keep going if you don’t have as much of a future. I don’t even think at all about having kids and raising a family.”

“I want kids to grow up and be happy and have the same quality of life that I was afforded. But I just can’t see that. And so it makes it harder to get really invested.”

Max’s outlook is rather daunting, and came from a point of stark realism.



Melina is a part of my extended family by marriage. She was 32 at the time of this interview in October of 2020.

I asked her how she defined a quarter life crisis in general.

“It’s something that kind of shocks you into realizing who you are as a person. For me, personally, I think I kind of came into my own self and my way of living and really knowing who I am. I feel like especially now, a lot of young people in their early 20s and even in their teens are really getting involved in politics and are establishing what their values are, what they stand for and believe in which is excellent. We need that.”

“As for me, I feel like that came after I had my first child. I was 27. And then, it just kind of kept developing and snowballing. Now I feel really confident and good about the way I live and what I believe in.”

“So I think that it’s when something happens that makes you kind of step back and say, oh, this is who I am. And it might be shocking or weird and hard to accept and that’s the crisis part.”

I asked Melina about her own quarter life crisis.

“Looking back, I feel like my crisis started when my first child was a baby and I was suffering from postpartum depression and my husband was basically nonexistent in the relationship. I was 27 then. And then everything just spiraled from there.”

“It was such a roller coaster. And it’s still not over. Just being a parent of little kids and trying to make parenting and marriage work at the same time as Covid. And everything else.”

“Then Covid could not have happened at a worse time in my life.”

“Working at the YMCA, being a nonprofit, they had to lay off all of their part time people, only the directors and full time staff kept their positions. Then they were expected to do everything that we were doing. When we reopened, they slowly brought instructors and everything. I did a lot there and so I was fully expecting to go back. But it’s October now and I haven’t gotten a call and you know, aside from my marriage and stuff going on, that’s been hard to accept because I worked there for eight years.”

“And I really felt like I put a lot into it and felt that sense of family

and community and having a place where I could do what I was passionate about. Even though it wasn’t anyone’s fault that all of the part time employees had to be put on standby.”

“It’s just been crazy. Since I lost my job, I was depressed for a little while, not talking to anyone. And with the girls, sometimes I’m so exhausted. And I just think I feel so much older than 32. Yeah, I feel like I’ve aged 20 years in the last five.”

“Covid has been a wake up call too, being laid off and everything. I think investing in myself [by going back to get a Masters degree in sustainability] is good because I’ve been doing so much, by my own standards, subpar because I’ve been focusing on the kids and being distracted by how our marriage isn’t working. And I’m like, ok, enough is enough.”

I asked if there were any messages that she might want to pass along to others who might just be entering a time of questioning in their 20s.



“Yeah, have a plan that’s just for you. I think if I could have told myself that, it would have been helpful. Because, for my younger self, my plans always involved whoever I was with at the time, or what I was going through.”

“So create a plan that really supports your own growth and your own goals, apart from anything or anyone else in your life. I wish somebody would have told me that. I’m sure I did hear that a few times, probably from my Mom. And I wish I would’ve listened to her. You get the information when you’re ready for it.”





Nova and my daughter were classmates at Shoreline Community College and that was how she and I met. Nova was 21 years old at the time of this interview in February 2020. She was working as the chief editor of the Shoreline Community College daily newspaper.

When I interviewed her, she expressed concern that time was passing her by. This was probably the center of her burgeoning quarter life crisis.

"I really love classic film and television from the 1950s through the 1970s. And I see actresses my age acting in those films and TV shows... and they get to act alongside and rub elbows with my favorite actors. It makes me feel like, "is it too late for me?", or when will I be able to experience something similar?"

"A lot of that comes into play with thinking that my favorite eras have passed me by, like the 50s. I sort of missed out. Or at least is there a way for me to achieve similar success alongside similar actors I like? Or even though my favorite actors are kind of not from the present day, will I be able to experience this kind of success in the entertainment industry, or whichever industry I end up falling into?"

"I just love the Hollywood of yesteryear. And I think it would be fun to find an equivalent to that. But right now I'm focusing on journalism, and hopefully will end up as a fiction writer or a film

critic - something to push me into the public eye."

"I see people my age who are super successful, namely in the entertainment world. And I look at myself at the same exact age. I look at where I am and I just think, when will I be able to travel somewhere else and have some kind of equally successful career and be as equally in the public eye as these other people are? Is there a way for me to kind of break into that scene? Before it's too late?"

"Realistically, my goal is to end up as a film critic. At a newspaper to become a fiction writer. But I do feel that sometimes there's this underlying way I could break into the entertainment scene and I sometimes feel a little bit old at 21- sometimes I don't sometimes I do. And I just hope I can find some kind of entertaining direction for my life before it's too late."

I asked Nova if she had any advice for others going through a quarter life crisis.

"Even if it's small steps, focus on what you want your end goal to be, on what you want your dream to be, and look for ways to achieve it. In the meantime, I'd say, surround yourself with things that will get you gradually closer to what you love. Actually, I'm going to edit that answer a bit - visualize success. Because I visualized myself as the arts and entertainment editor and it worked for me."



# Tangmo

Twenty-eight year old Tangmo came to my studio with Max, another project participant. At the time, they were dating and that is how she came to learn about the project. Tangmo was visiting from her home city of Bangkok, Thailand, and had only been in Seattle for five months as of this interview, in February 2020.

I asked Tangmo her story . . .

“My Dad always told me to be able to have a stable life, I must have business, money and, I don’t know, family, my own kids and whatnot. That’s the kind of pressure on me, at this age.”

“I want to have my own life. I want to follow my dreams. But on the other side, my parents asked, what are you doing? Why are you doing this stuff? Art doesn’t make any money.”

“I studied acting and directing in college. I worked in a drama company for almost six years since I was in college. And also I worked for a film production house, producing commercial video for advertising. Yeah, that’s what I did before I came here.”

“My family is complicated...my friends are my family.”

Tangmo said that the crux of her quarter life crisis was her conflict with her father. He wanted her to come home and work at his gas station business originally while she wanted to go to University and get her bachelors in directing theater and film. She went on and she graduated successfully, with honors.

And just as she told him, if you let her do what she loves, she’ll do it well. He said, yes, you can do it well, but it won’t make any money. But then she proved she could get a job in her field in Bangkok, make money, and live on her own.

Now not only is she employed and living on her own, but she is visiting the U.S. and applying for her Masters in Finland soon.

I asked her how you think your parent’s generation should be more compassionate towards other people your age?

“Believe in them. Think about when they were young. Remind themselves of this feeling and that they experienced that. I think they don’t like it but maybe it’s a pathway that they forgot. Don’t pressure your kids, don’t tell your children to do what you want to do, but you didn’t do. Yeah, I think this is important.”





Back in January 2019, Victoria, at 23 years old, wrote to me on Instagram after she saw her friend Diego's pictures come out on my IG feed. She was just finishing up her graduate degree at the University of Washington at the time of our meeting and was considering traveling the world solo for eight months in a prestigious and challenging program.

She said, "A life crisis happens sometime in your 20s, I'd say. In my case I'm dealing with 100 mini crises. For me the quarter life crisis is a bunch of small crises all packed into one very short amount of time. It involves some pretty big decisions like deciding whether to go back to school, which I chose to do, or to stay with a partner who's been abroad for many months now and will continue to be abroad for many more months. But also smaller crises like trying to graduate on time."

"My Mom was divorced at 21. Now that would've been a life crisis. That was before social media though, not many people would've even known that she'd been married and divorced. But if I had gotten married at 21, you know, social media with pictures, I would have made announcements, people would have come to the engagement parties, and all those things would have been so public. But if I had gotten divorced, same time period, you know, you don't want that to be public, and often with social media you can hide what you don't want people to see."

"So I think the crisis for our generation specifically is a crisis of publicity and personal branding. Trying to maintain myself as someone who's respectable, who has my life together, and is essentially a respectable person. So it's just a very complicated pulling between trying to keep myself sane, keeping my mental health in check while also trying to maintain the appearance that everything is okay."

"I really hope that we just start developing a better sense of self. Because I feel like a lot of us think we understand our-

selves. But we couldn't be further from the truth. A lot of my friends have self esteem issues, of course, and I have been trying to build them up, you know, over the past couple of years to take on their own sense of self and to realize that they're strong, powerful women."

"And I feel like that will be the end of the quarter life crisis: when they finally realize that they're worthy of their lives. I hope that as we grow up, we stop being afraid of being ourselves, because I feel like a lot of us are scared of taking on that responsibility. I am a person and this is how I am right now."




"And I'm really, really glad that my friends and I are starting to have those conversations. I think that the more that we talk to each other about our quarter life crises, the better we are at understanding them."

I asked Victoria about the older generations and how they can give compassion to the younger generations regarding the quarter life crisis.

"Certainly understanding that our crises are real is a good starting point. Because I feel like a lot of people think, oh it's, you know, just a phase of life. 'It's hard, it's meant to be hard and you're just being hard on yourself.'"

"But there are so many external pressures that we face every single day that make our crises more profound than ordinary problems. So just understanding that we do face real problems. It's a great first step and why I'm so happy that this is a project in the first place, because I think that this is a first step in making that a reality."

"Other ways to show compassion is to show general patience. I found that in my most chaotic days, the people who are the most patient with me, allow me to have patience for myself, right? Especially today. I walked in here today and I was nervous, but then you showed me that it was okay. And that completely changed my day. So certainly patience and understanding are very key ways that your generation can help us feel more comfortable."



Thank you so much for reading my magazine. Please contact me with your thoughts and comments. I would love to hear from you.

Let's connect on what photos you need to document the stages of your life.

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