The Second Midlife Crisis

By EILEEN DASPIN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
April 30, 2004; Page W1

The past year and a half of Vicki Ianucelli’s life bears many of the earmarks of a midlife crisis. She bought a condo on the beach in Mexico and jetted off to Paris to celebrate a big birthday. She treated herself to a 9.5-karat emerald ring and got breast implants to boost her self-esteem.

But the New York psychologist isn't a floundering forty something or even a newly minted empty-nester. She's a 60-plus grandmother of two who logged her first midlife crisis more than a decade ago when she got a facelift to get over "looking like Keith Richards." This time around, Ms. Ianucelli says dealing with age-inspired turmoil is harder, especially since she expected to be settled by now. "I didn't anticipate I'd be so aware of getting older," says Ms. Ianucelli. "I don't want to feel I'm out of the running because I'm 61."

The fact that people are living and staying active longer isn't just a challenge for the Social Security Administration and movie theaters that offer senior-citizen discounts. It's creating a whole new opportunity for age denial -- with grandmas and grandpas bumming around Europe on rail passes, dumping their spouse (or second spouse) and generally alerting their family and friends to sudden life-changing ambitions. In short, many people in their 60s and 70s are experiencing a good, old-fashioned midlife crisis -- the second time around.

The evidence is everywhere: There are more 60- and 70-year-olds today running marathons, buying Harleys, dating online and going to rock concerts. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, procedures on folks 65 and older have tripled in the past five years. (That group now accounts for one in seven facelifts.) At the hip Co-op unit of retailer Barneys New York, 60-plus customers have gone from zero to nearly 5% in just a year, says Terence Bogan, divisional merchandise manager. A few items of choice for the older shopper: snug C&C T-shirts and low-cut James jeans (designed for slightly fuller figures). Even two years ago, such women "never would have come here. No. No," says Mr. Bogan.

One reason is that these people have more money to tempt them into indulging their youthful fantasies all over again. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of households headed by people age 60 and up with an income of at
least $100,000 jumped 27%, to two million, between 1998 and 2002, the most-recent year for which data are available. Also, Americans are living longer. In 2002, life expectancy hit an all-time high of 77.2, up from 75.4 in 2000.

There are lots of other social forces at play, too, from a growing number of divorced seniors to more couples marrying and having children later. Increased pressure is coming from the other end too, as kids grow up at Britney Spears speed. According to a recent survey by market researchers NOPWorld, the classic midlife crisis now hits at 45, down from 49 in 2000, while pop-culture authors have also written about the "quarterlife crisis," a period when twentysomethings struggle with maturity issues.

"There are more crisis points than ever before," says Pamela McLean, CEO of the Hudson Institute, an education group in Santa Barbara, Calif., that focuses on middle age. "People in their sixties are no longer passively buying motor homes but saying 'I want to be fulfilled.'"

**Second Time Around**

See some positive references to late or even second midlife crises that are cropping up in popular culture.

**Figuring It All Out**

When Erville Light, a 72-year-old actress in Highland Park, N.J., recently came into a small inheritance, she immediately booked an appointment with a plastic surgeon and a Club Med vacation. "They have a social director and pick you up and introduce you to people," says Ms. Light, a widow. "They try to keep you going 24 hours a day." She says she didn't have time for a first midlife crisis because she was dealing with too many family problems. Now "I'm trying to figure out what to do with my life."

For her facial work, Ms. Light is planning to have fat injected into her lips and the lower part of her face, to both improve her chances to get acting jobs and to help on the dating front. "I have a boyfriend, but it's not a committed relationship," she says.

Indeed, much of the second-time-around phenomenon is being driven by the booming senior dating circuit. While statistics on second and third marriages are difficult to come by, census data show that the number of 65- to 74-year-old singles grew 12% between 1996 and 2000, while big online-dating service Match.com says 10% of its users are 55 and over, with half of them saying they're interested in a casual rather than long-term relationship. Meanwhile, the president of the National Fatherhood Initiative in Gaithersburg, Md., has heard so much about late-in-life fathers, he's started calling them "second-chance dads."

Though many businesses have been slow to target aging seniors, especially people in what's commonly referred to as a "life transition" (another way to refer to the midlife crisis), that is starting to change. In San Leandro, Calif., a group called Menopausal Tours runs trips for women of a certain age to Savannah, Ga., Santa Fe, N.M., and other cities. Women under 40 aren't allowed, and about
half of participants are professionals over 50. ("It's better than estrogen," claims one testimonial posted on the firm's Web site.) Suzanne Somers's latest treatise is called "The Sexy Years" and encourages women to beat the "Seven Dwarfs of Menopause" through natural hormone therapy.

Then there's the health-club industry, which has been one of the most active in homing in on the second midlife crisis. Equinox Fitness Clubs, an upscale urban chain, has found that its demographic has aged by 10 years in the past decade, so that the average age is now 35 to 59. As a result, they've started to cater to an older crowd, moving clubs into suburbia (where there are more older people), phasing in exercise machines with featherweight adjustment pins (instead of hard-to-use weights), and adding spa services. It's the domino effect, says Chief Operating Officer Chris Peluso. "These days, 35 is the new 25. People don't realize they're out of college until 35. At 45, they're getting serious about their career and family." Now Equinox has instructors in their 50s. "That would have been unheard of 10 years ago," says Mr. Peluso.

Though social scientists have long debated whether the midlife crisis is real, the phrase has had a special place in popular culture since the 1960s, when it was coined by a Canadian psychoanalyst, Elliott Jacques. While studying creative genius, Mr. Jacques concluded that their productivity started to decline around age 35. Over time, the notion got linked to forty- and fiftysomethings asking the big questions like, "Is this all there is?"

The Sandwich Generation

To some extent, the second midlife crisis has taken on a more serious undertone than its predecessor. While even 10 years ago 60- and 70-year-olds were able to kick back, play golf or take up water colors, today many seniors have lost their retirement savings to corporate folly, the stock market and reduced pension plans. At the same time, older adults are now often responsible for both their aging parents and their adult children, reconfiguring the "Golden Years" into the "Sandwich Generation."

On the other hand, there's also been a move among gerontologists, therapists and other social-service workers to help older Americans think of themselves as not in an age-related crisis but in a transitional moment. Books and seminars refer to "new chapters" and "cycles of renewal," and motivational speakers talk about getting your life in order. And therapists say that even patients with some
of the classic symptoms rarely label their situation as a midlife crisis, regardless of when it occurs.

Yash Aggarwal, for example, sounds like a classic second midlife-crisis candidate. Originally an earthquake specialist, Mr. Aggarwal moved back to the U.S. at 44 after working in Venezuela in the late 1970s. At a loss for what to do next, he remolded himself into a financial planner, a job that started to bore him as he turned 60. That's when Mr. Aggarwal decided to get a law degree, and by default, to hang out with 25-year-olds drinking beer and to learn their lingo ("you're bad" intended as a compliment). The 63-year-old New City, N.Y., resident says the legal interlude wasn't a crisis at all -- just a way to keep challenging himself: "I was searching for something else in life."

Today Mr. Aggarwal is ramping up his latest project, a political action committee he founded to promote India-U.S. relations. He has also sold the apartment buildings he owned so he doesn't have to worry about tenants and mortgages. Today, he points out, people retire at 60, and live until 90. "That's a third of your life. You can play golf, but -- play golf?"

Or you can hit the road. Harley Davidson reports that customers in the 65-to-74 age range tripled between 2000 and 2003. Or go under the knife. The rise in plastic-surgery operations done on patients 65 and older is roughly equal to the growth in the 35-to-50 age bracket, even though the effects of surgery at an older age don't last as long as procedures done earlier in life, says Dr. Lawrence Bass, a Manhattan plastic surgeon. Among the most popular procedures for older folks: Botox and eyelid surgery.

To some, this new image of the ageless senior will ultimately wind up leaving some feeling left out. Dr. Lisa Hollis-Sawyer, a gerontologist at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, says it's raising false hopes. "It does a disservice to the aging population that says 'What if I'm not there?'"

As with any midlife crisis, acting young can be downright dangerous, too. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the number of people 65 and older who died in motorcycle crashes more than tripled (to 79) between 1992 and 2002, while the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons says there has been a rise in Achilles tendon reconstruction in people over 60 -- an operation that was once the preserve of 40-year-olds (older patients were typically treated with a cast instead of surgery). For elderly scuba divers, fatalities outnumber other reported accidents, though the Divers Alert Network, a safety group in Durham, N.C., says that could be because of pre-existing conditions like heart disease.

Plenty of seniors are saying no pain, no gain. Mr. Aggarwal, for example, had his first heart attack at 53, and his second during his law-school odyssey. He says he's not letting illness stand in the way of personal fulfillment and that he plans to keep on going strong -- though he admits there are some limits to what he can do
at his age. "Even Viagra isn't going to help a 60-year-old compete with a 30-year-old."

Write to Eileen Daspin at eileen.daspin@wsj.com

Second Time Around

While marketers haven’t figured out how to finesse the aging-population issue yet, more positive references to late or even second midlife crises are cropping up elsewhere in popular culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>MY SO-CALLED MIDLIFE MOMENT</th>
<th>COMMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rod Stewart</td>
<td>The current album includes 59-year-old Mr. Stewart singing “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” with Cher. To promote the upcoming Volume III, J Records is trying to get the rocker on the cover of AARP magazine.</td>
<td>A spokeswoman for J Records says Mr. Stewart “is in denial about doing the AARP,” but that the label sees it as a way to reach his listeners. Among the cities where Volumes I and II have sold well: West Palm Beach, Fla.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Eventide’</td>
<td>The dating adventures of the novel’s elderly protagonist: His gift to one prospective girlfriend is a car battery.</td>
<td>Author Kent Haruf, now 61, was a teacher in his first career, says publisher Alfred A. Knopf, which has planned a 25-city author tour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Match’</td>
<td>When the gay character played by 64-year old Frank Langella reveals that earlier in life he dated women, too.</td>
<td>A spokesman for the new Broadway drama says they will be doing a limited number of discount performances with a senior’s disability group in June.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Something’s Gotta Give’</td>
<td>The much talked-about scene when Jack Nicholson accidentally sees Diane Keaton naked.</td>
<td>Hollywood wondered if there was an audience for a middle-age love story. Answer -- yes, since film has grossed $125 million so far in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Sopranos’</td>
<td>In one episode this season, 73-year-old Polly Bergen shows up as the glamorous mistress of Tony’s late father.</td>
<td>Next up for Ms. Bergen, who sings “Happy Birthday” to Tony à la Marilyn Monroe: a cabaret date at the Café Carlyle in New York City.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>The store is using the silver-haired model Carmen to promote designer Isaac Mizrahi’s clothing line.</td>
<td>Carmen appears on Target’s Web site in rolled-up khakis and white shirt, under a beach umbrella.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>