

Downshift

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By: Monte Burke

Ann Hayes Browning, 53, Trailblazer



Ann Browning spent 23 years at bank of America in Charlotte, N.C. As a founding partner of the bank's private equity group, she crisscrossed the country to meet with clients. "I was always chasing down a deal, flying everywhere," says Browning. She grew weary of the rootless life. "I knew so little about where I lived," she says. In 2006, just before the banking sector went into collapse, she quit. "I won't claim to have had any premonitions about the collapse, but one of the reasons I left was that we had moved so far away from fundamentals into a heady market that I wasn't really having fun anymore," she says.

Browning took a job in Charlotte as the project director of the Carolina Thread Trail, where she organizes rural and urban hiking trails. She spends some days in the office and others on the trails, selling their worth to community leaders.

Land conservancy appeals to her because "the whole focus of the job is about discovering neat little places in your own back yard." Her husband has downshifted with her, cutting his salary while going from a job with a software company to one that sells industrial supplies. They've been able to stay in their house (Browning has two stepchildren). It helped that she was able to walk away from her banking career with an ample 401(k). Still, she traded in her BMW for a Subaru, says her wardrobe "is much shabbier," dropped a golf club membership and makes a small fraction of her former salary.

Regrets? She recently had lunch at her old offices and says it "felt refreshing to be in such a familiar place. I miss the thrill of the hunt, though I still get a little bit of that now."

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