Walter Massey was set to work on his memoirs, brush up on his French and travel abroad to visit his son and grandchildren when he was nearing 70 and stepping down as president of his alma mater, Morehouse College in Atlanta, in 2007.

The former Argonne National Laboratory director, now 73, wasn't expecting to put another college presidency on his résumé after returning to Chicago. But the next thing he knew, he was pondering an opportunity to head the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, with 3,000 students and a $150-million endowment that needed to grow.

“I was stunned,” he says of the offer he went on to accept last year. “I wasn't sure I'd fit into a school of art and design.”

Only one thing was sure: He couldn't resist. He had flunked retirement, again, and was about to plunge back into the working world.

Move over, 40 under 40s. These Chicagoans over 70 bring new meaning to the term “senior executives,” continuing to lead in business, academia and philanthropy well into their eighth or ninth decades.

Patrick Ryan, 73, staked a new claim in the insurance business just a year ago, founding wholesale broker Ryan Specialty Group LLC after leaving Aon Corp. and running the city's unsuccessful bid for the 2016 Olympics. His buccaneer attitude is undimmed: He raided competitors for talent and was sued over it, but he brushes it off simply as the cost of doing business. As for the Olympics proposal, it remains “for the next generation to pick that plan back up and carry it forward,” he says.

Going strong, too, are McDonald's Corp. Chairman Andrew McKenna Sr., 81; Dawn Clark Netsch, 85, still teaching law at Northwestern University after 54 years; banker and investor Harrison Steans, 75; the Crowns, philanthropic partners Renee, 82, and Lester, 85, and Cardinal Francis George, 74, the Catholic archbishop of Chicago.

What keeps them energetic and engaged long after they could have packed up to bask in Palm Springs? Nearly all mention exercise, and many, a healthy diet. Hard-charging or not, Mr. Ryan says he needs a good night's sleep. Ms. Crown credits genes and habits for keeping her so active her husband still calls her “the Energizer bunny.”

“When people are in a job that allows them to express their personality traits, it's therapeutic. It's not work to them,” says Patrick Murphy, a DePaul University assistant professor of management.
Fred Bryant, a professor of psychology at Loyola University Chicago, says these Type A personalities “want to have a plan to be moving forward. It’s all about the carrot on the stick.”

LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

John Buck Co. principal Lori Healey has dealt with many of this group as a former chief of staff to Mayor Richard M. Daley and second-in-command on the Olympics bid. “They never get over the hunger of trying something new and challenging. That always wanting to stay engaged makes them so valuable,” she says. “They can pick up the phone and call anyone, and nobody says no. It’s the respect that everybody has for them—for their success and their willingness to give back.”

Mr. Steans lives and works in Florida part of the year, giving him a chance to study the senior set. “You can really tell the people who have stayed involved,” he says. “Their conversation—it's all forward-looking.”

Some of these over-70s have bowed to reality by trimming commitments. But they still work full-time hours, albeit setting their own schedules and focusing on strategy, not operations.

Mr. Crown, chairman of Henry Crown & Co., works at least 50 hours a week, starting with 7:30 or 8 a.m. meetings on weekdays, but he no longer works nights or weekends. He spends about 40% of his time on the industrial conglomerate founded by his father, Henry, and, with the family's fourth generation entering their 30s, another 10% on succession issues. The rest is devoted to civic matters such as the expansion of O'Hare International Airport and, with his wife, non-profits, where their support bolsters the Boys and Girls Clubs of Chicago, WTTW-TV/Channel 11, Lyric Opera of Chicago and Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science.

Whether supporting WTTW's “very necessary voice for Chicago” or Weizmann's global impact on health, Ms. Crown says, “every day there are results. This is what keeps my passion and commitment. Some days I'm cleaning closets, and some days I'm running an event.”

Make that a lot of days: She's on the town as much as an ingénue.

Mr. Crown won't say how much the family gives away each year—”a substantial amount, and we should,” he says. It donated $10 million for the Crown Fountain in Millennium Park. “We've been fortunate. We were at the right place at the right time—not because you're so smart. You owed it back to the community, the society that gave you a chance to prosper.”

A cardinal for life, with papal voting rights until 80, Cardinal George confronts mandatory retirement as archbishop next year, with some leeway if the pope follows form and waits to act on his resignation.

Known among priests as “Francis the Corrector,” he denies reports he's mellowed since taking charge in 1997. “I think I'm a little more of a curmudgeon,” he says. He doesn't sugarcoat his headaches, which are many—”I've had days I wish I hadn't had.”

With the archdiocese's 357 parishes reporting a combined $33.4-million operating loss last year, he says, “We're stable right now. But . . . that could change quickly.” Costs related to sex-abuse cases in the archdiocese, namely a $12.7-million settlement in 2008 covering 16 victims and 11
priests, are “significant . . . but we can meet that.” Priests are “stretched thin,” their numbers eroded by social forces. The celibacy requirement “is, in a post-Freudian culture, a real problem.”

More than others, Ms. Netsch sounds a note of frustration over unfinished business. She worries about the independence of judiciary, the stalled growth of the number of women in elected office and the plague of money in politics. There's also the melancholy of running into former students who are by now retired—”and I'm not.”

The former state comptroller and gubernatorial candidate works 50 hours a week on teaching and outside commitments. She promises year after year to drop the course on state and local government but hasn't been able to cut the cord. Her husband, architect Walter Netsch, died two years ago.

She's more selective about where she devotes her energy. “I obviously like doing most of the things I'm doing,” such as public-interest group commitments like the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, she says. She draws the line at political fundraisers.

NO SLOWING DOWN

Mr. Steans, who chairs Chicago-based private-equity firm Financial Investments Corp. and a family foundation that founded North Lawndale College Prep charter school, works 30 hours a week, half as many as in the height of his career. At IBM Corp. 45 years ago, he made it home by 8 p.m. only five times in 18 months. The key for executives of a certain vintage, he says, is turning over operating responsibilities to subordinates.

“I have been in a position to control whom I work with for at least 30 years,” he says. “It's the greatest luxury anyone can have.”

After chairing LaSalle National Bank in the 1970s and building up a North Shore bank group that was sold in 1987 to what is now J. P. Morgan Chase & Co., Mr. Steans built two new firms in Florida. His recession bets include a $120-million infusion at the height of the 2008 financial crisis in Rosemont-based Taylor Capital Group Inc., parent of Cole Taylor Bank.

With less energy to waste, he's not tolerant of people blowing smoke. But he no longer nitpicks. “There was a time I used to love to rip apart presentations,” he says. “Now, if this guy has the gist of it, let's not try to find the small errors.”

Andrew McKenna Sr. and wife Joanie on a visit to Madrid in 1980.

Mr. McKenna, who has been chairman of the White Sox and the Cubs, the Economic Club of Chicago, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago and the Executives' Club of Chicago, as well as the board of trustees at his alma mater, the University of Notre Dame, and the Museum of Science and Industry, takes this bromide to heart: “The greatest anti-aging device is to stay active.”

He still puts in a 12-hour workday, leaving home by 6:30 or 7 a.m. and attending night meetings. Something that hasn't changed with strides in technology: “You need to relate to people you need to relate to.”
Declaring that he has no plans to retire from McDonald's or family firm Schwarz Supply Source Inc. in Morton Grove, he says he's on a treadmill every day at 4:30 a.m., adding, “Every day means every day, regardless of where I am. It becomes part of you. Your body says, ‘OK, let's go.’”

Although Mr. Ryan says he isn't that dedicated, preferring midday workouts on a rowing machine and exercise bike, he considers himself at the top of his game. He allows time for family and philanthropy while still traveling on business and spending full days at the office working on strategic development and execution.

“People actually listen to me,” he says. “It's the highest-leverage part of my life.”

He has been mentioned as a potential controlling owner of the Chicago Bears (he and Mr. McKenna own 22% of the team) if the McCaskey family splinters after the death of matriarch Virginia McCaskey, 88.

TOUGH TASKS
Walter Massey, left, at Argonne National Laboratory, where he was director from 1979 to 1984. Photo by:

The School of the Art Institute tapped Mr. Massey after its president suddenly resigned and is counting on his fundraising skills to lift an endowment deemed by one board member as low relative to its peers. At Morehouse, Mr. Massey recruited donors like Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington and Ray Charles and oversaw a $125-million capital campaign.

Two years ago, as a veteran Bank of America Corp. director, Mr. Massey was thrust into the chairmanship during the financial crisis, when Kenneth Lewis was forced out by shareholders and later quit as CEO of the Charlotte, N.C.-based institution.

“It was very scary at times. We were all concerned about survival,” says Mr. Massey, who left the board last year when he reached its mandatory retirement age.

The over-70s realize they won't be around to finish everything they started. Cardinal George offers some perspective. “In a sense, you're fitting into a history you didn't write,” he says. “I don't have to see the results.”

His organization, after all, marks time in millennia: “We're very long-term, you know.”

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